

## Covenant Weekly Podcast Episode 6: Tension

I don't know if you've noticed, but not everyone in our world today agrees with everyone else. And I don't know if you've noticed, but those disagreements, when expressed in certain ways, can expose and increase tension. In physics, tension could be defined as a pulling or stretching force on an object. And that's what we are going to talk about and try to be honest about today on the Covenant Weekly Podcast Episode 6: *Tension*.

### *Intro Music*

We are *very* aware of tension in our world today. People are being pulled in different directions and that is leading many people to react in ways that are harmful and increases tension on others. Those others, in their state of tension, likewise react and further increase tension on still other people. Quickly it can become a cycle of increasing tension or efforts to eliminate any possible tension.

I got to thinking about this in light of the Ontario government's announcement yesterday that gathering restrictions would be eliminated two weeks earlier than had been previously announced. Due to radically different perspectives on the various restrictions, there has always been a measure of tension when any group - whether it be a business, a church, or a hospital - has tried to discern their way forward. As a church leader, I'm very aware of the different perspectives among those who call (or, in the past *have* called) Covenant Church their family. Due to certain restrictions, however, those with strongly differing perspectives have been largely separated.

We've been gradually getting closer to times when those with different perspectives on the vaccine will likely be in closer proximity with each other in a church setting. We've been gradually getting closer to times when those who want to hug are in the same spaces as those who are very nervous about getting too close to others. We've been gradually getting closer to times when those with very different perspectives on what *freedom* means and the implication of that will be planning on sitting in the same space on Sunday mornings. And with even less time to process all of our differences, that adds tension.

As one who is a part of a group that is working to take a variety of perspectives into account, but can only make *one* decision, these tensions weigh heavily. There is a *huge* part of me that wishes that the tension didn't exist and that we could all just be on the same page.

But as I've been thinking about that possibility, I'm thinking about how terrible that would *actually* be. You see, those who want all tension to be eliminated are, in fact, subtly thinking, "I want everyone to agree with me!" They almost certainly aren't thinking, "I want the tension to be eliminated so I want to change my mind!" No. We want people to be on the same page as we are. That's human nature!

But if someone is in a space where *everyone* agrees with them there are likely one of three things at play (or a combination of these three things). Either it's in a cult-like context where people are brainwashed. It's a private club where people are only welcome if they agree. Or it's a dictatorship where people are afraid to express their perspective. Those are the kinds of places where everyone agrees on things.

Sadly, it seems that these are *exactly* the kinds of places people want these days. When I hear people say, "I won't go to a store unless they do things *my* way," they're excluding someone from their club. When someone is so committed to their view that they respond to (or about) anyone who differs from their perspective with hate-filled rhetoric, they are showing signs of cult-like behaviour. When someone is so loud about their perspective that they aggressively shut down any engagement, they are trying to create a kind of dictatorship where they are in control. I believe each of these efforts is done to *try* to relieve tension. And I understand that because there is so much tension in our world that we need to try to do something about it.

I see two challenges to those approaches, however. The first is that they don't actually relieve any tension. In fact, they only increase it. There are many who have taken one perspective on an issue and, as such, joined a club or found a place of belonging. But as they've engaged with other ideas, questions have formed in their minds. But they can't ask them because they don't want to face what others who've asked questions have faced. And internally tension increases. Tension increases when we start looking for who is in and who is out. We face tension as we try to judge others or critique others. That increased tension in ourselves can lead to us doubling down on our attitudes and

behaviours. It can quickly lead to a spiral of increasing internal tensions that drive behaviour that puts remarkable tensions on others who are trying to navigate being around us. Rather than actually relieving tension, these ways of responding increase tension in harmful ways.

And that alludes to the second challenge to these approaches to relieve tension. It sees tension as almost exclusively bad or harmful when, in fact, tension is necessary and good for our thriving. In nature, tension is essential. The earth is sustained between the tension of spinning out of control and the gravitational pull towards the sun. Flowers are stretched between reaching towards the sun and pushing down roots. Music is made through appropriate tension on instrument strings. Tension helps people enjoy bungee jumping and parachuting, trampolining and waterskiing.

People and people groups have, for millennia, struggled with the tensions that emerge between generations and different ethnic groups and different political perspectives and different philosophies and different religious groups. And, as I write this, I cannot think of a time when working to *eliminate* those tensions through coercion, control, or manipulation has done anything other than *increase* tensions long term. If I'm missing something in history, please let me know, but seeking to ignore or eliminate tensions seems to *always* have a detrimental effect on people and on the world.

Without tension, much that is beautiful and right and progressive and stabilizing and true about the world gets lost. We live between the tension of eating well and not eating too much, exercising and resting, listening and speaking, working and playing, moving ahead and staying grounded, being together and finding solitude. We are at our healthiest when we acknowledge the tension and seek to move forward keeping it in balance.

As a guitar player, I think about the strings on my guitar. If I relax the tension the strings are, at best, way out of tune and, at worst, make no musical sound at all. If I increase the tension they are, at best, way out of tune and, at worst, snap. There is an optimal range of tension for each string depending on what is being played.

As a church, it does us no good if we just get rid of any tension. As individual Jesus followers, it really doesn't do us any good to try to find a place where there is no tension. We need each other and to engage lovingly with each other

in the midst of the tensions if we are going to find the way forward in the healthiest way possible. Let me suggest three things that might help us in this:

1. Accept that there will probably...almost certainly...be things that happen that you wish were different. This is true as it relates to moving out of the pandemic and as it relates to musical choices and as it relates to what speakers say and with as it relates to how kids ministry runs. This is true about virtually everything in a church and it is true for every one of us!
2. Recognize that the things that cause tension in us are likely exactly what someone else needs...and the things we love will likely cause tension in someone else. This is a healthy application of the encouragement we read in Philippians 2:3-4: *Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.*
3. Embrace those areas of tension as opportunities to practice love. What specifically does that kind of love look like? 1 Corinthians 13 gives us some words to think about there: *Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, 5 it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, 6 it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. 7 Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails.*

How different would navigating our areas of tension be if that kind of love marked our interactions?!? I could get into a side trail about when it *is* time to disengage from people who are not healthy, unfollow that friend on Facebook, or even when to move to another church community, but that would be a much longer podcast. Let me just say that there are times when doing so might be the most loving and healthiest thing we can do - for others and for ourselves. But even then, it should be done in a way that *is* marked by love.

As we move forward together as a church - beyond this pandemic and beyond that even - my desire is not that we would eliminate tensions. It is that we would live in them and even embrace them as followers of Jesus committed to the common goal of love. That will not be easy. In fact, at any given moment, embracing tension and choosing love may be the hardest thing to do. Manipulation, exclusion, and control are easier in the short term. In the long term, however, they are devastating for our well-being and for our participation

in the way of Jesus. So let's try to embrace the areas of tension and, more importantly, embrace each other with love as we work through them.

*Transition Music*

Please pray for our board as we meet tonight. We're finalizing things for our annual meeting on March 6 at 3 pm. We hope and pray that you'll join us for that either in person or online.

Watch our website and social media for upcoming events and opportunities to gather.

As you go through this week and seek to navigate the various tensions you are experiencing, I offer you this prayer from Philippians 4:

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Peace be with you.