

# The Pastor and Personal Criticism<sup>1</sup>

By C.J. Mahaney

I have often been asked what it was like to pastor at Covenant Life Church for 27 years. Here is my immediate response: It was an unspeakable privilege and joy to serve this remarkable church. I'm not sure a single day passed that I did not receive encouragement from a kind member of the church.

And my experience is not unique. To pastor in Sovereign Grace Ministries is to be on the receiving end of encouragement every week and often every day. We have the privilege of serving grateful folks who love us and excel in communicating gratefulness. We simply do not deserve their support and encouragement. They make pastoral ministry a pure joy.

Well, most of them do.

In every church there will be those who are not particularly grateful, who normally communicate with you only in the form of criticism. And to some degree this is the norm for every pastor.<sup>2</sup>

If you are a pastor you will be criticized. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually you will feel the sharp sting of critique.

Those within your church may criticize you, those who leave the church may criticize you, and even complete strangers may criticize you. The criticism will come from enemies and from friends. Some of the criticism will be true, some of it will be false, and some may be outright malicious. But it's coming—if it hasn't already arrived.

And there are many reasons why we can expect criticism:

- A pastor can expect criticism because of his own sin, which will inevitably be present in his heart and service, no matter how mature or well meaning he is (James 3:2).

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<sup>1</sup> This series of articles was originally published on C.J.'s blog between January and April, 2011. The entire series can be found online here: <http://bit.ly/CJcriticism>

<sup>2</sup> In this series I will use the terms *criticism* and *correction* interchangeably. I recognize the distinction between these two terms: *criticism* is a voiced disapproval of faults without a concern for resolving those faults; *correction* is feedback to rectify an error. The difference seems to be in the intent of the observer: the one simply points out apparent flaws, while the other points to apparent flaws and seeks to help bring change. However, because the pastor's response is similar in either case, I think a careful distinction between the words isn't necessary in this series.

- A pastor can expect criticism because there are limitations to his gifting, meaning there will always be weaknesses in his leadership.
- A pastor can expect criticism because we often preach below-average sermons. (After one sermon, a guy asked me, “So where do you work during the week?” My sermon apparently gave him the impression that preaching wasn’t my vocation.)
- A pastor can expect criticism because people can be proud and ungrateful.
- A pastor can expect criticism because, well, it is a sinful and fallen world.

But we as pastors often forget one more important reason:

- A pastor can expect criticism because it is part of God’s sanctification process—a tool that he uses to reveal idols and accelerate the pastor’s growth in humility.

God enlists many to serve us to this end.

Puritan Richard Baxter got this. In his book to pastors, *The Reformed Pastor*, he wrote,

Because there are many eyes upon you, therefore there will be many observers of your falls. If other men may sin without observation, so cannot you. And you should thankfully consider how great a mercy this is, that you have so many eyes to watch over you, and so many ready to tell you of your faults, and so have greater helps than others, at least for the restraining of your sin. Though they may do it with a malicious mind, yet you have the advantage by it.<sup>3</sup>

According to Baxter, the critique of many is actually a great advantage to pastors. This is a great mercy—at least I keep telling myself it is. And I have to keep reminding myself because criticism isn’t my personal preference.

I would prefer to mature through less painful means. I would prefer to mature through a flood of sanctified encouragement—that’s what I’m talking about!

But the reality is that I have grown far, far, far, far, far more from criticism and correction than from all the wonderful encouragement I have received over the years.

So God uses correction to mature pastors. That seems to be the norm. And this is God’s great mercy to help me see my own pride and sin. (If

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<sup>3</sup> *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 14, *The Reformed Pastor* (London: Paternoster, 1830), 64–65.

you've discovered a way to avoid criticism and still grow, please give me a call!)

## **Conclusion**

If you are a pastor, you **will** be criticized and corrected. It's coming. We must be prepared for it, and we must see it as God's means for our sanctification. How we respond to criticism (both from friends and from less-than-friends) is absolutely critical. I regret the many times I haven't responded humbly to correction. I desire to grow in perceiving correction as a great mercy from God.

