

# Formed Through the Crucible of Conflict

Michael Gulker

“I hate this question! Every time I get into conversations about faith and science I end up in a thicket of difficulties I can’t see through and I hate it. And now I realize why I hate it—because it makes me wonder if my faith is even true!”

Everyone in the room froze. Had Don really just said that? At least half the pastors and teachers in the room had been mentored by Don—as his Bible students, teaching colleagues, or both. And now he was openly questioning what he himself had so authoritatively taught us as the gospel truth. Worse yet—folks in the room who disagreed with one another about evolution were polarizing into camps. Divisions that had lain dormant for years were suddenly breaking out like a disease. Maybe this whole conversation was a mistake.

We had gathered in hopes of using tough, complex conversations like evolution as occasions to deepen faith and witness to the truth that all things hold together in Christ (Colossians 1:17). But things sure didn’t feel like they were holding together as we factionalized into two groups—those insisting on the authority of Scripture and those insisting on the need to take science seriously and teach it with integrity.

Things had started so well. We began the two-day retreat in prayer and worship, meditating on Mary’s annunciation in Luke 1, reflecting on what it might mean for Christ to be born in us in the midst of a pressured conversation like evolution. Later, we read Psalm 22, the opening line of which Jesus quoted from the cross—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken

me?” After Don’s declaration, we felt the despair of Psalm 22 more deeply than the hope of Luke 1.

How are we to act when we, who have been given authority for both the intellectual and spiritual formation of our students, come face-to-face with challenging conversations that threaten to call our own faith into question? How are we to balance our teaching authority and our confidence in Scripture with openness and vulnerability to new learning?

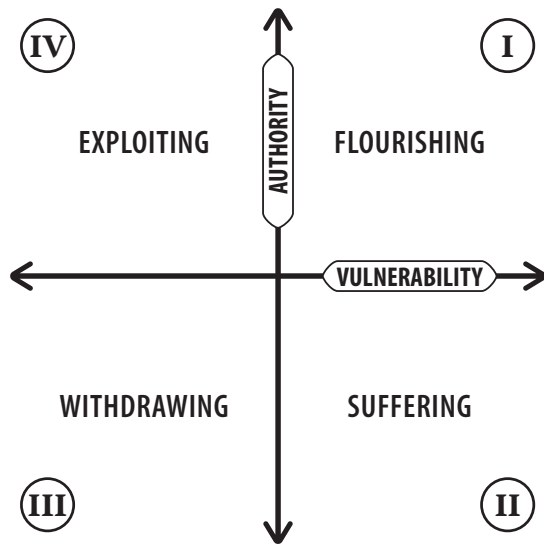
**And what, in our culture, did students need to see most—a tidy answer or a faithful question to a God whom we can trust to see things through even when we can’t?**

We’re tempted to avoid these landmine moments. One wrong step has the potential not only to cripple the faith of the young, but to outrage parents and offend one side or the other of our broader constituency. We feel caught—must we choose between the Bible and science? Should we confidently insist on scriptural authority even when we can’t always make sense of the scientific data? Or should we show vulnerability and risk shaking our students’ faith in the authority of Scripture?

We often feel we have only two options: cling tightly to scriptural authority or give it up and make ourselves vulnerable to every wind and whim of culture. Authority *or* vulnerability. Truth *or* love. Strong *or* weak.

Might there be another option? How might we, who worship a crucified Messiah, imagine something more interesting? In his recent book *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch explores just this possibility with remarkable clarity. He suggests that in Christ we discover that authority and vulnerability are not two poles of a binary spectrum, but rather two axes upon which humans live and move.

Crouch represents these axes with a chart that suggests that exercising authority and vulnerability together leads to “flourishing” while the refusal of both constitutes “withdrawal.” The exercise of authority without vulnerability leads to “exploitation” while vulnerability without authority leaves people at risk of “suffering.”



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In Christ, authority and vulnerability are held together in a sanctifying, dynamic tension that, when embraced, leads us into the deepest form of human flourishing—risking our authority for the sake of the vulnerable in ways the world cannot imagine.

Following Christ, we learn to assert our authority appropriately as well as risk vulnerability. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see that true authority is not opposed to vulnerability, but rather that authority increases when it is risked for those in need. The great hymn of Philippians 2 celebrates that our very salvation was accomplished by the one who humbled Himself to death on a cross, and that God exalted Him to the highest place, giving Him the name above every name. Christ holds authority and vulnerability together perfectly.

And His example makes possible other examples (like Don) that are critical to our own growth and flourishing. But the complex, contested conversations on topics like evolution demand risk. They threaten our authority. Make us vulnerable. Sometimes even the best of us can't see our way through to the other side. That's why we don't enter into these contexts alone—we do it with fellow believers in the context of prayer and worship, and with the confident trust that God has given us everything we need to be faithful.

After a long silence, one of the pastors in the room looked at Don and recalled our morning prayer from Psalm 22. He connected Don's confusion and vulnerability to that of Jesus as he prayed in pain, perhaps even confusion, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

**We are called to follow Christ by risking our authority for the vulnerable in the confident trust that God will see things through even when we cannot.**

Yet, even in His pain and confusion, it was to God that Jesus prayed His question. Then this pastor asked Don what required greater faith: praying a question to God when we can't see our way through or evading the complexity to protect ourselves and our authority? And what, in our culture, did students need to see most—a tidy answer, or a faithful question to a God whom we can trust to see things through even when we can't? Perhaps a God who has the power to raise the dead has the power to carry us through this as well? What if it is precisely through entering into situations of vulnerability that Christ's authority, Christ's own life, is birthed in us as it was so long ago in Mary? What if Luke 1 can't be without Psalm 22?

Of course, God did answer Jesus' question. As our Easter praise testifies, the Father did not forsake the Son, but the answer took longer than was comfortable, to say the least. There will be an answer to Don's question as well, an answer that holds Scripture and science together in ways that make sense to both the scientist and the biblical scholar. But until then, we are called to follow Christ by risking our authority for the vulnerable in the confident trust that God will see things through even when we cannot. Authority *and* Vulnerability. Truth *and* Love. Strong *and* Weak. Held together in Christ, yet formed in the crucible of conflict.

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#### Reference

Crouch, Andy. 2016. *Strong and weak: Embracing a life of love, risk and true flourishing*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.