

continued from front

Each of these models carries a unique culture and set of expectations. The tension arises because these archetypes describe realities that, on the surface, seem to pull in opposite directions.

The static and the living: the building and the flock

A tension exists between the stability of the building and the movement of the flock. These two images present a necessary contrast between established structure and organic care.

The church as a building:

Scripture describes the church as “God’s household” (1 Timothy 3:15) and a structure built on a foundation (Ephesians 2:19-22). 1 Corinthians 3:9 tells Christians, “we are...God’s building.” A building represents permanence, shelter, and order. It requires a strong foundation and structural integrity to stand. Jesus fulfills that as the chief cornerstone. See also 1 Peter 2:5, Hebrews 3:6.

In this mode, the focus is on structure and truth. It provides the walls that define what we believe and the roof that covers us. Without this structure, the church has no location or definition; it becomes formless and lacks conviction.

The church as a flock:

In contrast, the church is also called a flock (Acts 20:28). A flock is a living, breathing entity that needs guidance, food, and protection. It is defined not by walls, but by movement

and the voice of the Shepherd. (Luke 12:32, John 10:11-16, 1 Peter 5:2-4)

In this mode, the focus is on guidance and care. A flock wanders; it gets hungry; it gets scared. It needs a shepherd to lead it to green pastures, not just a foundation to stand on.

The tension:

The divine tension here lies between structure and Spirit.

If we emphasize the building to the exclusion of the flock, the church risks becoming rigid or institutional—a museum rather than a home. We may have perfect doctrine (foundation), but no life inside the walls.

Conversely, if we view ourselves only as a flock without the structure of the building, we risk chaos and vulnerability. A flock without a pen is exposed to predators; a movement without a structure eventually dissipates.

We need the solid “walls” of truth and structure (building) to protect the vulnerable, wandering life of the sheep (flock). We must be grounded enough to stand firm, yet mobile enough to follow the Shepherd’s leading. Pauls sums it up in 1 Timothy 4:16 “Watch your life and doctrine closely,” re-enforcing the both/and nature of divine tension.

Editor’s note: This has been cut due to space, please search for this story on DisciplesToday.org for the entire article.



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Divine Tension: Embracing the Fullness of God’s Truth (Part 3)

February 14, 2026 • Justin Renton – Johannesburg, South Africa

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Church Builders Conference
April 23-26, 2026
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Marriage Retreat Cruise
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September 12–22, 2026

North American Teachers Conference
September 17-19, 2026
Raleigh, NC, USA

Conferencia de Las Americas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Oct 15-18, 2026

In the physical world, dynamic forces must work in opposition to create environments where life can flourish. Consider a mighty river: it requires two opposing realities to exist.



It needs the kinetic energy of flow to move water forward, providing life and hydration downstream. Yet it equally requires the static resistance of banks to contain that energy. Without the flow, the river becomes a stagnant swamp; without the banks, it becomes a destructive flood.

We see a similar tension in the plant kingdom. A tree requires a root system that digs deep into the dark earth for stability and nutrients, contrasting with branches that reach high into the sunlight for photosynthesis. The downward grounding and the upward reaching are not contradictions; they are the combined, necessary mechanics of growth. It is not one or the other, it’s both/and. In the same way, the church thrives when we recognize and embrace the divine tensions God built into its design.

In Part 1 we established that the fullness of God’s truth is held in tension, rather than in simplistic either-or categories. We must apply this lens to a topic that often causes confusion and conflict: church culture.

The ecclesiological tension: many models, one church

When we ask, “What is the church supposed to be like?” we often look for a single, simple definition. But Scripture does not offer us one static image. Instead, it presents a kaleidoscope of metaphors, each holding the others in check. The church is described most frequently as a family, a body, an army, a flock, a bride, and a building.

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continued on back