So for the next several days I will be writing out some of my thoughts, biblical reflections, and personal experiences in this series: "The Pastor and Personal Criticism."

## 02: The Pastor's Temptations when Criticism Arrives

The sting of personal criticism is painful, and it can be very dangerous, too. When criticism arrives, many temptations arrive with it. Often for me, when criticism arrives, my response reveals the presence of pride in my heart.

Tim Keller is familiar with the temptations that come with personal criticism. He writes,

The biggest danger of receiving criticism is not to your reputation, but to your heart. You feel the injustice of it and feel sorry for yourself, and it tempts you to despise the critic.<sup>4</sup>

David Powlison shares Tim's familiarity with these temptations. At one point in David's life, a man began publishing criticism of him and his ministry. During this time David grew preoccupied with the personal criticism. He says it exposed many sins in his heart—a love of reputation, his desire to be thought well of, a desire to be treated fairly, a certain idealism and a romantic idea of the unity of the Body. "This man was a professing Christian," David said. "So why couldn't we be able to all get along? Why does this keep happening?"

David further explains how the Lord used this criticism to expose the idols in his heart and how Psalm 31 served his soul in the process, in his excellent message at our 2007 Pastors Conference.<sup>5</sup>

I am all too familiar with these temptations myself. Criticism can uniquely reveal my heart, and often what I see isn't pretty.

**I feel sorry for myself in the face of the "injustice."** Bill Farley, in his excellent article, "The Poison of Self-Pity," writes that "the roots of self-pity are 'pride-in-action.' It is the propensity to feel sorry for yourself because you are not getting what you think you deserve." The pastor will be tempted to think, "I deserve encouragement, and this person does not seem to understand or notice or pay attention to the countless ways I am serving!"<sup>6</sup> And through dwelling on what seems to be the critic's ignorance of the pastor's service and his withholding of encouragement, the pastor's heart quickly moves towards self pity. This is pride, and I've seen it in my own heart.

**I am tempted to despise the critic.** I sinfully judge the motive of the one criticizing me, wondering if they're offended with me, rather than

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.buildingchurchleaders.com/articles/2010/howdoyoutakecriticism.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sovereigngracestore.com/ProductInfo.aspx?productid=A2250-03-51>

<sup>6</sup> William P. Farley, "The Poison of Self-Pity," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Summer 2007), 17.

focusing on the content of their communication. Worse, I am tempted to dismiss the content if it is imprecisely communicated or if the illustrations are not completely accurate. I did this just yesterday when someone kindly corrected me. This is pride, and I've seen it in my own heart.

When criticism arrives, temptations to sin come fast and furious in the heart of the pastor. And if a pastor isn't prepared for criticisms, if he doesn't prize growth in godliness, he will despise criticism rather than embrace it. Sadly I have many times.

But by God's grace, there is an alternative. We can view personal criticism as a God-appointed means to produce humility in our lives, even if the criticism isn't accurate. As John Newton wrote,

The Lord abhors pride and self-importance. The seeds of these evils are in the hearts of his own children; but rather than suffer that which He hates to remain in those He loves, He will in mercy pound them as in a mortar, to beat it out of them, or to prevent its growth.<sup>7</sup>

Criticism is just one of the many ways God will pound the pride out of a pastor. But only when we have this perspective, will we humbly embrace—rather than proudly react to—the criticism when (not if) it arrives.

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<sup>7</sup> *Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1869/2007), 377.

### 03: Learning Wisdom by Embracing Criticism

Years ago during a study on Proverbs, I was surprised to discover that maturing in wisdom is often the fruit of correction (see Proverbs 9:8, 19:25, 29:15). I can remember thinking, “Surely it’s possible to learn wisdom *without* any need for correction and criticism.”

Apparently not.

In his commentary on Proverbs, Derek Kidner writes that wisdom’s “frequent companion is correction.”<sup>8</sup> That phrase is now firmly fixed in my mind. If you ask for wisdom to hang around in your life, you will find that she doesn’t prefer to travel alone.

