

Handling Criticism

Dear Wes,

Glad you've committed yourself to Kingdom service. Thirty-three years ago when I graduated from college I entered the vocational ministry. I have never regretted it. There is nothing I would rather do. And yet, in spite of that great sense of God's calling and job fulfillment, there have been critics along the way—and I am sure, will be along the rest of the way. Critics are a way of life. It is how we deal with them that make the difference between our failure and success.

It is important you realize, Wes, that pastoring is not for the fainthearted. Pastors are called to lead. Pastors are expected to set the pace. And leaders and pacesetters are always criticized. It cannot be avoided. If we do not want to live with those realities, it may be that God has gifted us instead for a support position or for another vocation. But, the reality is that pastors will be criticized. It is inescapable.

It is also true that we tend to become defensive when we are criticized. And, the smarter we are, the better we are at avoiding the blame of wrong doing and ignoring valid criticism. Yet at times we deserve the criticism. Some pastors do not keep their word, some are perpetually late and some over-promise when they get excited about a project, but they do not see it to completion. Others are overly aggressive or insensitive. Some are too dependent on the affirmation of

others. And, sad to say, some pastors are criticized because they are guilty of doing stupid things.

But at times pastors are also maligned unfairly. They are criticized because they confront sin, serve as change agents or simply work among people who act out because of personal struggles.

Enough of the reality; on to the encouragement.

Several principles for handling criticism have served me well. So, I pass them on to you with the hope that they will carry you through those rough times when the critics are out in abundance.

First, expect criticism; don't let it surprise you. It will happen.

Second, be careful not to let criticism, valid or invalid, control you. There are some people who will never be happy—unless being grumpy and negative makes them happy. When I left a church that I had pastored for fourteen years, one critic said to the elder board chairman, *Do you think the denomination could send us a good pastor this time? The last three have been lousy.* Wes, do some math—I had been there fourteen years, my predecessor ten years and his predecessor five years. That is twenty-nine years. Does that tell you something about the perpetual critic? They are usually set in their opinions. Do not waste energy trying to change them, placate them or satisfy them. And for certain, do not be controlled by them.

Third, find a soul mate to share your pain and to help you process the criticism. At times, your wife may be the one to confide in and lean on. But realize

you may also increase her burden. You may choose another ministry colleague. But make sure he is someone you can trust.

Fourth, recognize that criticism does hurt. Do not play the macho-man game. If it hurts, admit it, give it to God and let Him minister to you. Jesus was honest with His pain in the Garden of Gethsemane. We can do no less.

Fifth, do not be defensive, potentially missing the truth of helpful criticism. Sometimes valid criticism comes in an invalid manner. Overlook the manner. Remember that *love covers a multitude of sins*. When the criticism is valid, be mature enough to admit it. Don't be defensive—although that is easier to say than do. Work on improving. Romans 8:28 is true—if we give thanks for everything (even criticism), God will find ways to conform us further into the image of Christ.

Sixth, a wise man told me early in my ministry to weigh my critics but never count them. It is important that we don't keep score. Don't get angry, don't get irritated or negative and don't react. Rather, recognize the criticism as an opportunity to serve those in the church by bringing them back to the biblical patterns of thinking. Also, when you do stumble and react in an improper manner, be mature enough to admit it and ask forgiveness from the one you have offended. It is not easy, but it is necessary and right. Jesus said we are to *leave our offering at the table and go to the one who has anything against us*. Don't fail to do this; otherwise the negative ripples will far outweigh the impact of your sin.

Finally, remember that critics often take their own struggles out on you. One time, when I was in the midst of some heavy criticism for not taking a political stand for a special interest group, a wise man told me: *I know you are under a lot of criticism and it is unfair. But remember; only you are responsible for your spiritual life and for your Christ-like attitudes or lack thereof.* It was then that Paul's words about bringing *every thought captive to the obedience of Christ* took on new meaning.

Sincerely your friend and brother,

John Vawter

Not Alone Ministries, Portland, Oregon

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 4:16