

“With great thoughtfulness and prudence, renowned biblical scholar Gerald L. Borchert brings his broad experience to reflect on the pregnant tensions that abound in the Christian faith and practice, calling the body of Christ to a well-reasoned, principled, often both/and approach to counteract many prevailing binary, univocal perspectives. That overarching unity is foundational to the church’s mission to the world. I highly recommend this book.”

—James Hart

President, Robert Webber Institute for Worship Studies

“If you are a thinking person who wants guidance from a biblical scholar who engages with many of the perplexing issues of life, this book is for you. Scriptural insights combined with fascinating illustrations together reflect the author’s career of scholarship combined with relevance and applied wisdom to issues facing the Christian community today... Interesting, indeed! I certainly commend him for an intriguing book.”

—Harry Hiller

*Director, Cities and the Olympics Project;
Faculty Professor of Urban Sociology, University of Calgary*

“In this engaging theological exploration, Gerald Borchert demonstrates that the tensions existing in our understanding of the Bible, faith, and theology are not something that should confound or confuse. Rather, tensions are opportunities to re-examine, challenge, and strengthen core beliefs. In a conversational and appealing style, Dr. Borchert explores theological topics that are often given only superficial attention. His fresh questions, insightful exegesis, and piquant observations frequently produce within the reader ‘ah ha’ moments. As one has come to expect, this work is grounded in a solid and thorough biblical foundation.”

—David May

*Landrenau Guillaury Chair of Biblical Studies
Central Baptist Theological Seminary*

“Gerald Borchert’s *Tension* is a feast for head and heart. He shares with the reader the fruit of many decades of faithful ministry, teaching, and scholarship, winsomely addressing key issues the thinking Christian faces: God’s grace or human faith? Assurance or warning? Acceptance or judgment? I know of no better source for answering these vexing questions in a way that leaves the reader satisfied.”

—Eric Bolger

Vice President for Academic Affairs, College of the Ozarks

“Gerald Borchert, a biblical scholar, who reads widely and thinks deeply, sensitizes the reader to a wide array of theological and ethical issues that defy easy answers or simplistic approaches. This highly accessible work will challenge both laity and clergy to wrestle with perennial tensions in the Scriptures and Christian tradition, and, having wrestled with them, to emerge with a much more broadly informed and finely tuned perspective on the most relevant concerns of our day.”

—*Craig McMahan*

*University Minister, Dean of the Chapel and
Assistant Professor of Religion, Mercer University*

“Once again, Gerald Borchert gifts to the church a well-reasoned and biblically vibrant way to live faithfully amid the contentiousness so prevalent in Christianity today. Thankfully, he does not suggest a *via media* or compromise as a solution. Real tensions are not even to be overcome. Rather, Borchert brings his masterful knowledge of scripture, vast ministry experience, spiritual insight, and personal humility to enable the reader to live in the tensions that will always be our reality.”

—*Constance M. Cherry*

*Emeritus Professor of Worship and Pastoral Ministry
School of Theology and Pastoral Ministry, Indiana Wesleyan University*

“Gerald Borchert’s *Tension* addresses a crucial question for Christians: How do we think and live in a divided world? Drawing on academic research and pastoral wisdom, Dr. Borchert teaches us how to embrace personal and collective challenges. He shows us that tension is integral to God’s creation. Just as muscles grow through resistance, the Spirit trains us to embrace polarities. This book provides valuable biblical insights and timely application for individuals and the church. It’s an honor to support his work.”

—*William D. Shiell*

President and Professor of Pastoral Theology, Northern Seminary

“We are often taught that discomfort indicates something is wrong, and tensions must be resolved either this way or that to return us to comfort. Modern teachers insist, however, that tension can lead to creative possibilities if we allow them. Borchert shows that New Testament writers knew in their day that tensions raised by discussions of good and evil, gender, sexuality, present and future, etc., push us to more creative understandings and deeper faith.”

—*Mitzi Minor*

Mary Magdalene Professor of New Testament, Memphis Theological Seminary

“As followers of Christ, we live in the tension that God’s kingdom is present, yet not fully consummated. This reality has always sparked dialogue among those who call Jesus ‘king.’ In this book, Gerald Borchert and his fellow contributors invite readers into conversations about common tensions in contemporary Christian thought and life. If you find yourself in the midst of those tensions, read this book. It is a wonderful way to begin that process and will make you think more deeply about how your faith intersects with your way of being in the world.”