If we could mature in wisdom without any need for correction—and how I wish we could!—I would have discovered a way to do it by now and probably written a bestselling book explaining how. But that’s not how it works. We cannot separate growth in wisdom from criticism, correction, and reproof.

#### Eager for Correction

Since God often uses the criticism of others to reveal the idols of our hearts and to accelerate our growth in humility, pastors *should be* eager to receive criticism. I *should be* eager to receive correction, but usually I’m not. And it’s no mystery why I’m not eager to receive criticism—I’m a proud man.

Yet Proverbs teaches us that a wise man *loves* correction:

Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;  
reprove a wise man, and he will love you. (Proverbs 9:8)

The scoffer will flat-out reject criticism and hate the one who brings it. On the other hand, the wise man will embrace the criticism and love the one who brings it. On this passage, commentator John Kitchen explains what it means to “love” reproof:

When confronted, exposed and judged by your rebuke, the wise man will “love” you. This may not necessarily speak of overflowing positive emotion, but has more to do with accepting, embracing and learning from the truth as you have presented it. Indeed, a rebuke will likely unsettle the emotions and make one uncomfortable in your presence, but the wise

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<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (IVP, 1981), 36.

one will hear the truth and recognize in it the gift of life from God.<sup>9</sup>

Criticism can be a gift. Yet how a man responds to correction is one of the clearest distinctions in Proverbs between the **fool** and the **wise man**:

- A **fool** desperately needs correction, but refuses to pursue it or receive it.
- A **wise man** needs correction less than the fool, but he pursues it and welcomes it.

Pursuing and receiving correction is a means of attaining wisdom. The wise man knows this; the fool rejects this. This is what makes the wise man *wise* and the foolish man a *fool*. For the wise man, criticism holds potential, the potential for personal growth in humility and wisdom.

### The Challenge

Here is what I am aware of: If I value wisdom, this will be evident in my pursuit of, and response to, correction. But I do not truly prize wisdom if I do not welcome criticism, pursue correction, and receive reproof.

Here is what's easy:

- It is easy for me to *desire* wisdom.
- It is easy for me to profess a love for wisdom.
- It is easy for me to say, "I want to grow in wisdom."
- It is easy for me to pray, "Lord, give me wisdom."

But here is what's difficult:

- It is difficult to respond humbly to criticism.

Here I need the sanctifying grace of God.

Having been humbled by the gospel, I want to humbly receive correction and even to pursue it.

I want to be the wise man, not the fool.

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<sup>9</sup> John A. Kitchen, *Proverbs* (Christian Focus, 2006), 206.

## 04: A Kind and Painful Bruising

Criticism wounds. It's painful. Not all wounds are faithful wounds—some wounds come from reckless words that pierce like a sword (Proverbs 12:18). But I'm not talking about the sting of reckless words in this post. Today I am writing about the sting of criticism that comes even from a faithful wound (Proverbs 27:6). Even from a friend, criticism wounds.

But have you ever wondered *what* criticism wounds?

I think the simple answer is that criticism wounds the sin that has not been mortified. A wise, older pastor once said to me: "C.J., what hurts isn't dead yet." And that is often what criticism wounds—my still-living, still-breathing pride.

Receiving criticism and correction is necessary, because it reveals the blind spots in my life and the pockets of pride that have not been put to death (Colossians 3:5, 12). Therefore we need correction. But by saying this I am not arguing that receiving criticism will be painless or enjoyable. Far from it!

David got this. He understood the benefit, as well as the pain, of correction:

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness;  
let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head;  
let my head not refuse it. (Psalm 141:5)

Say again? A *kindness*?

Left to myself I wouldn't share David's perspective. This kind of kindness I can do without!

But criticism from a faithful friend (and at times, even from an enemy) is a *kindness*. It is the kindness of the friend willing to bring an area of concern to my attention, and most importantly it is an expression of God's kindness, because often through the criticism I perceive my enemy that still lives—my sin! I find this to be a helpful reminder when the sting of criticism arrives.

Receiving criticism hurts. It always will. I don't anticipate maturing to a point where receiving correction will become a pure joy. A wound is a wound. It leaves a bruise. It hurts. But I need it.

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness. Let me not refuse it.



