

7 Strategies for Handling Criticism with Confidence and Class

In his own inimitable style, southern preacher Vance Havner wrote in his book *Pepper 'n Salt* in 1966, "A true preacher is best measured not by how many bouquets have been pinned on him but by how many brickbats have been pitched at him. Prophets have been on the receiving end of mud more than medals." Some things don't appear to have changed much through the years!

That's been my experience as a pastor and now as a pastor to pastors. Constructive criticism is valuable, and disagreement is certainly not a negative when it results in more effective ministry; however, few church leaders have not been on the receiving end of destructive criticism. Often this comes from church people who may mean well but seem unable to respond in godly ways when they disagree on some matter.

Here's what I've discovered: leaders who seek to lead their churches without compromising doctrine—decoding their culture, reaching out to the lost, prayerfully working toward positive ministry changes—will inevitably face hostile critics.

How can we keep our balance and benefit from criticism, even destructive criticism, as we seek to be better church leaders? Here are seven strategies that I have found helpful.

1. Make prayer a priority.

Start here. God is greater than any challenge we may face, including criticism. Recall Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, when more than once He spoke to the issue of insult and mistreatment. He specifically instructed that we pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:10–12, 43, 44). According to our Lord, praying for our critics brings God's blessing, but I've also discovered that it softens my own heart.

2. Look beneath the surface.

Through the years, I've discovered that critics are often dealing with difficult personal issues. When I respond with genuine compassion in a nondefensive way, some of their own problems often spill out. I've learned that some people carry pain from past church experiences that paint everything with a negative brush. Often without even realizing it, they build their current actions on unresolved past issues. As I approach my critics, I try to consciously put myself in their place and understand where they might be coming from.

3. Maintain a humble and teachable spirit.

This is the hard part for me. We as church leaders can sometimes try to throw our weight around with sweeping

pronouncements and insensitive actions. Let's acknowledge that we do not have a corner on the truth and that our own attitudes need correcting at times. Be willing to put aside popish inflexibility and dictatorial reactions. Be approachable and teachable. James writes that wisdom from above is "peaceable" and "willing to yield" (James 3:17). Humility is one of the defining qualities of godly leadership.

4. Listen first.

We're used to doing the talking! One of the best things we can do in defusing potential serious conflict is to first allow our critics to share what is on their minds without our interruption or rebuttal. It sends a powerful message and sets a good example in seeking reconciliation.

5. Acknowledge the truth.

There's often an element of truth in every critic's concerns. I do well to acknowledge it and learn from it. Even destructive criticism can make us better leaders. While criticism often stings, and I may struggle with hurtful comments, critics have been used of God to help me be a better pastor.

6. Confront error with Scriptural and practical wisdom.

Based on the above foundation, there's obviously a time to appropriately confront a critic with an explanation of leadership actions as well as a personal challenge concerning a Biblical response. This may not be received well, but it's an important responsibility in local church leadership. Note Paul's words to Timothy about encounters with oppositional people in his ministry: "Those who oppose him he must gently instruct" (2 Timothy 2:25, NIV).

7. Keep going.

It's easy to lose perspective and become discouraged when critics unload on us. As pastors, we joke about those Monday morning resignation letters, but the hurts are real. I know—I've been there. I encourage you to remain focused on the mission and keep your eyes on the Lord. He will reward you for your faithfulness, despite the challenges and difficulties.

Consider the example of British preacher Charles Simeon. In 1782, at the age of 23, he began ministering at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge and was met with antagonistic worshipers who boycotted the church and locked the pews. (Yes, in those days members actually owned their worship space. Today some of our people just think they do!) For 10 years people had to stand to hear him preach. Angry exchanges and personal conflicts often took place. But he lovingly confronted his critics and in time prevailed, resulting in a fruitful 54 years of ministry there. May we follow in his example.