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Feeding the Hand that Bites You: Dealing with Difficult People in Your Ministry

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When Christian businessman Fred Smith was asked by *LEADERSHIP* journal to write an article on handling critics in ministry, he transparently lamented that one word came to mind: “arsenic!” Unless you pastor the First Baptist Church of Heaven, you no doubt can relate to the reaction. It seems that in every congregation, there exist a few members who appear to believe that “devil’s advocate” is actually a church office.

Mayor Richard J. Daley, the scandalously famous mayor of Chicago, once said of his opponents, “They have vilified me, they have crucified me, yes, they have even criticized me.” The comparison feels right: nothing hurts more than a stinging criticism when it rakes across the tender heart of well-intentioned service.

Like Moses and Elijah before me, I recall moments of discouragement springing up from the irony of being opposed by the very people I was giving my life to serve. “Do they think I’m in this for the financial rewards, for cryin’ out loud?! I’m just trying to love God and help people in obedience to God’s call on my life. If they don’t like the way I’m doing this, maybe they would like to give it a try for a week or two”

Following your “gut” reaction in intense moments of opposition is probably not a wise plan, unless you’d like to add some new categories to the lists of “deadly” sins! God often calls us into an “uncomfortable” position in terms of ministry, allowing us to endure what we feel we don’t need, withholding from us the very things we feel we need most. I have learned in these times

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that God is not so much interested in changing my ministry circumstances as He is in changing *me* in the midst of my circumstances.

Reluctantly, I have arrived at a strategy for handling the criticism and opposition that is to be expected in any geographical setting, provided that *people* are involved. The strategy flows out of the conviction that *God desires even professional ministers to grow and change so they might more effectively love and serve the people to whom God has called them.* The strategy involves two steps, easy to understand, yet difficult to practice.

Step One: Confront the Man in Your Mirror!

How easy it is to forget that we in ministry can be our own worst enemies. Wisdom calls us to self-examination when confronted with difficult people and difficult circumstances. Let me suggest five areas in which reactionary tendencies may surface.

An unbalanced ecclesiology. The Apostle Paul's theology of the church provides us with rich metaphors which stress the fact that no member is insignificant or unneeded (1 Cor. 12). The mixture of spiritual gifts in the church serves to bring balance as each is exercised with mutual respect and concern for differing gifts (Rom. 12:3-10). Inevitably, arriving at this balance may cause one gift to feel that another gift is raining on his parade!

Have you ever secretly (or not-so-secretly) nursed a desire that God would arrange a job transfer for selected individuals in the congregation? Perhaps you have found yourself less than devastated when a difficult person decided to leave, adopting a "Who needs 'em?" attitude at least inwardly. Would you exercise the same painstaking attempts at recovery and restoration for a detractor as you would for a cheerleader? A biblical understanding of and commitment to the church as designed by God makes room for those who criticize us.

An addiction to approval. Addiction is a popular contemporary scapegoat which covers a multitude of sins, but permit me for a moment to utilize the term to emphasize the intensity of a problem to which we pastors and Christian workers are especially vulnerable. I am referencing the reception of “Atta-boys” as we wind our way along the sometimes treacherous path of professional ministry.

If you had the blessing of a father’s or mentor’s regular and realistic verbal encouragements in your developmental years, you know how deeply satisfying an occasional drink from the well of human approval can be. The power of praise to motivate and encourage is nearly universally recognized. This *desire* for human acceptance is not inherently a sinful one, no doubt a part of the way God designed us as social beings who would long for community with others. If you were deprived of such encouragements in your childhood or were exposed to verbal or physical assaults instead of acceptance, the desire for “Atta-boys” may be particularly intense.

The landscape of ministry is especially precarious in this regard. The expectation of universal acceptance from those I am serving is certainly an *unrealistic* one, and may indeed become a *sinful* one, an idol of the heart (Ezek. 14:3). If I am “about” being accepted by others, I may veer off into the ditch of compromise of principle, or more frequently the ditch of discouragement when encountering opposition. John Ortberg said it well, “To truly care *for* people requires not caring too much *about* their approval or disapproval.”¹

A weariness in shepherding. This reaction I am convinced is born of a romantic and idealistic image of “the ministry” before one actually gets involved. We see the “work” of our pastor (public appearances in the pulpit two or three times weekly) and

¹John Ortberg, “Breaking the Approval Addiction,” *Leadership* 13 (Summer 1992): 34-40.