—Greg Henson

President, Sioux Falls Seminary

“If the Bible gives you a tension headache when reading passages that rattle your sense of justice or puzzle your quizzical mind, this book is for you. Refusing to remove such tension, Borchert puts into perspective biblical and theological stress factors, and he fine-tunes the tension, so that you can continue the journey of faith humbly and clear-headed. This book is medicine for the soul plagued by perplexity.”

—Jack Van Marion

*Senior Reformed Pastor; Professor of Worship
Robert Webber Institute for Worship Studies*

“A unique approach accessible for the educated lay person or minister and that shows appreciation for the many healthy tensions in biblical theology... Written in an informal, personal style, Borchert sprinkles his analysis of these theological tensions with numerous anecdotes and personal stories. It is a work of uncommon maturity and wisdom drawn from the author’s many decades of teaching and deep theological reflection.”

—Garland Young

*Vice President, Dean, and Professor of the
Practice of Religion and Greek, Milligan University*

Gerald Borchert’s collaborative volume *Tension* calls us to attention before a host of perplexing truth issues in theology and ethics (e.g., Bible and science, sexual diversity, good and evil, Christian wholeness, security and citizenship). He invites us, as finite beings, not too quickly to choose (logical) sides, but instead to seek new syntheses that integrate paradoxes that can (un)comfortably straddle polarizing differences. I heartily encourage you to accept this invitation and join him in this engaging work of dealing creatively with these tensions.”

—Ralph Korner

Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Taylor Seminary (Canada)

Tension: Empowering Christian Thought and Life

Gerald L. Borchert

with

Drs. Ross Brummett, James R. Hart, John Hurtgen,
David May, Craig McMahan, Mitzi Minor, R. Jackson Painter,
Jack Van Marion, and R. Garland Young

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Webber Institute Books

Webber Institute Books (WIB) serves as the publishing arm of the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies (IWS). The Institute was founded by the late Robert E. Webber for the purpose of forming servant leaders in worship renewal with the perspective that “the way to the future necessarily runs through the past.” IWS is the only school in North America dedicated solely to graduate education in biblical foundations, historical development, theological reflection, and cultural analysis of worship. Its vision emphasizes that its graduates will “participate intentionally in the story of the Triune God” to “bring renewal in the local and global church by shaping life and ministry according to that story.” In scope it is “gospel-centered in nature and ecumenical in outlook, embracing and serving the whole church in its many expressions and variations.” Those interested in obtaining further information concerning the Institute should consult www.iws.edu.

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Such exchange of ideas hopefully will enhance worship renewal within the various segments of the Christian church. Moreover, in keeping with the hopes and dreams of Bob Webber, may all that is done through this publishing enterprise enable Christians to reject the narcissistic patterns prevalent in contemporary society and give the glory to God who sent Jesus, the Christ, to provide for human transformation and in concert provided humans with the divine triune presence through the Holy Spirit.

Robert Myers
General Editor

Gerald L. Borchert
Founding Editor

James Hart
President, IWS



Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeological Review</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CorBC	Cornerstone Biblical Commentary
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	Interpretation
KJV	King James Version
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NAC	New American Commentary
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NLT	New Living Translation
NTL	New Testament Library
OTI	Old Testament Library
PRSt	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
RevExp	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SP	Sacra Pagina
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Other Religious Works by Gerald L. Borchert

Today's Model Church (Roger Williams Press, 1971)

Dynamics of Evangelism (Word Books, 1976)

Paul and His Interpreters (TSF/ IBR/ InterVarsity, 1985)

Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care (Westminster Press, 1985)

Discovering Thessalonians (Guideposts, 1986)

Assurance and Warning (Broadman Press, 1986; Word N Works, 2006)

The Crisis of Fear (Broadman Press, 1988)

"John" in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Mercer University Press, 1995, 1996)

John 1–11 and *John 12–21*, New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1996, 2002)

"Galatians" in *Romans and Galatians*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Tyndale House, 2007)

Worship in the New Testament: Divine Mystery and Human Response (Chalice Press, 2008)

"Revelation" in *NLT Study Bible* (Tyndale House, 2008, 2017)

Jesus of Nazareth: Background, Witnesses and Significance (Mercer University Press, 2011)

Assaulted by Grief: Finding God in Broken Places (Mossy Creek Press/Carson-Newman University, 2011)

The Lands of the Bible: Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Sinai & Egypt, Jordan, Notes on Syria and Lebanon
(Mossy Creek/Carson-Newman University, 2011)

The Lands of the Bible: In the Footsteps of Paul and John (Mossy Creek/Carson-Newman University, 2012)

Portraits of Jesus for an Age of Biblical Illiteracy (Smyth & Helwys, 2016)

Christ and Chaos: Biblical Keys to Ethical Questions (Nurturing Faith, 2020)

Translator for "Galatians," "Romans" in *New Living Translation* (Tyndale House, 1996, 2004, etc.)

