



The church lives in tension. The church even thrives in tension. A loose church is a limp church. Its water is neither boiling nor cold, but lukewarm, useless. It will be “spit out”. Its salt is no longer salty. It can neither preserve nor add spice and taste to its people and community. Its light is dim, insufficient to light a path in the dark.

A church in tension is caught between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. The church can resist this tension in two ways: it can put up blinders and disengage from the culture completely – or – it can tear down its walls, forsaking its sanctuary so that one does not know where the culture ends and the church begins... Both are equally dangerous and disastrous. Neither is the church which Christ entrusted to his Apostles. The Church of Christ is the one who engages the culture with a left hand of reproach and repentance and a right hand of gospel and salvation. This is the church that is unafraid of the culture’s pointed index fingers. This church is unafraid of the truth and equally unafraid of the consequences of proclaiming the truth.

Christ commanded such boldness in our gospel reading of Luke 10. Jesus sends out his 72. He warns them that some towns will not receive his message of repentance and salvation. In those towns, the disciples are to go into the streets and say: Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you. That is to say: the very dust itself will be a testimony against you. That we – the messengers of God’s Kingdom and its salvation – were here and you did not receive us nor our message. So, may even the dirt of your unrepentant town remain here for the coming judgement.

Rejection of the truth is a reality for which the church should be prepared.

*If we say that, then they might not come back...*

... should be in the mind of the church. Christ warns us as much and encourages us all the same to proclaim with boldness the truth of his Word. We are, however, gentle as we are bold. As Paul says in our epistle lesson: Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

But please take note that we must preach; that we must restore. To be gentle is not be silent. A silent church that avoids the hard conversations is a gutless church. Silence is the church that avoids the tension of the two kingdoms by tearing down its walls and letting the culture dictate her proclamation. Gentle and bold, like lambs among wolves. There is a tension. How often do we forget that.

But our joy is not in our authority to call out sin and to bring to repentance. No, our joy is our salvation. Jesus says to his returning disciples: Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits [the demons] are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

“Nevertheless” means that this proclamation of ours certainly affords us much joy, but it is still not the cause. Jesus warns us that any joy in ourselves – even in our proclamation of his name – can be dangerous.

We are not to rejoice over our ability to conquer demons. That is something outside of us, something that is not even really done by us but by Jesus, with us as his tools, his messengers. Instead, we rejoice in the cross. In fact, we might say that we would even boast in the cross. But far be it from me, says Paul in our epistle, to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is one in tension: Lambs among wolves. Reproaching and repentance for salvation. Bold yet gentle. Expect more polarization in the coming years. Expect more rejection of the truth. Expect wars and rumors of wars.

If this seems like the same message the church has heard for the last 100 or even 1000 years, that is because it is the same message. At no time was the church never in tension between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. If it seems like things have changed in the last 100 years, that is because it has. The cultural norms of the 20th century have gone away. It is no longer “normal” to go to church. The 21st century has brought all kinds of new normal. We have all seen this.

But if the culture changes, the church is a rock. To the new normal, we might seem out of date, obsolete, archaic. But these observations from the outside should not be regarded as slurs, but as positive bell-weather confirming for us just how counter-culture we are. Jesus didn't say: like lambs among turtles; like lambs among goldfish. No, the operative comparison is lambs among wolves. And our mission is to convert those wolves into fellow lambs. An impossible task, for sure. But Christ has equipped us with his tools – reproach and forgive – chastise and comfort – kill and make alive.

That is exactly where Christ built his church before he ascended. And like a rubber band that keeps getting tighter and tighter; we preach, we teach and we live by the unwavering truth of God. It might seem uncomfortable, unbearable, unnecessary; but it is for the sake of this dead and dying world that the church remains. Christ is soon to return. And at that finality, the tension will snap and he will restore this world into a new world, a world without end.

Amen