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conclude that the life of ministry must be a life of glory. Though we give lip service to the understanding that the ministry is a life of sacrifice, our infatuation may prevent us from seeing the picture as it truly is.

A favorite image of the New Testament writers for the office of pastor, the *shepherd*, should have clued us. The “shepherding” booth would certainly not be a popular attraction at Career Day at the local high school. No, if you want a sure path to leisure and luxury, shepherding would not be the wisest choice: long, lonely hours of vigil, exposure to the elements, low social standing, and less attention for doing the job than comes for *not* doing the job.

Yet being a true follower of Jesus Christ, not just mere ministerial professionals, demands that we embrace the shepherd’s task. Jesus described those unfaithful shepherds who invested no personal ownership or sacrifice in the work and who would run at the first sign of trouble (John 10:11-13). Peter called us to “feed the flock of God which is among you . . . with a ready mind” (1 Pet. 5:2). Don’t gaze longingly at another pasture and fantasize what it would be like to minister somewhere where they really appreciated you. Pick up the staff and get to work at loving your own people by serving them (even the “difficult” ones) in order to make *Him* happy.

A growing ingratitude. It is comforting to me that the great apostle Paul affirmed that contentment was a discipline, a process he found it necessary to *learn* (Phil. 4:11-12). It is no wonder that we are given the *command* to rejoice when we fall into all kinds of difficulties and trials (James 1:2; 1 Thess. 5:18), anticipating the good that will accrue to our character if we respond in faith. Joy is not a natural, human response to the intrusion of difficulty over the horizon of our lives and ministries. Again, I must remember that God is faithfully working at producing in me the likeness of His dear Son (Rom. 8:28-29). To that end, He will employ effectively means that in my human opinion are inhibiting the

process (if not *reversing* it!). God is more interested in making me *holy* than He is in keeping me *happy*. Consequently, in His great wisdom and loyal love He applies pressure when and where needed to produce character in my life that will result in His glory, consistent with the goal of all creation.

How recently did you actually *thank* God for the trial of opposition and difficulty that you are facing in your ministry? Have you asked Him to help you to get involved in what He is attempting to do in your life at a deeper level? Are you praying specifically and lovingly for your “enemies” in ministry? Are you asking God to accomplish changes that will result in greater Christ-likeness for them as well?

An overactive imagination. In a church I pastored, I had a friend who loved to play a little game with me on a semi-regular basis. As a deacon, he served on a number of committees and was privy to many conversations dealing with the administration of the work. He was a loyal member and always helpful to me, but he also had a definite streak of mischief in his personality. He would approach me in the hallway, and in passing ask, “Sam, did ‘they’ talk to you yet?” Puzzled, I would reply, “No. Who? What about?” He would look puzzled in return, confirming, “No one talked to you about the salary thing yet?” Receiving my negative response, he would then cheerfully chirp, “Never mind then!”, only to walk off, whistling as he went.

Even though I knew the “problem” was make-believe, I must confess that my imagination would occasionally intrude into my thinking, suggesting potential situations for concern. Was it the school committee? The proposal for the new budget? A parent upset over the last youth outing? What?

The tendency to think the worst at the slightest suggestion of trouble is a natural one for many of us. But how often have the views of the critical and vocal minority cast a pall in our minds over the supportive yet silent majority in our congregation? I know of a church where a good and faithful pastor submitted his

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resignation, believing his ministry was ended after years of listening to the opposition of some critical individuals. Only afterwards did he come to realize that these concerns represented the feelings of only a small segment of the people, the rest of the congregation being very supportive of his work among them.

Could it be that our *perception* of the problems in our ministries, cued by the complainers, is blown far out of proportion to reality? It is possible that we find ourselves in the midst of an Elijah-like crisis, isolated and lonely, woefully unaware of the scores of others who are on the same page as we, loyal and committed to Christ and His work in our congregation? I believe it is not only possible, but highly probable.

Like Mayor Daley, we all tend to smart acutely when experiencing the sting of criticism. Are you avoiding it as an intruder, or welcoming it as a friend, an opportunity to change and grow in Christ-likeness? If we truly see God's hand in the difficulty and criticism that comes our way, it will help us take that much-needed long look in the mirror and move us toward the second step in our strategy for handling difficult people.

