We introduced the idea of holy tensions. Everyone’s familiar with the concept of unholy tensions. You all know what it is to be in relationships where there is irritability and, because somebody’s sarcastic, there’s a tension that develops in the room that you could cut it. It’s as thick as ice. And we’re familiar with a lot of conversations that are devoted to avoiding any kind of tension.

What’s this idea of holy tension all about? How does a SoulCare conversation introduce a productive kind of tension, a tension which legitimately can be called holy, which helps us achieve the purposes of SoulCare?

To understand the idea of holy tension and to move into how we engage in conversations that put us into position of complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, in order to understand these matters and to move into the provision and practice of SoulCare, let me talk to you about four different kinds of conversations, three of which involve, at best, only a minimum level of SoulCare because they don’t generate holy tension. Let me talk about these kinds. The first three kinds of conversations that I want to mention to you most often actually diminish the soul and run at cross purposes to SoulCare conversations. They don’t restore the soul; they decrease or diminish or weaken the soul. Only SoulCare conversations intentionally create the kind of holy tension that releases the Spirit to do His deepest work.

Four kinds of conversations—the first kind I call very simply social conversations. This is not a bad thing; it’s a good thing. Let me describe what I mean by it. In a social conversation, the purpose is to keep things pleasant. The real agenda in a social conversation is simply to have a good time and enjoy the interaction. Is there anything wrong with a bunch of guys getting together and watching a football game and their whole point is to have fun, and they make comments about the game together, and when the conversation is over they say, “Great time; time to
go home”? Is that a good thing? Sure it is. But understand that sometimes the central purposes of SoulCare are violated by that kind of conversation. Not always, but they can be. Let me explain.

Although not stated, although nobody talks about it, the covenant in a social conversation is to intentionally honor appropriate boundaries of social discourse, to intentionally honor appropriate boundaries of social discourse and to see to it that no one’s offended, that no one gets uncomfortable and that all tension is avoided. “What a nice evening,” we often say. Criteria—we had a good time. “That wasn’t a good evening. Didn’t like the evening.” “Why didn’t you?” “It wasn’t a good time.” Somebody made things unpleasant by being obnoxious, by being sarcastic, by being critical, by offering a putdown, and we say, “Next football party, he’s not going to be invited,” because he doesn’t fit into purposes of our social conversation. He violated the covenant.

Many conversations—I hesitate to say, but I think it’s true—most conversations among Christians in church settings are little more than social conversations. We meet in the lobby, we meet in the Sunday School class, we meet in a Bible study and our bottom line agreement is we’re going to keep things pleasant, we’re not going to talk the way that disrupts anybody. Our measure of whether the evening, the time, the conversation, was good is whether a good time was had by all. Social conversation, not necessarily a bad thing, but if it’s the only kind of conversation we have, we’re not in fellowship with each other and we’re not really the church. We’re not functioning as the church.

Second kind of conversation—task-centered conversations. In a task-centered conversation, the purpose is to achieve an agreed-upon task to pool the resources of the people in the room to move towards something we all concur has value. I’ll bring what I have to bear, you bring what you have to bear, and together we’ll go toward that end which we’ve agreed is a good end. Sometimes stated, but generally understood, the covenant in a task-centered conversation is to intentionally not have a good time (that’s a social conversation), but to intentionally pool resources to accomplish an objective of common concern. And sometimes we create a productive tension. Sometimes we’re willing to say, “I don’t think that’s the best means of getting there,” and someone else says, “Well, I disagree with that.”

And now—the tension that comes out of disagreement is productive if it leads to SoulCare? No. It’s productive if it leads us
to pooling our resources more effectively and we can agree that “You know, I think you have got a point. If I did this, it would be more effective in getting there and our final goal is getting there, so let’s get there by doing this, and you’re doing that.” There’s an eagerness to achieve something that cooperative effort can achieve. A task-centered conversation. “What a good meeting,” we often say after a church committee meeting. What do we mean? Everybody got involved. We dialogued. Everyone worked together. We kept the objective in sight. And our disagreements didn’t get us off track from our agenda. A bad evening happens in a task-centered conversation when someone is obstructive or lazy or disinterested or committed to a different objective.