Contents

Acknowledgments..... ix

Introduction: Engaging Tension by the Christian..... 1

THE PROBLEM OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Chapter 1: The Problem of Good and Evil..... 13
*Tensions in Understanding Good and Evil, Climate Change,
Suffering, Theodicy, and Violence and Forgiveness*

Chapter 2: Problems with Human Nature..... 33
*Tensions in the Integrity of the Self: Living with
Two Inclinations and the Weakness of Analogies*

Chapter 3: Problems with Making Racial and Economic Distinctions 43
Tensions Created by Differences in Race and Economics

Chapter 4: Problems with Making Sexual Distinctions 53
*Tensions Related to Sexuality and the Acceptance of Women,
Divorcees, and Homosexuals*

THE WORK OF GOD IN BRINGING THE NEW COVENANT AND HEALING TO HUMANS

Chapter 5: The Coming of the Transforming Jesus..... 71
Tensions in Understanding the Incarnation and the Two Natures of Jesus

Chapter 6: New Covenant Wholeness 87
*Tensions over Grace and Faith, “Thingifying” Relationships,
Walking with God, and the Stages of Salvation*

Chapter 7: New Covenant Security 105
Tensions in the Message of Assurance and Warning

**NEW COVENANT PERSPECTIVES
ON LIVING INTO A TRANSFORMED LIFE**

Chapter 8: The New Covenant Characteristic	117
<i>Tensions in Living the Way of Love</i>	
Chapter 9: New Covenant Living	127
<i>Tension in Living with the Spirit, a Commitment to Prayer, and a Respect for Time</i>	
Chapter 10: The New Covenant Community—The Church	155
<i>Tensions in the Church's Nature, Structure, Message, and Service</i>	
Chapter 11: The New Covenant Community—	177
The Church's Sacred Actions	
<i>Tensions in the Sacred Actions of the Church</i>	
Chapter 12: Living with Dual Citizenship.....	191
<i>Tensions in Living as a Part of the Kingdom of God and of an Earthly State</i>	

NEW COVENANT LIVING INTO THE FUTURE

Chapter 13: Living with Tensions and the Christian Hope.....	205
<i>The Ultimate Tension of Acceptance and Judgment</i>	
Conclusion: Living with Tension into the Future	221
Subject Index	227

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I have had many superb doctoral students during my years of teaching. In designing this present work, I undertook an interesting project in which I asked nine of those now judicious representatives in the academy and in various churches and denominations if they would join me in a combination work. They have since their earlier studies become outstanding professors and academic administrators in their own right.

I asked each of them to take a number of chapters of my preliminary manuscript and add their insights, critiques, and suggestions in an effort to make our joint ideas as sustainable and as irenic as possible. I promised to integrate their ideas into my previous work. They happily and readily responded to my offer. One was unable to fulfill the assignment but gave me some crucial advice, and so is included among the others.

Their responses were beyond my expectations in terms of their forthrightness in critique, their helpful additions, and their suggested amendments. I have sought, as best as I know how, to integrate their ideas into this work. Yet it still remains open to improvement because we are merely mortal and fallible.

Naturally, since I am the writer, I take full responsibility for everything that is written here. If this work is deficient, then the result is attributable to me. If you have positive reactions to this combined work, then commendations should be directed to my colleagues. But beyond these reflections, I hasten to say that this project was a delightful learning experience not only for my associates but especially for me. Their incisive comments reminded me that we are never beyond the need for gaining new insights from those who at one time may have been part of our instruction. Indeed, in this project, several of my former students reminded me of some advice I had earlier delivered to them. So, please understand my deep indebtedness to these gracious colleagues who have assisted me in this study on tension as it relates to biblical theology and ethics or Christian thought and life. Thanks to those honored friends, Drs.:

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- Craig McMahan—University Minister, Dean of the Chapel, and Assistant Professor of Religion, Mercer University
- Mitzi Minor—Mary Magdalene Professor of New Testament, Memphis Theological Seminary
- R. Jackson Painter—Professor of New Testament, Simpson University
- Jack Van Marion—Senior Reformed Pastor and Professor of Worship, Robert Webber Institute for Worship Studies
- Garland Young—Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean, and Professor of the Practice of Religion and Greek, Milligan University

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Introduction

Engaging Tension by the Christian

Considering the Challenges of Tension

Tension—it seems to be present in almost every aspect of our cosmic reality. We wrestle with tensions and polarities in living, in making decisions, in relating to people, and in many aspects of our thinking and acting. To be a human is to face tension! Having a choice by its very nature involves some elements of tension. And God has not removed our necessity of making choices. Indeed, Christians, like all humans, are confronted daily with the requirement to make choices that can have consequences—many impact our lives and those around us. Some are very serious and may have wide human significance—even eternal implications!

