

## HANDLING CRITICISM IN THE MINISTRY

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We reserve the word criticism for illegitimate fault-finding. It means something negative because it has negative cause, result, or both. Criticism is evil because it does not edify of others but aggrandizes self. A critic's conscious motive may be to hurt or offend, and the person criticized feels that hurt. Criticism does not build up anyone or improve the situation. It is not done the same way constructive efforts are done. Many times critics do not go to the person himself, but air their complaints to third parties or in public situations. They make their statements in condemnatory tone of voice and in ways which imply their doubt that the other person is willing or able to make adjustments that correct. Their aim is to evaluate rather than ameliorate—to condemn rather than to help.

### I. Why People Criticize

A. To get attention. People criticize because it gives them something easy to say. Offering solutions is harder than observing that some proposed solution or current effort is not accomplishing everything that would be well to have. People never criticize others for things they also are guilty of; consequently, they are saying to people, "Look at me; I do not have that fault." By pointing out weaknesses they try to tell other people that they themselves are intelligent, that they know the difference between the way things are and the way they ought to be, that they know a better way (though typically a critical person never allows himself or his ideas to be put to the test and he seldom himself tries to do anything; that would set him up for ridicule for failure).

B. Because of distrust. Criticism is weakness behavior because it does not trust. Critics' relatives and friends have evidently been untrustworthy, and so they are automatically transferring that feeling to you. It may take a while to show them that their fears are unwarranted. Distrust amounts to fear. Critical people are driven by a sense of insecurity.

C. To gain control. Criticism is also weakness behavior because it represents (1) a felt need to be superior through competition. Obviously criticism creates the opposite effect because a superior person does not have to prove he is superior. Efforts to gain ascendancy by tearing another person down prove the insecurity of the critic, and they indicate how low his own level is by the level to which he has to bring you in order to feel above you. In other words, people criticize you because they feel intimidated by you. Critics have the feeling of gaining the upper hand because they can see that their comments make the other person uncomfortable. It "puts the him on the spot." They often misreading this response, however. The other person may be uncomfortable, not because he feels guilty but because he feels frustrated.

The desire to gain control may be more diffused, or ambiguous. They may be afraid of what negative things might do to them; so they be trying to get (2) a sense of mastery

over the situation by verbalizing about it. What they say is not really so much of a comment on you as it is an attempt to subdue the situation.

D. Because silence feels like approval. Much admonition against being critical goes unheeded because people fudge that admonition into the idea that they should not criticize unless it is justified, which puts them right back at square one. They have confused being critical with lying. What person ever criticized someone without thinking he was justified in it? Admonition against critical behavior also goes unheeded because people assume they are not to criticize unless they can do a better job of it. Since many people magnify their abilities in their own mind, they do not profit from the warning.

E. Out of habit. Often critical people do not realize what they are doing it. Because of their upbringing they habitually seeing what is wrong around them, and “have” to say something about it.

F. Because you have been criticizing them. Preachers are as critical as anyone and they often take advantage of the pulpit to do it. Warning people about sin gets skewed into criticizing people for their sins. Negative preaching—“hell-fire and brimstone,” even if it is not aimed at anyone in the audience, nevertheless sets the example being overtly negative toward what is wrong in the world and in people rather than offering solutions to the problems or devising ways to help people develop from where they are to where they ought to be.

## II. Responding to Criticism

A. Prevent criticism before it happens. We say, “Prevention is the best cure.” (1) Build relationships with your people more than implement programs, and you will avoid a lot of criticism. You will be building trust and people do not criticize their friends, the people they like, the people they think like them, the people they feel close to—people they think they can trust; so be their friend. The closer you are to your people the less they will be inclined to think negatively of you or feel intimidated by you. Reduce distance and you reduce criticism. Since criticism is a self-protection mechanism some people get into the habit of using, they will not criticize what they do not fear. Affirm them and do not be their enemy. Since people normally treat you the way you have treated them, make sure you do not criticize them. Being positive toward them pays off in a number of ways including their not being negative toward you in the form of criticism.

(2) Build people up. As with most weakness behavior, criticism ultimately stems from low self-esteem. When you edify people, you forestall negativism about themselves, their situation, and their impressions of you. Critics are weak or socially awkward; otherwise they would give constructive suggestions instead of destructive criticism. Obviously you cannot be best friends with everybody all the time, but it is worth the try to communicate some way to these people that you value them. Raising their self-esteem will lower their criticism.