## **05: The Pastor's Wife and Her Role When Criticism Arrives**

When a pastor is criticized, his wife will likely be tempted to become offended on his behalf against the one bringing the criticism. Because she loves him, she may want to defend her husband from all attacks, criticisms, and corrections.

That can be the initial temptation, and it may seem appropriate, but it isn't. Instead, she can play a different and much more important role, one that can make all the difference in the heart and life of her husband.

Let me explain.

### **Preserving and Sharing Content**

When criticism arrives, the pastor is wise to share the criticism with his wife. But in doing this he must protect his wife from these predictable temptations. He does this in these ways:

First, he should examine his own heart and his motives, humble himself, and review a biblical understanding of criticism's value in his life.

Second, and as much as possible, he should listen to the criticism and correction with an objective ear, not being preoccupied with the attitude of the one bringing it, nor becoming distracted by details in the criticism that may be inaccurate. Further, the pastor must learn to separate any concern he might have about the person bringing correction from the content of what he is saying. He can then turn to his wife, share those points of criticism, and ask: "Can you confirm this from your experience? Do you see this in my life?"

Third, when he shares the critical observation with his wife, he should avoid letting the conversation deteriorate into criticizing the critic. He must avoid the temptation to merely seek her support, her defense, and her agreement.

### **My Wife and My Godliness**

Nobody knows us better than our wives. And if there is any level of accuracy in the criticism brought to my attention, there is nobody I trust more to help me see it than Carolyn. By protecting her from very common temptations, and by providing her with the content of the

criticism, I can allow her to play an invaluable role in helping me discern the legitimacy of the correction.

Countless times Carolyn has made all the difference in how I have received correction and responded to it. Many times over the years I would have simply dismissed the correction of others if not for Carolyn's helping me to perceive what was accurate in it.

Each husband needs the kindness of his wife in this way. But again, this isn't my preference! Many times I have found myself sharing the criticism I have received, assuming she would join me in dismissing both the criticism and the critic...only to realize that as I am talking, her facial expression suggests there is some legitimacy to the criticism. An ominous feeling sweeps over my soul as I realize she isn't going to confirm my disagreement and dismissal of this criticism!

But this is an act of kindness on her part. It's obviously not kindness as I would prefer it. I would prefer to *only* experience Carolyn's kindness through her supporting encouragement, her loyalty, her defense of me (and she provides me with all of these). I would prefer that she join me in disagreeing with criticism, not helping to confirm its accuracy!

But I have learned that God's kindness comes to me in many forms, and one form is through a wife that will not become offended on her husband's behalf, but will instead come alongside him, help him perceive where his critic is accurate, help him see where sin remains in his heart, and help him seize the redemptive purpose of the criticism.

And even though I don't desire her help in confirming criticism, by doing this Carolyn has shown herself to be the suitable helper I so desperately need.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Speaking of Carolyn, she has wonderfully addressed this very same topic (but from the wife's perspective) in a blog post we published back in 2008. You can read her comments here: <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/cj-mahaney/post/how-to-help-your-husband-when-hes-criticized.aspx>

## 06: Adding a Few Smudges to My Moral Portrait

Many quotes from the writings and sermons of Charles Spurgeon have served my soul over the years. And there is one particular quote that has served me big time when it comes to personal criticism. I review the quote either before personal criticism arrives (if I have advance warning), or after the criticism appears (if it was a surprise). It both prepares my heart for coming criticism, and provides perspective for my heart once the criticism has been shared.

Check it out:

Brother, if any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him; for you are worse than he thinks you to be. If he charges you falsely on some point, yet be satisfied, for if he knew you better he might change the accusation, and you would be no gainer by the correction. If you have your moral portrait painted, and it is ugly, be satisfied; for it only needs a few blacker touches, and it would be still nearer the truth.<sup>11</sup>

On different occasions over the years I have been on the receiving end of criticism from someone who appeared to have, well, a bad attitude. When this happens I am tempted to be offended by that attitude, and prematurely relieved, concluding that any criticism brought in such an attitude must certainly be inaccurate. And it might be inaccurate (or not). But even if the criticism is inaccurate, any relief I experience is a short-lived when I am reminded of Mr. Spurgeon's words.