The challenge for humans is to understand the significance of tension and the implications that follow from some of the choices we make and the way we relate to the options that engage us. Hopefully this study will alert us to the pervasiveness of tension and to the need for examining where we stand with respect to the choices we make and the implications of living with freedom. Welcome, friends, to this study of tension, which is a crucial aspect of human reality and of Christian thought and life—or theology and ethics.

A Personal Reflection: Science and Tension

When I was a child of eleven or twelve, our family moved about two hundred miles south from Edmonton, Alberta to Calgary. One of the parks in our new city contained a small museum of fossils and many concrete replicas of dinosaurs. My beloved younger brother (Don, who later became a philosopher) and I played with friends on those concrete replicas for several years, never doubting their former existence or the fact that they preceded us humans by millennia. Because I asked many questions about dinosaurs, my parents, who were wonderful Christians, gave me an encyclopedia about those dinosaurs. Even though I had problems at that time reading many words in that volume, that book became a treasured possession that I still have today. But during that time, we listened on the radio to some preachers, including the premier (similar to a U.S. governor) of our province of Alberta, telling us that the God who created the world did so in a very short time. I have to admit that this boy was a little confused by those

different messages. I later understood there was a tension or a set of polarities engaging my early thinking.

By my first year of high school, Alberta was experiencing an oil boom. The school board, seeking to be relevant, inserted into the science program an elective course in geology. I was thrilled and literally gulped down the information about geological levels such as the pre-Cambrian and Devonian periods. Then after law school, seminary and doctoral studies at Princeton, I was called to a seminary post in South Dakota and I was asked to work a circuit speaking on the Bible and science. That opportunity led to a number of discussions and questions. My response to people with questions was always the same. “I believe firmly in God. And God does not lie in either ‘the stones’ or ‘the Bible.’”¹ The problem is not with most of our records; it is with the people who read and interpret both the stones or stars and the Bible.

Now, as a former lawyer, I am quite aware that such a remark is a faith statement. But do you see that my answer is a response to living with a tension? Instead of accepting and dealing positively with tension, however, many people seek their solutions to tensions or polarities by lining up on one side or the other (such as “science” and “scripture”) and focus, as combatants in a battle in which they seek to obliterate the arguments of the other side.

But we all make faith statements or pronouncements—whether they are positive or negative—including scientists! Charles Darwin was correct in some things, but I suggest he was not correct in everything. The same would be true of an Einstein, a Newton, or a Copernicus. These marvelous scientific adventurers stand as monumental figures in history. There is no question that they have stretched our minds into new vistas of reality. But there are other factors and realities of which they and we are not authorities.

Our task as humans is to recognize what is science and what is not. The task likewise is to recognize what the Bible claims to be hard truth or reality and what it does not. Our further task, therefore, is to recognize what is true biblical

¹When I was going through graduate studies, I was fortunate to read Alan Richardson’s *The Bible in the Age of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) that helped me develop some understandings of the real tensions that exist in the disciplines and the frequent unhealthy mindsets that result from reading only one side of the conflict. There have, of course, been a number of popular books written since that time such as Michael Gullam’s *Amazing Truths: How Bible and Science Agree* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) and the earlier work of Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) that are quite irenic. See also the dialog in J.B. Stump, ed., *Four Views on Creation, Evolution and Intelligent Design* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017). What I trust is that Christian young people in reading scientific and religious literature on these subjects will not assume that it is always fair and unbiased. But hopefully they will weigh the materials and judge carefully how they use the information presented.

exegesis (interpretation) and what is merely an assumption concerning statements in Scripture. Our task is to work at understanding what statements are rooted in observable fact and what are theological or scientific reflections. In this pursuit of understanding, it is not a question of truth but the kind of truth that is present in an issue. Sometimes this task is difficult for people, especially in this era when the Western reader's entire social setting is very different from that of the biblical periods. William Paley and others tried desperately to bring science and the Bible together for their generations, and they should be commended for their efforts to take both God and the natural world seriously. But many have failed to remember that the Bible does not purport to be a textbook on science.

