

## To Fight or Not to Fight

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As a young staff pastor in Arizona, I was amazed and indignant when Dave told me about the carpeting in his office. I knew church life was tough, but not that tough!

As founding pastor, he had brought the church from five families to an attendance of more than three hundred in seven years. He and his wife had poured their lives into the congregation. One of Dave's few requests as they moved near completion of their second expansion was that his office be carpeted in red. The trustees met — they voted — and they installed green shag.

"How can you put up with that?" I demanded. The attitude of those trustees toward this unselfish servant made me furious. "I would insist on what I'm going to have in my office."

Dave's response was one I've never forgotten, a word of advice that has been a wise guide throughout my seventeen years of ministry: "John, you have to determine what's worth going to the wall for. Not every issue is the worth a fight."

### The Urge to Push

I tend to be a perfectionist. I don't like to see the microphone cord dangling in front of the pulpit. I'm bothered when the light on the cross isn't lit, when the organist is late, or when people remove the ropes causing latecomers to disrupt the service as they are seated at the front of the sanctuary.

I pick up a gum wrapper if I see it on the church lawn. I personally proofread the bulletin to emancipate it from any typo. And I make sure our people are contacted daily when they are in the hospital. I hate sloppiness and lack of commitment—whether in caring for the Lord's facilities, an individual's theological belief, or in relationships among members of the body.

This personality bend has its strengths and weaknesses. It drives me to produce quality work, but at time it hinders my relationships with people. With such strong convictions of what I believe is best for a given ministry, I sometimes cut across ideas, convictions, and contributions of others.

After eight years of ministry with Dave, I packed up my family and belongings and transported them 2,600 miles to assume a senior pastorate in New Jersey. I didn't realize that I also packed and carried with me a little piece of Dave.

After a few months at the church, I decided to change the chancel furniture. Rarely had I used the pulpit when I preached in Arizona. I either stood in front of the congregation simple with the bible in hand, or I would use an overhead projector when it would enhance the message. I didn't like the large wooden pulpit at this new church. (When I candidated, I removed it prior to the evening service.) Without giving it much thought, I placed the pulpit in a closet.

One Sunday, a dear woman came up and said, "Pastor, I'm not sure if you realize this, but when this church was built, different folks donated the sanctuary furniture. I wonder if the family who donated the pulpit is offended that it's not being used any more." Alice's concern was sincere; she wasn't being petty.

“Well, Alice, I’ll have to give that some thought,” I said. “Maybe I can find out if this bothers them. On the other hand, I’ll have to weigh that against my effectiveness in communicating without that barrier.”

The following week I asked several people how they felt about my not using the pulpit. I asked our custodian, “Hey, Earl, have you noticed I’m not using the pulpit on Sundays?”

“You know, Pastor, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” he said. From my random survey I concluded that preaching from behind the pulpit was pretty important to this congregation.

For me, when I stand holding an open Bible and present its message, I am speaking with authority. For many in this eastern church, I speak with authority when I stand behind “the sacred desk.” I could bring logical and biblical arguments to reinforce my conviction, and perhaps with systematic education I could persuade some. But for many if not most in our congregation, an auditorium is not a sanctuary unless it has a pulpit.

During that week I realized I had brought part of Dave with me to New Jersey. You’re right, Dave, not everything is worth going to the wall for. The following Sunday I preached (at least some of the time) behind the reinstated pulpit.

A few years back a television commercial advertised its product with the slogan: “I’d rather fight than switch.” As more years of ministry are logged behind me, I see fewer things worth seriously fighting over. I don’t think it’s because I’ve become a wimp or just mellowed with age. I think it’s because the advice my mentor has demonstrated its wisdom.

My tendency to fight over minor issues has also been tempered by regular reading in the Book of Proverbs. When I was a high school student, my youth pastor challenged us to read a chapter a day, thereby cycling through the book twelve times a year. There are several proverbs underlined in my Bible that warn me about going to the wall too quickly (“A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult” Prov. 12:16); too stubbornly (“A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy” Prov. 29:1); too vocally (“He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity” Prov. 21:23); too frequently (“A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense” Prov. 19:11); or too pridefully (“The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice” Prov. 12:15). Most things look “right” from my own subjective vantage point. Before I go to the wall, I’d best be convinced and advised that my belief is worth fighting for instead of worth overlooking.