Even if the criticism is inaccurate, that leaves no room for my pride. This is due to the fact that I am more fully informed of my own sin than any critic. More importantly, God is perfectly informed of all my sins. So even if the correction is proven totally inaccurate, I shouldn't be prouder for it.

Knowing this restrains me from too quickly criticizing and dismissing the perceptions of others, even if their correction is severe, even if their hearts don't seem humble and kind, and even if their content is largely inaccurate. I can always learn from criticism one simple lesson: I am worse than they think!

Spurgeon's quote humbles me, restrains my pride, and reminds me that I always need a Savior even when others cannot accurately see the true depth of my own sin. I have learned over the years that even when criticism is inaccurate, it should humble me and remind me of God's

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Spurgeon, sermon, "David Dancing before the Ark because of His Election," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 35.

accurate moral portrait of sinners like me. It should remind me that even the most ill-informed criticism is still more flattering than the reality.

## 07: Deal Gently with Your Critics

Where has John Newton been all my life?

Newton has recently become a mentor for me. He is a rare embodiment of pastoral humility, compassion, wisdom, and courage, and is always theologically informed and gospel centered.

I see his compelling pastoral example particularly in the words of his letters, first written to inquirers and later published for broad readership. Those letters have had a significant effect on my soul and life, and made a huge difference in how I view and respond to criticism. This is especially true of his letter titled “On Controversy.”<sup>12</sup>

In this letter Newton explains how to humbly respond to an opponent when engaged in a potentially heated theological debate. The context is obviously different from personal criticism, but you will see that Newton’s instruction is relevant to pastors who experience the sting of personal criticism.

In his letter, Newton makes three particularly important points:

### 1. Pray for your critic.

As to your opponent, I wish, that, before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him.

In reality, it is difficult for me to sinfully judge—or even indefinitely dislike—someone I am consistently praying for.

### 2. If your critic is a believer, count them your brother or sister in Christ.

If you account [your opponent] a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom are very applicable: “Deal gently with him for my sake” [2 Samuel 18:5]. The Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little

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<sup>12</sup> John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* (London: 1820), 1:268–269. Online here: [http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=217/](http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=217/)

while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.

“Dearer to me than the nearest friend.” How is that possible? It is possible in light of eternity, and it is possible because he is a brother for whom Christ also died (Romans 14:15).

Please read Newton’s words again (they cannot possibly be digested in one quick read). This paragraph is full of convicting wisdom. I have read it many, many times and I plan to return to it again, particularly when I am being criticized. This perspective will transform your attitude toward your critic.

**3. Or, if your critic is not a believer, show them compassion as an unbeliever who needs Christ.**

But if you look upon him as an unconverted person, in a state of enmity against God and his grace (a supposition which, without good evidence, you should be very unwilling to admit), he is a more proper subject of your compassion than of your anger.

Newton’s three points are invaluable for the pastor:

- Pray for those who criticize you—this will soften your heart toward them.
- Know that your fiercest critic—if he is a Christian—will one day be closer to you than your closest friend is now.
- Have pity on your critics who appear to be yet unbelievers, for they need God’s converting grace above all else.

To be honest, I feel as if this 250-year old letter was written to me. The letter has personally guided and directed my heart in times of criticism and the temptations that soon follow.

If you expect personal criticism to be directed your way at some point in your life (and you should), keep Newton’s letter close. It will offer you a divine perspective on your critic, a perspective that can transform your perception of them, inform your prayers for them, and alter your attitude toward them.

## 08: Why Faithful Pastors Will Be Criticized

The great reformer and pastor John Calvin was no stranger to criticism. One of his biographers reports that he “was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, near the end of his life Calvin said this to a gathering of pastors: “I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus,”<sup>14</sup> an arquebus being a large muzzle-loaded rifle that emitted a *boom* and a large cloud of smoke with each firing. Fifty rounds! And you thought you had critics!

I have been criticized, but to date I have never been threatened like this.