The 1925 Scopes Trial and the forceful arguments of William Jennings Bryan in Tennessee may have seemed like a victory to some, but it was only a tragic detour for the human mind. The more recent attempts to employ the Bible as the prevailing authority in such matters as creation will continue to fail, not because of good intentions but because of sad misunderstandings concerning the Bible's purpose. To bend either the truth of science into a philosophy or to bend the truth of the Bible into a book of science is a misrepresentation of God and God's world.

Therefore, it is essential to remember that the writers of the Bible serve primarily as witnesses to the reality of authentic life with God that was revealed to them in their settings. For example, when one reads the four gospels, one must understand, as I have indicated in my work on *Portraits of Jesus for an Age of Biblical Illiteracy*, that these four documents are marvelous testimonies concerning Jesus and life.² I repeat: they are first and foremost testimonies about Jesus, and each has a unique perspective about God's chosen liberating representative for humanity. They are far more than mere factual accounts or photographic images of Jesus, the Son of God. All of them are written with a purpose of presenting genuine portraits of Jesus that will lead the readers to comprehend and act accordingly by becoming faithful, transformed followers of Jesus as Lord.³ We can argue about elements of truth in terms of facts all day, but until we recognize both the nature and focus of the phenomenological world that is the context of scientific analysis and the corresponding nature and focus of the biblical documents in

²Gerald L. Borchert, *Portraits of Jesus for an Age of Biblical Illiteracy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2016). See also my earlier works, *Jesus of Nazareth: Background, Witnesses and Significance* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011) and *Worship in the New Testament: Divine Mystery and Human Response* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 9–57.

³While the text of John 20:30–31 spells out the purpose for the Fourth Gospel most clearly, each of the gospels is intended to bring about authentic faith in the reader. See Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, vol. 25B, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 317–320.

exegesis and interpretation, there will hardly be a rapprochement between the disciplines.

A Personal Reflection: Security and Tension

With these thoughts concerning faith statements in mind, I leave the subject of science and the Bible and instead turn to one specific tension in the biblical message—quite aware of various presuppositions. This subject of security has suffered greatly from the failure of Christians to take seriously the Bible’s holistic picture when well-meaning Christians make statements akin to “once saved always saved.”

Now I understand that the security of the believer is a very crucial concern that I will discuss at length in chapter 7, but after reading the Bible for a number of years I still recall, when I was much younger, asking my friends where that idea of “once saved always saved” appeared in the Scripture. They would often give me a number of texts that reflected assurance statements such as John 10:27–28, but I would then ask what they did with the warning texts of the Bible. Their responses usually amounted to the feelings that those warning texts such as Hebrew 6:1–6 and 1 Corinthians 10:6–11 did not apply to Christians.

As I indicated, I certainly intend to deal with that subject further, but my purpose in raising this issue here is to point to the fact that there is a significant tension in the Bible that has a great bearing on how we perceive the biblical concept of salvation or wholeness. We all seek for security, but what we are given in the Bible are both assurance and warning texts. The presence of both can create for many Christians tension, yet it can be empowering.

When I was a professor of New Testament at a seminary in Louisville and one of my colleagues was upsetting the constituency with his emphasis on apostasy (the so-called theology of “falling away”), I was approached by several of my faculty colleagues and encouraged to set down in writing my views for the denomination in hopes that it would calm troubled waters. I did so!⁴ But the problem is that many people refuse to accept tensions in the Bible. They will usually do all in their power to eliminate tension from their minds. Yet, reality demands that we confront honestly the existence of tensions not only in the Bible but also in life.

⁴Gerald L. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987; repr. with new introduction, Singapore: Word 'n Works, 2006). In this work, I focus primarily on the dialogical letter of Paul known as 1 Corinthians, the Gospel of John, and the sermon of Hebrews.

The Intersection of Tensions and Our Mindsets

But the security issue is not the only tension/polarity in the Bible and in our theological constructs.⁵ And these tensions need to be recognized because they have created and will create upheavals in the church and in society. Recognizing their presence in the Bible and in life, therefore, is crucial. Now we are people who are moving from modern mindsets with their rationalistic perspectives into this emerging era that was earlier designated by some as a postmodern period.

Our problem is that most still seek to deal with tensions by fleeing to one side of a given polarity. Such a pattern has been inherited from our Western forebearers who focused on thinking by division or differentiation. Accordingly, many stoutly resist recognizing the value of accepting the contribution of both sides of tensions. Tensions are easily viewed as alternatives that must be confronted and a selection or choice needs to be made. Instead of choosing one side, however, we need to think more about developing new syntheses that arise in the interaction of polarities, as Hegel argued many years ago in his dialectal thinking. Now, I am not a Hegelian but a further question must be raised: Do tensions always need to be resolved, or can we at times live creatively with them and recognize that there may be strength within tensions?