Step Two: Learn to Love Your Critic!

Criticism and how one responds to it was a favorite topic for the sage. Consider these choice observations as a sampling of inscripturated wisdom:

"A reproof entereth more into a wise man than an hundred stripes into a fool" (Prov. 17:10)

"He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding" (Prov. 15:32)

"It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools" (Eccl. 7:5)

Listen to David's mature resolve in his season of distress:

"Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer shall be in their calamities" (Ps. 141:5)

Having seen God's purpose in our trouble to help us change and grow, we must commit ourselves to loving ministry to the people we may consider "difficult." Let me suggest six expressions of this love I am describing.

Create an environment where constructive criticism is warmly welcomed. If you lived under a boss or a parent who exploded when approached with a suggestion for improvement, you probably remember how difficult it was to be excited about approaching him again. Often a person who intimidates others in that way lives in an illusory world of apparent harmony, oblivious to the unrest simmering just beneath the surface. A pastor who communicates inapproachability may find members who vote their dissatisfaction with their feet—the old revolving door syndrome.

A local church environment where helpful criticism is welcomed is strategically influenced by the pastor. Both publicly and privately, communicate that you are open to hear the concerns and suggestions of the people. You may share publicly how positive changes were made in a church program, for instance, due to concerns that were voiced. Certainly, if you have behaved sinfully, be quick to confess to God and the appropriate people and seek forgiveness. Even paralinguistic cues like tone of voice, facial expression, and body language express eloquently whether or not you are open and approachable.

Also, don't forget that verbal welcoming of criticism means very little if no positive changes can be demonstrated as a result of it. Even if you find the criticism more "husks" than "com,"

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determine to profit by the rebuke and demonstrate this in a practical way.

Look discerningly at possible underlying causes for criticism, and respond appropriately. Fred Smith suggests several “classifications” of critics:

- 1) People who resist authority per se.²
- 2) People with natural leadership qualities who are not part of the majority.
- 3) People who criticize to show their expertise.
- 4) “Natural howlers.”
- 5) People who use criticism to exorcize internal conflicts.
- 6) Genuine, honest, interested critics.³

Smith’s classifications remind me that pastors must look beneath the surface of a critical attack, believing that not all who respond in this way are simply reflections of the day in which we live (which is no excuse for the behavior, incidentally). Perhaps the individual is in need of a greater challenge, and the criticism has brought them face to face with an opportunity for you to

²The postmodern milieu in which we labor undoubtedly influences people to respond to authority in ways unlike their parents or grandparents may have. As an example, consider my neighbor’s bumper sticker, “QUESTION AUTHORITY.” Unfortunately, we may expect an increase in this type of attitude as the philosophy permeates the culture unrestrained.

³From a helpful article by, Fred Smith, “The Care and Feeding of Critics” *Leadership* 16 (Winter 1995): 29-35.

minister to them at a deeper level of their lives. The situation may present a platform for challenging them to invest their gifts toward a resolution of the problem. They may need to hear a loving and Spirit-directed rebuke (particularly if they are “chronic” complainers). Or, they may simply be sending you distress signals of a deeper hurt in their life, “exorcizing conflict,” to borrow Smith’s terminology.

I will not soon forget the encounter with a man in my study who had grown increasingly critical of my ministry, centering primarily around my preaching (OUCH!). The conversation began with the typical acrid assessment of my pastorate. As I listened to the list of grievances, I was peddling fast to avoid becoming defensive. During a lull in the delivery, I thanked him for having enough courage to share his concerns with me (AGAIN!) and ventured a question. How were things going in his home life? I had observed signs of some stress there and tried to express concern and a willingness to help. At this point the confrontation changed in the most dramatic fashion. He forgot his list of gripes and began tearfully pouring out the sad tale of the discouragement and frustration of his marriage. The dynamic of our relationship was effectively altered: no longer was I a target toward which to release pent-up anger. I was now a counselor who could minister the Word to his life. He didn’t retract *all* of his criticisms, but his spirit in sharing them was certainly transformed. The experience caused me to wonder how many times I had missed similar opportunities with others in an attempt to defend myself from the onslaught.