Yet Calvin faithfully ministered in the midst of this severe opposition because he was prepared for it. He understood that the faithful pastor will be criticized.

This wisdom is evident in the following quote from his commentary on 1 Timothy 5:19:

None are more exposed to slanders and insults than godly teachers. This comes not only from the difficulty of their duties, which are so great that sometimes they sink under them, or stagger or halt or take a false step, so that wicked men find many occasions of finding fault with them; but added to that, even when they do all their duties correctly and commit not even the smallest error, they never avoid a thousand criticisms.

It is indeed a trick of Satan to estrange men from their ministers so as gradually to bring their teaching into contempt. In this way not only is wrong done to innocent people whose reputation is undeservedly injured, but the authority of God's holy teaching is diminished....

The more sincerely any pastor strives to further Christ's kingdom, the more he is loaded with spite, the more fierce do the attacks upon him become. And not only so, but as soon as any charge is made against ministers of the Word, it is believed as surely and firmly as if it had been already proved. This happens not only because a higher standard of integrity is required from them, but because Satan makes most people, in

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<sup>13</sup> Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (Oxford, 1989), 29.

<sup>14</sup> John Dillenberger, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (Anchor Books, 1975), 42.

fact nearly everyone, over credulous so that without investigation, they eagerly condemn their pastors whose good name they ought to be defending.<sup>15</sup>

The same man who wrote these words faced “continual bickerings,” gunfire, and the threat of drowning. If this was the criticism Calvin faced, then no pastor should be surprised when criticism arrives. Even the most faithful pastors will be criticized.

Knowing this will protect me from a number of temptations. It will certainly protect me from self-pity. I shouldn’t feel sorry for myself just because people say unkind and inaccurate things about me. This would be yet another evidence of pride in my life.

The opposition I have experienced is...well, I am embarrassed to even reference it in light of Calvin’s experience.

But amidst the criticism and opposition, Calvin pressed on.

So should you.

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Eerdmans, 1996), 263.



## 09: Too High An Estimation

How I perceive myself makes all the difference in how I receive and respond to personal criticism.

When a pastor is on the receiving end of criticism and correction, temptations are never far off. In my experience, the higher my estimation of myself, the closer those temptations are. Criticism contradicts my high view of myself—so I am tempted to respond sinfully.

How differently the Apostle Paul responded to criticism!

We read of Paul's response in 2 Corinthians, a very personal epistle. In chapters 10–13 Paul responds to the criticism leveled against him. He could have defended himself with an account of his incredible personal experiences or with his years of service to the church. Yet he chose to respond to the personal criticism with words like these:

Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, **so that no one may think more of me** than he sees in me or hears from me. (2 Corinthians 12:6)

This passage deserves a re-read. In case you didn't get Paul's point the first time (and I certainly didn't), perhaps the following comment on the passage by Dr. Don Carson will help you comprehend its full weight:

What is remarkable is the way Paul's stance differs from our own. **Many Christians today, even Christian leaders, go through life fearful that people will think too little of them.** They quickly become irritable if someone, especially a junior, is praised more than they. But **Paul goes through life fearful that people will think too much of him.**<sup>16</sup>

Paul was fearful that people will think too much of him!? That's not a fear that I am familiar with. Too often my concern is that people think too little of me—that they don't share my high estimation of myself.

Yet the question every pastor must eventually answer in his own heart is this: *Am I concerned that others have **too low** an estimation of me, or that they will have **too high** an estimation of me?* How I respond to personal correction often reveals which concern rules my heart.

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<sup>16</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 80.

The first concern can ultimately be traced back to the presence of pride in the heart.

The second concern can only be explained by the active grace of God in the heart.

## 10: Distinguishing Criticism

At the beginning of this series I wrote that personal criticism is part of our sanctification process, a tool that God uses to reveal idols and accelerate the pastor's growth in humility. This has been my emphasis for most of the series. However, this emphasis runs the risk of being misunderstood, and I would not want a pastor reading this series to conclude that every criticism he receives is accurate or warrants his time and attention. In fact, sometimes it is wise and appropriate for a pastor to simply ignore criticism.