It is also interesting that the qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 includes several “anti-wall” qualities: above reproach, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome. Those qualities give me the distinct impression that an individual who continually thinks he’s right and is frequently willing to fight to get his viewpoint accepted is not the person who can lead a church to unity and maturity.

To go to the wall, or not to go to the wall...that is the question! Without going to either extreme (a Hitler or a wimp), how do we determine what’s worth or not worth, a fight?

I don’t have a full answer, but as I’ve reflected on Dave’s advice, I’ve come up with three gauges that help me with decisions.

### **Doctrinal Convictions**

A friend who had been serving a Baptist church began to believe that baptism was not to be a practice in the age of grace. In all honesty he could no longer teach the membership seminar or

the junior discipleship class, since he didn't believe the ordinance of baptism was transcultural. While he is still on friendly terms with members of that fellowship, his conviction led him to another denomination. He could not switch beliefs just for the sake of a paycheck. His integrity demanded he hold to his convictions.

In our own church, we have struggled for months over differing views of the role of women in ministry. Two years ago, a woman who had been teaching in the adult elective program was put on hold until the elders could reach a conclusion on the matter. After several marathon sessions that got nowhere, I wrote up my position and presented it as a motion to get something concrete on the table. My statement seemed to represent the majority of the board; however, the view was completely opposite that held by one of our elders. He felt this practice would be detrimental to the church. When the board voted strongly in favor of the motion, this elder resigned.

Even though I disagreed with Dick's position, I had to compliment his integrity. Even though our church lost a leader, he was being consistent, and we accepted his decision.

Doctrinal convictions are worth fighting for and, at time, resigning over. At other times, however, perhaps the thing to do is not to resign but to continue pressing one's viewpoint, lobbying for change.

The way we continue the fight is crucial. Earlier in my ministry I would have felt that I was right and Dick was wrong. Now I recognize the I'm-biblical-therefore-you-aren't approach is neither Christian nor effective. Drawing stark battle lines at times may be necessary, but usually it's like backing a tiger into a corner—the encounter will probably be bloody, and you're never sure who will win.

Someone once said, "God is not against us for our sins; God is for us against our sins." I've found a similar principle effective in dealing with people who disagree: I can either be against my opponent, or I can be for my opponent and against the problem. By not condemning my opponent's feelings, I give the person's motive the benefit of the doubt, which makes him more likely to listen to my convictions.

When going to the wall, you want to make sure you are heard.

### **Philosophy-of-Ministry Issues**

I will not go to the wall over whether or not we have children's church. Some people believe children should learn from adult models by sitting through the entire worship service. Others believe children should receive instruction geared to their own age level. In our church, we try to have the best of both worlds, having children in the service for the first half-hour, then releasing them for a children's choir.

Many parents feel more in tune with the service when their younger children are out. Most of the children also prefer their own activities. My conviction is that we should try to accommodate these desires of both parents and children.

If the Christian education committee or the board of elders, however, recommends that children should remain in the service, I would probably not go to the wall on that issue. I may disagree with the reasoning, but that particular issue is not as significant as others are.

I would not go to the wall over Bible translations, altar calls, day versus evening vacation Bible schools, or governance structure. But there are some major ministry convictions that are

personally so important that integrity necessitates insisting on them, even if it means quietly moving to a new ministry.

For example, I'm convinced that small-group Bible studies or cell meetings are essential for Christian growth. In our large meetings, we can experience corporate worship and instruction, but ongoing discipleship and fellowship is maximized in the small group.

When I came to Southwood, there was one centralized midweek service on Wednesday evening, attend by an average of twenty-five. In my first year, I began a home Bible study on Thursday evenings, and then launched another with a qualified leader. In just a couple of years we had several groups meeting.