*Evaluate each criticism on the basis of its content, not who said it or how it was said. If you have someone who week by week greets you at the door after the service with a critical assessment of your sermon, arguing some fine point of interpretation, you may develop a reticence to *listen* to what is being said.*

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Some people have shared an opposing viewpoint so frequently that audible sighs are heard from the congregation if they rise to speak in a business meeting or raise their hand to share a comment in Sunday School. The exasperation is understandable, especially if the individual is clueless that he or she has crossed far beyond the limits of reasonable patience.

Yet there is an inherent danger in becoming calloused to this person's approach: undoubtedly at some point they will share a concern that may be a timely word of counsel for you personally or the congregation corporately. You must try to separate your prejudices and preconceptions from the task of listening so that you actually hear *what is said*.

Work hard to turn your critics into coaches. Indeed, a person who has earned a chronic reputation as a complainer needs concentrated pastoral attention. A true friend will faithfully deliver a wound when it is needed, uneasy with the deceptive embrace which may actually conceal a foe. A critical spirit unarrested may result in dissension on a grand scale, perhaps ultimately resulting in church discipline. No one savors the opportunity to endure such a process, necessary and biblical though it is. Actually, many such situations could be averted by diligent and deliberate ministry to the person before the pattern escalates into a real problem.

More than likely, such people will need to be coached on some basic principles of good communication, growing from passages like Ephesians 4 (learning to speak the truth *in love*). It may be that they have never been taught in this critical area of life, and the only models from which they learned were poor ones. It is likely that they are struggling in other relationships due to their critical spirit, and may welcome the help. You may just gain a new and loyal friend in the process!

Another way to help them is to get them involved in the process early when you anticipate a possible conflict. If an issue is approaching about which you expect them to have strong

opinions, take them out for breakfast and talk the matter through *before* the business meeting. They will certainly feel that you value their opinion and will probably feel less compelled to share it with the world at a later time.

Be secure enough to view criticisms as a challenge, not a threat. Though it may seem to you that the chronic complainer in your church wants your job, you can probably rest assured that 99 percent of them do not. Personal insecurities left unaddressed can cause us to overreact in moments of intense pressure. We must be open and transparent enough to allow God to speak to us about areas of our life that need to change, and my experience is that He often does so through unlikely channels. Nearly every criticism, if I am secure enough to hear it without bias, will help me to highlight a problem that needs to be changed, a perception that needs to be altered.

At all costs, refuse yourself the luxury of personal revenge. Humanly speaking, pastors possess a decided advantage when it comes to personal conflict: the public forum of the pulpit. We have all heard the horror stories: a pastor is stressed beyond the limits of tolerance by critics and nay-sayers, and in a moment of carnality descends to shameless personal attack. The weapons normally used in such attacks: the ever-adaptable *sermon illustration* or the always available *pastoral pulpit prayer*. I have talked to more casualties from such attacks than I need to suffice me for a lifetime. I have found that the wounds sustained in such attacks are typically enduring, often inciting the wounded to step aside from the battle indefinitely.

Personal revenge may also take the form of political power-moves in the administration of the church. Insulating your administration with “yes-men” may make your life easier, but will effect a dangerous imbalance in the outworking of ministry. Behind-the-scenes “insurance” that certain individuals are

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relegated to insignificant stations may be expected in the business world, but assuredly ought to be out of place in the local church.

Conclusion

As someone has perceptively penned,

“To live up above, with the saints that we love:

Oh, that will be glory!

To live here below, with the saints that we know:

Now, that’s a different story!”

Conflict among believers privately or corporately is inevitable until we stand together in glory, finally knowing as we are known. “There is always enough sin to go around the room,” as the saying goes. Are you growing in humility enough to honestly confront the person in your mirror as a *first* response when you encounter criticism? Can you list specific changes for good that you have made in your life in the past six months that grew out of a criticism you received?

Are you communicating in verbal and nonverbal ways that you are open and approachable to those who have concerns to share with you? Are you courageous enough to really *pastor* the people you would consider detractors to the program? Are you reaching out to them or running from them?

Being a faithful undershepherd calls us to continue growing in the love Jesus modeled for us. Keep pursuing that kind of ministry that reflects the patient sufferings of Jesus. Ministry actually *is* a life of glory—just be reminded that the true glory is to be experienced in the city toward which we journey.