Because a pastor's role is a public one, it is inevitable that he will more frequently be the object of criticism (an assumption underlying 1 Timothy 5:19). Some of the criticism will be constructive and some of it will be, well, less constructive. In fact, occasionally criticism will come from someone with a hidden personal agenda, someone who is simply blind to his own sinful motives. The critic may even feel he has a divine mandate to bring correction to a pastor or his church. And he might express these unfounded accusations, not personally to the pastor, but instead to others in the church through gossip and slander. Or just as likely, he may express them online. As we have already discovered in this series, criticism of this nature long predates the Internet, but the anonymity of the Internet makes it easy for someone to make a baseless accusation or spread hearsay without personal accountability.

So how does a pastor respond to this type of criticism? It may surprise you, but Michael Hyatt, the chairman and CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers, says to simply ignore it. That is his conclusion in his article "Friends, Critics, and Trolls."<sup>17</sup> In the article Hyatt provides counsel on how to distinguish among three types of criticism.

First, some criticism will come from **true friends**:

Not all criticism is bad. God forbid that we should turn a deaf ear to everyone who disagrees with us. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6). Some people are in our lives to save us from ourselves. As a leader, the trick is to create an environment that is safe for dissension, so these people can speak up.

Second, some criticism will come from **honest critics**:

Some people decide that they disagree with you and go public. They aren't malicious. They aren't out to destroy you. They

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<sup>17</sup> <http://michaelhyatt.com/friends-critics-and-trolls.html>

simply disagree with you. That's okay. We need to allow for a diversity of opinion. Besides, we might learn something from it. It enriches the conversation. We need to engage these people and refrain from making it personal. Not everyone has to agree with us.

Third, some criticism will come from people he calls “**unhealthy trolls**”:

These people have an agenda. They are out to hurt you—or at least use you for their own ends. They want to lure you into a fight. I have had three this week. They taunt and mock you. They are unreasonable. If you engage them, they will only distract you and deplete your resources. The best thing you can do is ignore them....You will never satisfy them. Just keep doing what you know you are called to do.

Most constructive criticism will come from true friends or honest critics. But sadly, “unhealthy trolls” exist. These are critics who are unreasonable, and in my experience these are critics that, unless you completely agree with them, will not be satisfied. In these rare cases I have found Mr. Hyatt's counsel to be wise.<sup>18</sup>

I believe a more biblical term for the troll is the *quarrelsome* person. The book of Proverbs frequently mentions quarrels and quarrelsome people (see for example Proverbs 17:14, 20:3, 22:10, 26:20–21). In his study on the topic Kevin DeYoung defines the quarrelsome person as one who stirs up unnecessary arguments, arguments that are not the product of loving rebuke or principled convictions.<sup>19</sup> The quarrelsome person, he writes, “loves to pour gasoline on every tiny spark of conflict.” And sadly, too often the quarrelsome person is a professing Christian within the church.

I'm grateful there are—relatively speaking—few quarrelsome people. But they are out there. In reality, most people will be true friends or honest critics. Don't ignore the criticism from your true friends. Don't ignore the criticism from your honest critics. But do ignore unreasonable criticism from those who are quarrelsome trolls.

### **Don't Ignore Your Heart**

You may ignore unhealthy trolls—but never ignore your own heart.

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<sup>18</sup> Here I need to make one qualification. There might be an occasion when it is wise and appropriate for a pastor to address a false accusation publicly, especially in cases when it is unsubstantiated, is sowing suspicion through the church, or is adversely influencing a large percentage of the congregation. In this case it would be very appropriate for a pastor to address the accusation publicly. But in my experience this situation is quite rare.

<sup>19</sup> <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/02/24/distinguishing-marks-of-a-quarrelsome-person/>

Especially when you are the object of false criticism or accusation, pay particular attention to what's going on in your heart. Here's why. Often there is a temptation involved, a temptation explained well by Tim Keller, a pastor who is familiar with trolls.

