

When Church Stops Working by Andrew Root

Chapter 5: Waiting Brings Life, Not a Slow Death

We love smooth. We expect smooth. We need smooth to the point where frustration, conflict, and negativity become debilitating. We see it with our children. They're so savvy and creative, but resilience, or even a stomach for tension and conflict, is another matter.

A Church in Conflict

We also want church to be smooth. We're frustrated because it's so glitchy. It's not working the way we want it to. The anxiety frustrates us. Or maybe it's the frustration that makes us anxious. Regardless, we just want it to be smooth. Is that so much to ask?

We can't wait. We hate the idea of waiting, because it means we must accept tension, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Waiting means we have to live with the glitches.

Tension, even crisis, is deep in the DNA of the church. To obey Jesus's command—to be the body of the living Christ—the church will always be in tension. There will always be some level of discord, some crisis.

Though uncomfortable, these are signs of life. Life always comes amid tension, discord, and crisis. Of course, it can spin out into dysfunction, destruction, and dehumanization. But often this arrives when we try to smother, shame, and shun those we believe are responsible for interrupting our smooth with tension.

We want to act quickly, making the congregation the star of its own story, because we want to solve the crisis of decline and get things back to the smooth. To solve the crisis of decline we need to eliminate glitches and do away with tensions.

The pastor imagines that this is their job. We all assume that if we only have more (more members, more dollars, more relevance, more resources, all of those things helping to procure more of the others), we could call an end to the crisis. The crisis days would be over and gone!

No Tension = No Community

It is a mistake to assume that a community of faith could ever live without tension, discord, and even conflict. It can't if the church wants to be alive.

There is a great temptation to love the idea of community, to even love the ideal church. But there is no such thing. Maybe there would be if God were just an idea. But God can never be assumed to be an idea because God has made Godself known in the person of Jesus Christ.

Because the church is the body of the embodied God, there can be no ideal church. Just the real community of the real bodies of real persons in real relationship.

There can be no perfectly smooth (even mostly smooth) congregation. To try to live beyond tensions is to photoshop the body of the church, taking out all the acne and replacing it with plastic-looking skin.

To love the church is to love the real church made up of real people. We can end the tensions and discord in the church only if we pretend the church is not made up of real people with real bodies. We can get there only if we photoshop everything smooth, covering up our scars and tears, smoothing away the wrinkles from our laughter and joy. A church that can't embrace tensions and discord, making a way even in conflict, is a church that may look smooth but is not alive.

No Crisis = No God

The real crisis of the church is encountering a living God who is really God. To encounter this real God as humans constitutes a crisis. We are broken and sinful people, a weak church, who are called to wait for the God who is God to act in our midst.

We deny that we are in need of God's action to save us. Instead, we take action to save ourselves. We seek to dilute the taste of crisis with buckets and buckets of overflowing relevance and resources. While these overflowing buckets may dull our sense of crisis, they will never end it. They will never end crisis because the crisis the church faces, and must never live without, cannot be ended.

Our attention should be on the crisis of God's own action. How do we discern God's action? How do we help our people experience, know, and follow this living God who acts? This living God who is beyond and greater than all experience and all knowing? That is the crisis. We should be asking, How can we help our people encounter the living God in a secular age that blinds them to anything beyond the here and now?

God comes to us in very backward ways. At first glance, these ways are not what we would expect. That's a gift. God comes in these odd ways, in suffering and yearning, so that we know we do not conjure up or control God.

The church has no life other than waiting for and witnessing to the God who reveals Godself in the world in the backward ways of love.

The church can never be the star of its own story, because the God who makes the church can never be caged or captured by the church. Our crisis is continual because God is God. Because God is God, we must wait.

Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023).

Exported from Logos Bible Study, 9:46 AM June 9, 2026.