As one of my former students in reading this work reminded me, tension is related to ambiguity and people can have either a strong aversion to ambiguity or have a higher tolerance for it. And dealing with ambiguity points to the classic work of Eric Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* in which he detailed the reasons why people often choose totalitarianism rather than liberty—because of their lack of tolerance for ambiguity.⁶ Resistance to ambiguity and search for easy answers is an ever-present danger that haunts democracies—even the American political system today.

The longing to settle tensions can create emotional and mental stress for us as humans that can engender in us confusion and block clarity in our perceptions. Education is supposed to aid us in dealing with such patterns of stress, but willingness to see alternatives can be viewed by others who resist ambiguity as a lack of decisiveness. But tension is not limited to intellectual aspects of the human persona. Tensions function in respect to moral behavior as well so that we may state our commitment to certain principles such as equality and yet act counter to our declarations. We may say we care for the poor, but the use of

⁵Earlier, Malcom Brown noted this phenomenon of tension in his work, *Tensions in Christian Ethics: An Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

⁶Eric Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Avon Mass Media, 1972).

our money reflects an entirely different way of life. Likewise, attitudinally we may believe we are emotionally balanced, yet may harbor attitudes of animosity, impatience, and intolerance for those who think differently than we do.

Of course, there are legitimate alternatives that demand our choice such as good and evil (which I will discuss shortly). I would hardly suggest dealing lightly with evil, sin, hate, war, drugs, or similar degrading elements in society. But I would argue that there are many aspects of reality that we will not readily resolve and so we will have to learn how to develop theologies and perspectives that can hold such tensions in a fragile, uneasy balance since we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent—which interestingly can create another tension in thinking about God.

Humans may consider themselves in our era to be almost “almighty” or “all knowing” because we can develop new machines that are able to split atomic particles or allow us to leave the gravity of the earth. Humans can manufacture tiny communication devices that would boggle the minds of our ancestors, and we have discovered new insights into quasars and black holes that would leave our forebearers gasping. But these innovations and discoveries generally only add to our Adamic temptation of thinking ourselves to be “like God” (Gen 3:5). So, the issue of supposed omniscience is one with which we must deal honestly. In this process, we dare not forget our own fallibility.

When we turn to the Bible, we recognize that it reflects our fallibility in the way that a mirror reveals our earthly warts and pimples. If we ponder its message, it becomes clear that a fundamental tension emerges from the fact that the Bible deals with people like us humans who are frail mortals and yet are in some amazing way related to and impacted by the eternal, immortal God who created and sustains us.

The God of the Bible, who became more clearly revealed in Jesus, is not like the pagan gods that are generally mere creations of the human imagination (cf. Rom 1:23) and possess frail imperfections like their mortal creators. The biblical God is quite different and has sometimes even been designated as “the wholly other one.”⁷ This true God, “the other one,” provided an incredible act—the incarnation—in sending Jesus, the Christ, who became human in order to reconcile rebellious, error-stricken humans to God’s self (2 Cor 5:19).

Not only is his incarnation virtually incomprehensible to us, but his willing death and resurrection provided a means for our forgiveness, far beyond our

⁷Karl Barth frequently referred to the biblical God as *der ganz Anderer*. For those who wish to familiarize themselves with his ideas in brief, the English translation of his summary work can be helpful. See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), especially p. 38 where he asserts that “God is not only unprovable, unsearchable, but also *inconceivable*.” (Italics in the original.)

understanding. In attempting to describe this reality, the brilliant Apostle Paul was forced to employ word pictures to describe what in theology we have termed “the atonement” (the act of bringing us rebellious humans into an acceptable relationship with the immortal God). None of Paul’s word pictures, nor all of them together is/are really adequate to describe what happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus. So, we struggle to comprehend this amazing mystery.

God, as the incarnate Jesus, gave himself to an actual death and resurrection in order to bring about this reconciliation of humans to God’s self and to model reconciliation for us with other humans. To say that this act creates tensions in our thinking is an enormous understatement—namely, bringing together the two realms of the divine and the human in our theological reflections.