I would suppose a clearest example of a task-centered kind of a conversation is a committee meeting, a church committee meeting. I wonder how many elders’ meetings are task-centered conversations and nothing more. Task-centered conversations can occur among elders, among church staffs. They can occur at a church service. They can occur in a small group where the goal is to worship or to connect. And we say, “Here is our purpose. Here is our task. We’re going to worship God. We’re going to connect with each other. Let’s see, how can we pool our resources to make sure that happens and the only tension that we are willing to put up with is the productive tension that will get us each to contribute whatever we have to contribute to move toward this particular objective.”

Task-centered conversations—the goal is to get something done. And when your goal is to get something done, there are times that you quench the Spirit. There are times when you don’t wait upon the Lord. We’re going to make it happen and then we say, “Spirit of God please show up. Here we go.” Task-centered conversation—devoid often of the holy tension that is required for effective SoulCare to take place.

The third kind of conversation I simply call informational conversations, where the purpose quite obviously is to give or to receive information. And usually this is clear: A classroom setting is an obvious setting, a discipleship relationship with a mentor and a mentee with a covenant is to intentionally learn something of value from another—not to avoid tension, not to produce productive tension but maybe to honor the tension of confusion, the tension of ignorance. “I don’t know about this. You do know about this. Will you relieve the void, the tension that I feel about not knowing what I wish I knew? Will you relieve that
by teaching me?” Folks, we often confuse SoulCare with teaching.

What you’re going to hear me say a little bit later is the fundamental dynamic of the human soul that needs to be released and needs to change is not going to be changed when all we do is teach. Is there a place for teaching? Of course. Is it the core of SoulCare? No.

In an informational conversation, the core purpose is, in fact, to teach and to learn. We say a sermon is good. You leave church and you go out to lunch and have your preacher [out] for lunch and somebody says, “Great morning. Great sermon.” What do we mean? Well, he was clear. He kept our attention. As learners, he kept us focused. He said some things that we actually recall from the sermon and so we say, “What a good morning.” The teacher taught well, and we as learners learned something. It was a good evening or a good morning or a good sermon or a good class. How about if we say, “Well, that was a waste of time. I’ll never go back to that church again. If that pastor’s preaching, I’m going to skip the morning”? What do we mean when we say it’s a bad sermon, or a bad Sunday School class, or a bad classroom situation? Well, either the leader taught poorly and didn’t know his material and wasn’t effective in communication, or the learner wasn’t attentive or focused or was too distracted—but learning didn’t happen. Bible study, whether on Sunday morning, or in small groups, or Sunday School class, is a clear example of informational conversation taking place in a church.

Too often we think that’s where spiritual growth takes place, because too often we think that the dispensing of information is sufficient for spiritual growth to take place. Is it necessary? Yes. Is it sufficient? Well, discipleship has too often—in our Western culture particularly—been understood as the process of dispensing information to another. Even with our new focus on spirituality and spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines, too often we become technicians who dispense a new understanding of how to do something. I will teach you how to engage in this particular spiritual discipline of reading the Bible in a certain way, or this discipline of centering prayer, and when you learn this discipline from me as your teacher and you practice it, this will happen. There’s no connection between people. I’m still just the teacher, and you’re the learner, and I’m standing in front of you with a blackboard with a lecture, and all I’m doing is teaching. Is there a place for that? I hope so. I’m doing it right now. But is it sufficient for SoulCare? No. Preparation for SoulCare? Yes. The essence of SoulCare? No.
Informational conversations don’t change us at the core level. They provide the framework for change, if the information that is being conveyed is, in fact, biblical truth. The goal in informational conversations is to learn something in our brains that perhaps at some point we can translate into our hearts and express it in our behavior.

There’s a fourth kind of conversation which I simply call **spiritual formation conversations**, SoulCare conversations, if you like. The purpose in a spiritual formation conversation, the purpose in a SoulCare conversation...as I describe this purpose, listen to how different the purpose of a SoulCare conversation is from a social conversation, which has its place; from a task-centered conversation, which has a valuable place; from an informational conversation, which is crucial to the growth of the Christian and important in many, many settings; but listen to how different the goal is from each of those in a SoulCare, spiritual formation conversation.

The goal, the purpose, in a spiritual formation conversation is...I wonder how you would finish the sentence. From all that you’ve heard so far, how would you finish that sentence? See if what I say aligns with where your heart is. I put it this way.