Some people accused me of "selling prayer meetings down the river." Their concern seemed justified. The days of the two dozen saints were going; now only a dozen or so showed up on Wednesday evenings.

What they failed to realize, however, was that in the one centralized meeting, only 12 percent of our adults were in midweek Bible study. By adding the decentralized home meetings, we began reaching over one hundred adults, or 50 percent of our adult membership.

At my regular evaluation by the board of elders, they recommended I try to boost the size of Wednesday prayer meeting. "Pastor, we don't mind if people get involved with home Bible studies, but if they do, it should be in addition to prayer meeting."

I resisted. Our people have busy schedules, with responsibilities to jobs, family, church, neighbors, and the community. "I believe it is unrealistic to expect people to participate in both of these growth opportunities," I said. "I can honestly encourage people to attend prayer meeting or a home Bible study, but I cannot encourage them to attend both."

I explained I'm convinced that spiritual maturity happens best when is accountability is present. On Wednesday evenings, and in most of our services, there is no accountability. But in small groups people can inquire, challenge and encourage one another.

The necessity of cell groups is a deep conviction of mine. I would have gone to the wall for that issue. As it turned out, however, we agreed to disagree. They continued lobbying for Wednesday night plus home Bible study; I was satisfied if a person chose one or the other. Now, several years later, the board has accepted the home cell groups as legitimate alternatives, and two of our elders are leading studies themselves.

When philosophy-of-ministry issues arise, I patiently and systematically try to educate the church with my rationale. At the same time, however, I must remember that the church belongs to the people and their elected or appointed leaders. It would be wrong for me to force my philosophy of ministry on them. Integrity causes me to hold to my conviction, but respect for the church means that sometimes I have to make a change when there is an impasse. If our board of elders would have voted or insisted that I eliminate the home Bible study program, I would have followed their desires, but I would also have begun looking for a new ministry.

### **Violations of Personal Authenticity**

This is probably the most dangerous area when it comes to deciding whether to fight. Discernment is not easy because we are so subjective.

God has made individuals unique; we are each one of a kind. I am the only male born to my parents, in 1946, who lived in inner city Chicago, who attended Faulkner school, and who has

been shaped by a unique combination of teachers, friends, models, and media stimulation. This has accumulated to make me the individual I am.

Recently a member said, "No offense, John, but Charles Stanley is my favorite preacher." That statement didn't bother me. I acknowledged that sometimes I also watched Charles Stanley. But if God wanted me to be Charles Stanley, I would have been born to Mama Stanley! While I dare not embrace the attitude reflected in the songs "I Gotta Be Me" or "I Did It My Way," I nevertheless must minister within the vortex of how I've been knit together by God.

For example, some people in our congregation feel I've delivered a great sermon if I dump some guilt on them. While there is a place for correction and rebuking, I generally do not heap guilt on our congregation. I do not need to tell our people they should be out evangelizing; they already know that. I need to challenge them by painting a picture of who they are in Christ, and therefore how they can behave in Him. Authenticity demands that I do not vacillate back and forth trying to please everyone. My effectiveness in preaching and leading is directly related to its congruence with who I really am.

Some pastors find themselves pushed into a heavy counseling mold when they are not gifted in that direction. Others find themselves swamped with administration when by nature they are lovers of people. While we cannot challenge every aspect of ministry with which we feel uncomfortable, we should work toward serving out of our strengths and values.

When Dave and I had that conversation in 1977, the church had grown to more than one thousand in worship, with four additional staff pastors, and the green shag carpeting still in his study. If I were the pastor called to that church in those early years, I probably wouldn't have stayed very long. I couldn't have handled all that early discouragement.

But by knowing what, and what not to go to the wall for, Dave has weathered the storm. Today Trinity Church ministers to nearly two thousand, with a full family program, a strong missions emphasis, a school, and a new worship center.

Several years and 2,600 miles have separated me from my friend and mentor, but his advice is as wise in the east as it was in the southwest.

Thanks, Dave!