This struggle for precision, especially concerning Jesus and his work led to historic battles among the early Christians (see chapter 5) that are not absent between brothers and sisters of faith today. I simply remind you that our struggles over words in attempting adequate definitions often prevent us from reflecting the model of Jesus (cf. Phil 2 5–11), which means that our words become hollow echoes of the gospel to others. Reading and embodying the Bible’s message implies entering the spirit and life pattern of God’s incarnate Son. But a failure to embody the spirit of Jesus into our living will likely mean, as interpreters, that we will misrepresent the purpose of our inspired texts.

Yet, if and when we think we may have gained a correct meaning, it still behooves us to admit in all humility that we with our twenty-first-century mindsets may not have fully understood either the text or ourselves. So, we need to respect all those who differ from us in the past and present as they, like us, labored to comprehend the meaning of the biblical texts and their life applications. This task is indeed an onerous one.

But seeking to understand the biblical message is also a thrilling assignment as the Holy Spirit leads us through the maze of past, present and future tensions in order to bring us to a sense of personal and corporate purpose for living in this created universe as transforming agents for our Lord.

Reflecting on Time and Early Christian Thought

Before I move forward in our discussion, I should briefly raise the question of the ancients in their understanding of “time” and the “future” (topics to which I will return in chapter 9). I suggest that it is imperative for us to remember that the parameters of our thinking are quite different from the thought processes of the people who heard Jesus or of the early readers who received the biblical

writings. And the issue of the “future” reminds me that a number of years ago, one of my seminary classmates, Tony Campolo, told me that many of the young people in the Black and Hispanic communities where he was working did not use the future tense when they were speaking about themselves or their intentions. They normally used the *present tense*! It was almost as though their minds were fixed in the present. That idea hung in the back of my mind until one of my colleagues reminded me of the important work being done by sociologists on peasant populations and the relationship of their thinking to the ancients in the Mediterranean world at the time of Jesus.

Most of us in the Western world have been socialized into a future orientation where we have been forced by our culture to focus our lives on distant goals not immediately attainable. But that orientation does not fit the stories of the New Testament. So, as Bruce Malina asks, “What happens when a future-oriented American reads [about]. . . the coming of the Son of Man?” And we can continue to ask: How do we respond when we read something such as this scripture: “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place” (Mark 13:30, Matt 24:34, Luke 21:32)?⁸ Would the early Christians not read this message a little differently than we do? Malina would respond: Very differently! The reason is that, like peasant communities of today, they would be present-oriented. And that distinction makes a great difference in the way many Westerners read their New Testaments.

Indeed, the sociologists would remind us that even the elite Romans were not future-oriented, but their primary preference was a past orientation. They and their ancestors were not concerned about “long-range planning in any field.”⁹ Thus, as Carroll Quigley has argued, the Roman rulers “never found logical obstacles to action, because they cared nothing for logic” and they “had no plans for world conquest [but they] . . . became rulers of the world in fits of absent-mindedness.”¹⁰ So, the early Christians would hear “Let the day’s own troubles be sufficient for the day” (Matt 6:34) and “Give us this day our daily bread” (6:11) a little differently than we might. And when we read “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” Malina asks, does that text from Hebrews 13:8 not simply mean “an endless day, hence an endless present?” And he asks:

⁸Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Routledge, 1996), 181.

⁹*Ibid.*, 182–83.

¹⁰Carroll Quigley, *Weapons Systems and Political Stability* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983), 374.

“Did anyone [then] experience the alleged tension between the ‘already and the not yet’ that some scholars argue they were supposed to have experienced?”¹¹

As you read your Bible and engage in this study on “tension” in theology and ethics, please bear in mind that the first century Christians may have received the messages of Jesus and the New Testament a little differently than we in the twenty-first century receive them. Try to remember that when Mark quoted Jesus as saying “the kingdom of God is near (*engiken*),” Mark was likely not thinking of some distant future. He was oriented to the present, while we are much more future-oriented. Accordingly, let us understand that while there are many inherent tensions in theology and ethics, some of our tensions may be the result of our reading ancient works that are oriented differently than we think.

Pursuing the Tensions That Impact Our Lives

With these introductory remarks in mind, let me mention a few of the tensions that are present and should be considered further as we proceed.

There is the age-old disturbing problem that if God is good, why do humans suffer? When something tragic happens, is it a result of our sin? Or, is it because of someone else’s sin? This concern, of course, also raises the issue of why good people suffer. And those questions of course lead to the subject of theodicy that raises the concern of how we as humans face the reality of issues such as climate change. These subjects point to the more personal questions of integrity and why do we, as humans, have tensions within ourselves. Why do we act like we do when our better selves tell us that we should or should not do what we are doing?