The purpose in the spiritual formation conversation is to celebrate the presence of God’s Spirit. The purpose of a spiritual conversation is to celebrate the presence of God’s Spirit by making ourselves available to whatever He’s doing in the moment, whatever He longs to do in my soul—to celebrate the immediate availability of God, right now as the two of us are having a cup of coffee at our favorite coffee shop. To celebrate the availability of the presence of God, right now, as we gather for our Bible study. To celebrate the availability of God as, over lunch a friend says, “My marriage isn’t going so well.” Rather than “you need counseling” or “how do I fix that?” or “what’s the Bible verse that deals with that one?”—no, to celebrate the availability of God’s Spirit; He’s here; He’s present; He’s eminent and He’s working. He’s never taking a break. He’s active.

The effects of celebrating the presence of God’s Spirit and making ourselves available to His availability, making ourselves available to whatever He wants to do—the effect is to feel a holy tension. The effect is to feel what Paul felt in Romans chapter 7 when he said, “I’m aware of something inside of me, the presence of God’s Spirit, that is actually impelling me, moving me, creating impulses
within me that makes me long to go in a certain direction, but I feel a tension. The things that I really want to do (I want to be pure; I don’t want to watch pornography; I want to be so patient with my husband; I want to enter my children's lives, so, well, I don’t want to be so irritable with them; I want to be close to my friends; I want to reveal Jesus to them)—the thing that I long to do, I don’t do. And the things that I don’t want to do (I have such a bad temper; I’m so impatient; I think such lustful thoughts; this sexual addiction is driving me crazy)—the things I don’t want to do, I end up doing.”

When you celebrate the presence of God’s Spirit and you realize that holiness dwells in the sanctuary of your soul, a tension is developed between where you are and what you long for. It’s that tension, I suggest, which provides the dynamic for spiritual formation to take place.

In a SoulCare conversation, in the spiritual formation conversation—I’ll use the terms interchangeably—the covenant, I would suggest, must be clearly stated and prayerfully agreed upon. It’s my conviction that SoulCare, at its richest level, will not happen until there’s a stated covenant between the people who are involved in the conversation. In a “good time” you don’t state, when the guys come over to watch the football game, “Our purpose tonight is to have a good time. Everybody agree?” It’s just assumed. When you get together for a committee meeting, you may state—but often not—“Our purpose tonight is such and such. We’re going... we’re the building committee and we’re going to agree on a budget for tonight and that’s our agenda.” Maybe you have an agenda, some agreement. In an informational conversation, it’s kind of assumed the purpose is that you’re going to teach, and I’m going to take notes and learn. But too often when Christians get together for SoulCare and spiritual formation, we assume it just sort of happens.

It’s my conviction, based partly on my experience, that SoulCare at the strictest level is not going to happen unless the people who walk into your living room for your Bible study agree, “We’re coming tonight not centrally to exegete a text. (There’s a place for that, a very important place.) We’re coming tonight not centrally to have a pleasant time and to avoid tension. We’re coming tonight not to reach a particular goal and decide how best to evangelize our neighborhood. (That’s a valid objective, a wonderful goal for a task-centered evangelism group.) But we’re coming tonight for an explicit purpose. We’re in the pains of childbirth until Christ is
formed in each other and we believe that we have the resources, because God has given us the division in our soul that, when released, could actually stir up your appetite for God. We don’t know how to do it; we’re lost; we’re experimenting, but we’re trusting. And even more than trusting, even before trusting, we’re committing. We have an intentional agenda and it’s spiritual formation.”

Ask yourself the question, “When have you been in a relationship, whether one-on-one conversation or a small group, where you have intentionally agreed together to enter into each other’s lives, for one to enter into another’s life, perhaps for the purpose of spiritual formation?” Maybe one of the reasons it happens so rarely is because we don’t know what the term spiritual formation means. Does it mean that you stop doing bad things? That you have devotions every day? That you miss church very rarely? What is spiritual formation? Let me give you a simple definition. Maybe not too simple, a little cumbersome, but I want you to ponder with me.

When I think about a SoulCare conversation where two people, and maybe more, get together for the purpose, the agreed-upon purpose of spiritual formation, here’s what the people are agreeing to: agreeing to the process of spiritual formation, which I define as a process, as a process by which the Spirit of God relieves the holy tension in the seeking, honest soul. Spiritual formation—the process by which the Spirit of God relieves the holy tension in the seeking, honest soul. How? By nourishing the passion for God that He has already placed in the soul so that the interior world of our ruling passions increasingly resembles the interior world of Jesus.