(3) Evaluate your own work and life. If we judge ourselves, we will not be condemned by others (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:31). We will be spotting weaknesses and correcting them, which averts criticism for what we would otherwise have omitted or committed.

B. Consider the criticism possibly true. In order to protect ourselves against the devastation that criticism usually brings us, we can (1) try to disregard it altogether. While you cannot let it get you down, you can consider whether there is a “kernel of truth” in it. Just shoving it aside without further thought eliminates any changes you might make that would lead to ending of criticism. Another reaction is to (2) try to play up the weaknesses of the critic whether great or small in comparison to what he is saying about you. This kind of reaction simply turns the Gold Rule “on its ear” by responding in kind. Part of the issue has to be whether the fault actually exists. If it does, then change or apology may be all it takes to get rid of it.

C. Listen beyond the specific criticisms. (1) Many times people are legitimately uneasy about things, but they misidentify the problem. Since they think the real problem is coming from this or that, they say negative things about it without considering the possibility that they are misanalyzing things.

(2) Criticism may be a function of inadequate relationship between you and your critics. Their complaining is more of a cry for love than it is a call to opposition. Their feeling left out, disregarded, overlooked, unappreciated may express itself dysfunctionally as criticism of your ministry. If you have not done enough to prevent the occurrence, even after it starts you may be able defuse it by attention, but you have to be careful not to get a pattern going where you pay attention to them when they criticize and then back off when the criticism abates. They may consciously start it up again to get your attention; most criticism is attention-getting behavior anyway.

(3) Sometimes people do not want to come right out and tell you tell what is bothering them because it may be too “touchy.” Maybe you or your wife are too bossy sounding, too withdrawn, too slow-moving. Your personal hygiene may need improvement or you are too sloppy in your dress. You may be boring in the pulpit. If the real difficulty is something they do not think you can change or are likely to change, they will bring up other things that are in a sense “excuses”; but they may really be doing it to keep from destroying you with “a low blow.” We have the saying, “Where there is smoke there is fire.” That means that if criticism is growing there is actually something wrong; so do not “blow it of”; try to figure out what the problem really is.

D. Find out how many people are dissatisfied. Criticism often seems more extensive than it is because it “sticks out.” A few vocal people can make a bigger impression than they should be allowed to make. You also need to figure out whether this handful of people has some hidden agenda. Occasionally some friend or relative has become available for ministry; their objection to you is only a ruse for trying to get this other person. That may be coupled with a “power play” to solidify control of the congregation by getting someone they can handle or someone they perceive to be on their side in some way. If there is discord, remember that most dissatisfaction with a minister does not involve everyone in the church.

One reason criticism can be so destructive is that you are not in a good position to tell whether it is legitimate. You cannot see yourself as others see you. There is always more

that you could do and you could always do it better, but it is hard for you to determine whether .

Look to see whether the ones criticizing you are just negative people—people who characteristically complain about other people’s failures, evil motives, sins, and weaknesses. People that have a negative style are weak people, perhaps afraid of failure, and typically untrusting of others. Consider also whether they are likely to be in a position to know the truth about what they are criticizing before you “let it get to you.”

E. Keep people aware. Criticism is born of fear and fear is born of ignorance. You can prevent a lot of criticism by letting people know what you are doing; otherwise they may fear that you are not doing anything and criticize you because they do not have a very good feel for what ministers do. By volunteering the reasons why you are doing something, you may offset the fear that your motives are somehow not good.

F. Deal with criticism impersonally. Do not flinch; respond, but do not react. Ask matter-of- fact questions relevant to the criticism. Keep your voice even; be pleasant; give unhurried statements to explain what’s and why’s. Consider their criticisms as much a comment on themselves as on you. Be descriptive rather than evaluative in your own comments. Silence is a strong response to criticism. If someone passes on to you the fact that a person in the church has said something negative about your ministry, smiling and letting it pass without comment communicates that you are not worried about, that it is not true, and therefore that you are strong enough that something so small is not problem. Make sure never to say something about it again to the informant or to anyone else. Talking about things is what keeps them alive; silence kills them; so let them die of inattention. Unless it is a serious charge you do not need to go and accost the person who has accused you of something or criticized your work. Getting a reaction out of you only reinforces his tendency to think he is right and you are guilty.

G. Live above your feelings. In a way this admonition calls for more than a person can do consistently. The better you are at it, however, the more stable your ministry will be, and the stronger image you will project, which in turn will reduce the criticism people feel inclined to level against you.