

Tension in the Bible

Contradicting verses strengthen understanding

One evening a student in adult Bible study raised an interesting question: "Why did God allow some verses in the Bible to contradict one another? Why don't they all just agree?" When I asked her for an example, she asked how to reconcile verses which point out that a person is a perpetual sinner with others that claim eternal saint status. We took some time to consider the dilemma: Is there a constructive role for such tension in the Bible?

We all sin. In 1 Kings 8:46 and again in Romans 3:23, the writers of Scripture point out the universality of sin. In fact, there is "no one who does good, no, not one," the psalmist declared (Psalm 14:3). We all agreed it isn't hard to picture human imperfection, nor is it hard to accept that we are perpetually sinners. After all, we tend to prove it every day by the poor choices we make and by the things we fail to say and do on a regular basis.

Next, the group read that God chooses who will receive mercy and grace (Exodus 33:19). Again in Romans 9:15-16, the Bible states that God alone determines who will receive mercy and grace. After reading 1 John 1:9, we all agreed that if any person confesses his or her sins, God is faithful and just and forgives each person. The consensus was clear: God's grace made us saints. So if we are forgiven and become new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17), why are we still considered perpetual sinners?

Our denomination's founding father, Martin Luther, called Bible verses that pulled in opposite directions "dialectics." He suggested that these verses create a tension that enables readers to better understand the message of grace. Maybe Luther saw the application, but my class wasn't feeling particularly enlightened by the contradictions. Then the Spirit led us to some imagery that seemed to help.

I told a story I'd read recently. On June 30, 1859, a French aerialist, the Great Blondin (Jean-François Gravelet), was the first person to walk over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. His success was dependent on a 3-inch diameter hemp rope securely anchored on the Canadian side of the falls, with the other end being secured on the American side more than 1,000 feet away.

The Great Blondin successfully traveled back and forth numerous times that day. But he wasn't satisfied to make the trips alone. So he persuaded his manager, Harry Colcord, to climb on his shoulders and be carried across the abyss filled with raging water. There was an act of faith!

The class immediately began to put the real story into a spiritual perspective. Our collective creativity began sketching out a modern allegory. The raging falls were the dangers of life. The Great Blondin was the image

of Jesus. Colcord represented each of us. The rope was the journey from sin to grace.

Then we put the pieces together. One end of the spiritual rope is anchored in the Scriptures, declaring our sinfulness. The other end is securely anchored in the text's declaring God's incredible grace. With the rope anchored at each end, a journey between the two is made possible. The class was really getting engaged now.

Next they postulated that Jesus alone can traverse the dangerous journey from sin to grace. We can't get there ourselves. Jesus invites each of us to climb on his shoulders so he can carry us from sinfulness to God's eternal grace. It's by faith that each of us chooses whether to climb on Jesus' shoulders and let him take us there. The rope must be anchored at both ends—one in the verses of sinfulness and the other in those of God's grace.

It all made sense now. We left that night agreeing with Luther. The verses that created the tension between being perpetual sinners and eternal saints were indeed helpful. A special thanks to the Great Blondin for carrying the point home. □



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