Can you imagine sitting across from somebody and just thinking to yourself, “Could the interior world of this woman actually resemble Jesus when He’s hanging on a cross saying, ‘Take care of My mother’? When He’s talking to Peter who has betrayed Him and His only intent is to restore Peter to a deeper love relationship with Himself?” What passions ruled in Jesus in all the narratives we have all through the Gospels? And to be able to come together and say, “My purpose in coming together with you, your purpose in joining with me, is spiritual formation that I believe is a tension. You long to be like Jesus, but you’re not a whole lot like Him and the Spirit of God can relieve this tension by nourishing the appetite for God that rules the heart of Jesus. ‘It’s my delight to do your will.’” Could it be my delight to do God’s will with the
memories of sexual abuse? Could it be my passion and delight to do God’s will when my wife tells me she’s leaving me? Could it be my passion and delight to do God’s will when I discover my child’s on drugs? Spiritual formation is not telling Dad, “Here’s how to handle your kid.” Spiritual formation is working, chatting, engaging with that dad in a way that awakens his passion for God so that it’s stronger than even his passion for seeing his son walk a godly, moral, responsible life. Only that will free the father from engaging in a power struggle with the son.

Spiritual formation conversation is conversations that are rather rare. Spiritual formation conversation—the goal is not to have a good time, although it may be a good time. The goal is not to get something done, although much might happen. The goal is not to learn something important, although many important things will be learned. The goal is to provoke holy tension that only spiritual formation can relieve. To become so preoccupied with God that, more than anything else, you want to reveal God’s glory through being spiritually formed. You want to be the kind of person with another that, when the person engages with you, they catch the fragrance of Christ. They leave that conversation with you saying, “I think I know a little bit more of what Jesus is like and something in me is stirred to want that more than I did an hour ago.” And now the tension is relieved a little bit because the impulse to move toward God has become strong enough that you're able to begin to say with the apostle Paul, “Wretched man, who’s going to deliver me? I praise God. I thank God. The Spirit within me can relieve the holy tension as I learn to know what it means to walk in the power of the Spirit.”

The process of spiritual formation requires, I believe, the twin setting of solitude and community. In solitude, the practice of spiritual disciplines creates space for the Spirit to do His deepest work. In solitude, you most directly encounter God under the authority of His Word. Certain things can happen in solitude in spiritual formation that happen better in solitude than in community. But, with all of our increasing and appropriate focus on solitude, let’s understand that community is required as well.

In community, in the practice of SoulCare, through spiritually-forming conversations, something can happen that solitude maybe doesn’t produce quite as powerfully or as effectively. And I would suggest it is the stirring of the holy tension between who I am and who I truly long to be that requires God’s provisions for me to move forward in my life.
So now with the idea in our minds about the passions that rule us and the wisdom that guides us as we provide SoulCare, so now with the idea of moving into SoulCare conversations and wanting to have conversations intentionally devoted to spiritual formation, we need to think about what those conversations are going to look like. And I want to think about that topic under three headings. I want to think about the purpose—we’ve already mentioned it. I want to look at it more carefully. The purpose of SoulCare conversations—the agreed upon purpose, the actual covenant that exists between the two, or perhaps more, people.

I want to look at the provisions—what has God provided that makes SoulCare conversations possible, but, frankly, are not as clearly essential in the other kinds of conversations? It has been my experience that a number of elders’ meetings have seemed to progress quite well by our agenda without the Spirit doing much at all. SoulCare conversations can never progress without the Spirit doing everything. What are the provisions?

And lastly, we’ll look at the process. The purpose, the provisions, and the process.

And I want to say, just as simply as I can, that the purpose of conversation intentionally dedicated to SoulCare is a purpose which ought to be at the center of every conversation with Christians, but may not be the priority focus in every conversation among Christians. The purpose in an informational conversation, a task-centered conversation, a social conversation might be the purposes we mentioned, but somehow at the center there needs to be the recognition that there is a core purpose that governs a Christian every time he’s involved. What is it?

I’ll say it simply: The core purpose of every SoulCare conversation is to help people enjoy God so much that their consuming desire in all their relationships is to reveal the God that they have supremely enjoyed. That’s what I believe it means to glorify God—is the sole purpose for everything.

If that’s our purpose, we need to understand it better. We need to understand the provisions God has made to make that possible, and we need to understand the process by which the Spirit can make it happen through SoulCare conversations.