And in this era when matters of discrimination have frequently been on the front pages of newspapers and made lead statements on television, what should we do with the fact that there continues to be discrimination not only in society but also in the church? We proclaim that Jesus came to remove the barriers between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor, and male and female (cf. Gal 3:28) and yet, why does the church seem so unable to live with the reality that in Jesus Christ such differences have been eliminated?

Then what about divorce and remarriage, when in some places up to fifty percent of marriages are failing? Some of our recent ancestors thought that divorce was virtually an unpardonable sin. And, I should not forget the question of how homosexuals fit into this issue of no distinctions.

¹¹Malina, *The Social World*, 185. This tension, he would argue, is a creation of nineteenth-century northern European biblical interpreters and their heirs.

Naturally we must ask: How do God and Jesus figure into the bringing about of a change in humanity? What shall we say about the nature of Jesus and what theologians call the incarnation? And what does it mean to be saved or find wholeness in this life? Then I suppose we might ask: Can we actually find wholeness in this life? What is the role of grace and faith in our understanding of salvation? Do we ever act as if faith is more significant than grace, or the reverse? And what does Paul mean by walking in newness of life? How does such walking relate to obeying God's precepts?

Of course, there is the matter of dealing with the tension over security and the seemingly contradictory statements of the biblical texts on assurance and warning. Indeed, is it possible to be secure?

And what does it mean to live like a Christian? What characteristic is most Christlike? And how do we relate to the Spirit? Indeed, how does the Spirit of God fit into the pattern of Christlikeness? Is prayer important in this pattern? What about forgiveness? Is it really necessary for me to forgive? Why? What if I do not forgive? What about my personal life and time? How do I conceive of my time and its relationship to God? Then what about the church as a new covenant community? And how do we treat the sacraments or ordinances of the church?

There is also the question of Christian citizenship. What happens when obedience to Jesus and our national interests collide? Which standard or flag is ours?

And finally, what should be the hope of those who belong to Christ or the church? Is such a hope realistic in this "me-centered," "immanent-oriented" society? How can humans be sure about such a hope?

Approaching Our Study of Tension

I trust these and other preliminary reflections will set your thoughts into high gear. Hopefully they will stir your mind and challenge you to reflect more on the tensions and polarities that may be present in your theologies and the way you approach life. Some of these tensions may be easily discernible, while others may not be so evident in your thinking. Wherever you are on the spectrum, I suggest that there is a need to reconsider the issues concerning tension as we look to the challenges of the future.

A hard look at how we tend to deal with tensions today can be very instructive because it can force us to look at both sides of issues in new ways. I believe that such a reflection on tension can provide a stimulus to engage complex issues of dissonance and assist us in realizing that some of our old, simplistic answers

may not bring satisfaction today as they once may have offered. My sense is that many of our simplistic answers are often in fact not really answers to our complex lives. Further reflection may force us to realize the need to abandon a few of our most cherished and/or embedded theological views and adopt newly chosen deliberative perspectives—which can affect the way we will live into the future and relate to both God and others differently.

It is already obvious that the world that is emerging is challenging Christians and churches to demonstrate the validity of their proclamations. Can this challenge awaken us into seeing new vistas of engagement? It is not that Jesus changes, but perhaps we may need some rebooting of our views. Hopefully glimpsing anew our current situation will stir up a reconsideration of many questions such as the way we use our resources, the way we relate to time, the way we care for the poor among us, the way we deal with our earth and its fragility, the way we approach health issues and toxic patterns of living, the way we deal with disagreements among us, the way we perceive truth, the way we sense Jesus touches our lives, our society and even how we with God's leading can be involved beyond our current circle of engagement. Perhaps we can gain some further insights that will help us engage in concerns that we will face with a more holistic perspective than we have had in the past.

I think we need repeatedly to ask: Is our theology ready to deal better with old tensions and accept the fact that new tensions loom in the future? Perhaps, seeing the incredible power that is present in dealing more effectively with both sides of tensions may be more productive. Dynamic power may be present if we are a people who are willing to accept and creatively integrate such tensions into new combinations. Will we be among the new explorers of Christianity?

Welcome then to this study of tension! Hopefully, you will be challenged to reflect on some new aspects of living with God and respond more perceptively to tension. Prayerfully, you will be directed to new dimensions of accepting the legitimacy of these tensions in your life. Confidently, may you reject easy answers to complex questions and recognize that God will be with you in your struggle for clarity. And may we all be open to discovering that God can lead us into the emerging concerns that are not yet fully on the radar screens of our lives.

... So, let us begin with one of the most fundamental tensions: the issue of good and evil.