

The Embattled Pastor

How to Navigate Conflict and Criticism



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"Your church lacks community."

"You botched caring for me during my husband's affair."

"You are not a warm church."

"Too much red tape at the church."

"The church is too big."

"Your scripted prayers seem silly."

Ouch, I thought when reading these words. These were comments directed at *our* church, *our* people, and *our* leadership. Each critique stung like a handful of gravel hitting my face. As anyone in leadership knows, criticism stings. Though we asked for this feedback from departing members, criticism is never pleasant when it comes.

As biting as such disapproval can be, however, it's still better than open hostilities and quarreling. Disagreement, misunderstandings, frustration, and disunity can tear at the seams of Christ's church. Conflict leads to hurt feelings, judged motives, and flared tempers. Church

members might take sides. Gossip and whispers spread like wildfire, and soon the forest is raging. If criticism is like a sprained ankle, conflict is the fracture.

Conflict Goes Way Back

[Link](#)

Conflict and criticism in the church are inevitable at times. Life is messy, full of bumps and bruises. The church is a gathering of sinners who unfortunately still sin. Misunderstandings happen. Sharp words cut and attack, impossible to reel back in. Criticism can lead to conflict and conflict to criticism, running on a dreadful treadmill of hurt and pain. The last several years brought about increased friction in many churches, but conflict is not new. Disunity that divides churches has been around since the beginning.

In Philippians, Paul entreats two beloved co-laborers of the gospel — Euodia and Syntyche — to “agree in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2). These two women have labored side by side with Paul, and their names are written in the book of life (Philippians 4:3). They are genuine followers of Christ who were “together for the gospel” but are now divided by some sharp disagreement that has become known to the entire church. Church conflict is as old as the church.

Addressing conflict is not easy work. It’s like plunging the toilet: messy, unpleasant, but necessary. Ignoring conflict only exacerbates it, like closing the basement door as the black mold creeps up the walls. It’s not going to go away by itself, and the results will be catastrophic.

Three Ways to Lead in Conflict

How, then, can pastors and elders move toward the fray rather than retreat? Like courageous first responders who run toward chaos, how can pastors be ready to engage conflict with courage, conviction, humility, and gentleness?

It’s no easy task. Some can be paralyzed by fear of man and fear of failure. Still others are much too eager to jump into battle. Like prizefighters eager to find sparring partners, such pastors are unfit to engage. Consider Paul’s wise words to the young Timothy:

The Lord’s servant must *not be quarrelsome* but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)

“Pastors cannot run from conflict, nor can they be too eager to fight.”

We see the difficulty of the task. Pastors cannot run from conflict, nor can they be too eager to fight. Kindness, patience, and gentleness must accompany the willingness to engage, exhort, admonish, and rebuke. How does one thread the needle? What truths help Christian pastors and leaders engage in conflict willingly, without relishing the next quarrel? Consider three foundational beliefs for those who seek to serve in conflict.

1. Humbly remember this is God’s church.

First, remember that the church is not yours. Moses models this humble attitude. After the exodus, God’s anger is stirred up against Israel’s idolatrous worship of the golden calf. What

does Moses do? He intercedes by reminding God “that this nation is *your people*” (Exodus 33:13). Moses makes clear that Israel isn’t *his* people, but God’s. He models humble dependence upon God to work among his people for their good.

The parallel for pastors is this: humbly remember that the church is *Christ’s church*. When conflict comes, spiritual leaders are wise to resist the urge to fix things in their own strength and wisdom. Jesus is sanctifying *his* church. He is eager to give his help, his wisdom, and his grace for the good of *his* church. Pastors are also wise to remember they, and their churches, are being sanctified. Lessons remain to be learned; grace remains to be given; more wisdom is yet to be bestowed. God works in and through conflict for the good of his people. Remember, Jesus is the master carpenter, crafting his ultimate creation, the glorious church of God.

Pastors, pray like King Solomon as he faced the daunting task of leading God’s people: Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. . . . Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? (1 Kings 3:7, 9)

Humbly pray for discernment to lead the great people of God. Ask for wisdom from the God who gives generously and lavishly, for the benefit of *his* church (James 1:5).

2. Humbly remember Christ’s example.

Second, emulate Christ’s example of selflessness and sacrifice. Pastors are undershepherds who take cues from the chief Shepherd himself. And Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7–8). All believers, and especially leaders, are called to imitate his humility, servanthood, and sacrifice.

“Nothing will undermine leadership more quickly than selfishness and a lack of humility.” Selfish ambition, conceit, envy, and rivalry have no place in the church, much less among the church’s leaders. Some of the strongest condemnations in Scripture are against the self-serving shepherds of Ezekiel 34. God’s people were scattered, devoured, and preyed upon by Israel’s shepherds. Nothing will undermine leadership more quickly than selfishness and a lack of humility. God’s servants must indeed be *servants*, humbly obeying the master.

Pastors are to “share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3). We pastors serve at the pleasure of the King. We are under authority. When armed with the mind of Christ, pastors are able to maintain the unity of the Spirit, outdo one another in honor, and “reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2).

As pastors, we put aside personal preferences and opinions, and seek to serve as Christ would have us, exhibiting his selflessness and patience. We eagerly and humbly embrace the role of *servant* as undershepherds of Christ.

3. Humbly speak the truth in love.

Finally, speak the truth in love. Godly pastors exhibit an unswerving commitment to truthfulness that is honed and shaped by a deep, abiding love for God’s people. They cultivate Paul-like love, yearning for their people with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:8). Their words build up rather than tear down; their speech is loving. What

they say, even while admonishing, is infused with gentleness and care. Their teaching has the essence of love coupled with the unflinching truth.

It's here that many a pastor has gone astray. The temptation to appease, placate, and quell conflict and tension is great. Yet, undershepherds' words are to be "gracious, seasoned with salt," never lies or half-truths masquerading as graciousness (Colossians 4:6). Pastors are to "set the believers an example in speech" (1 Timothy 4:12). With Paul, pastors renounce all the disgraceful, underhanded ways of the world (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Candid speech sheds light, rather than obscuring. So, pastors stubbornly let their yes be yes and their no be no (James 5:12). We seek to be tenaciously true to our words. We labor not to undermine the trust we have been given by God to be heralds of the great truth of the gospel. We resist any temptation to mollify critics by modifying the truth. Instead, we refuse to tamper with the truth, but proclaim the truth in love so that the church might grow up into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

Hope in God Who Is Working

In the midst of choppy waters, remember God's promise to his servants and to his people. God promises undershepherds a glorious reward: "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). Conflict and criticism will never be easy, but the pains and labors will be small compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

Similarly, God promises his people that he will complete the good work he has begun (Philippians 1:6). The church is being sanctified so that it will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. Hold onto that promise as a raft of hope as you dive into the choppy waters for the good of Christ's church.