He addresses the pastor's heart when he writes,

If the criticism comes from someone who doesn't know you at all (and often this is the case on the internet) it is possible that the criticism is completely unwarranted and profoundly mistaken. I am often pilloried not only for views I do have, but also even more often for views (and motives) that I do not hold at all. When that happens it is even easier to fall into a smugness and perhaps be tempted to laugh at how mistaken your critics are. "Pathetic..." you may be tempted to say.

Don't do it.

Even if there is not the slightest kernel of truth in what the critic says, you should not mock them in your thoughts. First, remind yourself of examples of your own mistakes, foolishness, and cluelessness in the past, times in which you really got something wrong. Second, pray for the critic, that he or she grows in grace.<sup>20</sup>

Yes, ignore those who merely accuse, taunt, and mock. Pray for them. Check your own heart. And then keep doing what you know you are called to do.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.buildingchurchleaders.com/articles/2010/howdoyoutakecriticism.html>

## 11: How to Criticize Your Pastor (and Honor God)

In this series on the pastor and personal criticism, it is important to consider how church members can effectively serve their pastor with correction. As pastors, we need this, and we need to make it as easy as possible for church members to approach us with any questions, concerns, or observations they might have.<sup>21</sup>

So what if you have some correction that you want to bring to your pastor's attention? How can you bring that critical observation to him in a humble and loving way? How can you bring correction to your pastor in a way that not only serves him but pleases and honors God at the same time?

These are excellent and important questions.

But given the limitations of addressing this topic in a brief post, I cannot address every situation or provide you with exhaustive suggestions on this important topic.

This series on personal criticism has not attempted to address sins that would disqualify a pastor from ministry.<sup>22</sup> What I'm attempting to address is when a church member has a concern about a particular sermon, the direction of the church, or about a pastor's personal character that the pastor may be unaware of.

Actually, one's interaction with a pastor and possible disagreement with him will most often be over an issue of wisdom, or maybe even a matter of personal preference.

With that in mind, here are some suggestions to consider.

### **Motivated to Serve**

Perhaps the most important step is this one: examining our hearts prior to any conversation in which we bring corrective comments to someone. And here's why: motive makes all the difference. It is wise for me to examine my heart for any self-righteousness and to ask: Is my desire to share this critical observation with my pastor motivated by a

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<sup>21</sup> On a related note, it is important that pastors cultivate approachability and accountability. Two articles written by Ken Sande are very valuable in helping pastors to cultivate these areas, and those articles can be located here: <http://sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/cj-mahaney/post/2010/01/15/Approachability-and-Accountability.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> For more on the distinction here between disqualifying sin and non-disqualifying sin in pastoral ministry, see *Preaching the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), pages 122–124.

desire to serve him? We must not assume our motive is humble and redemptive. Our purpose must be to serve our pastor, not to scold him.

One way I have found effective in preparing my heart prior to correcting someone is to spend time thinking about evidences of God's grace in his life. Study the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) and the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27–31; Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Peter 4:10–11). Then study the life of your pastor and carefully consider where you see the work of God in his life. Thank God for your pastor and these evidences of grace in his life. This simple practice will create fresh appreciation for him, a fresh awareness of God's activity in his life. It will also help to ensure that you bring corrective observations to him in a spirit of gratitude.

Next, pray for him. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the various burdens and temptations that are common to all pastors. John Newton, a pastor for more than 40 years, was quite familiar with these temptations, and he can help you better understand the burdens of pastoral ministry in blog posts like this one<sup>23</sup> and this one.<sup>24</sup> As you pray for your pastor and the various burdens he carries, your heart will be softened toward him.

### **Meet in Person**

For a variety of reasons I think it is normally unwise to communicate correction to your pastor—or anyone, for that matter—in written form. Writing is easier than meeting, but that's because, let's be honest, we are reluctant to correct and fear their response to our correction (and that can be sinful judgment on our part). Meeting for a conversation requires that we first, by God's grace, put to death the fear of man in relation to our pastor or anyone we are correcting.

There are numerous benefits to a face-to-face conversation with your pastor. I could write pages on why conversation is superior to written communication when it comes to correction. Only in conversation can we ask questions, elaborate on points, draw out our pastor, and hear his perspective. Whenever I correct someone I know that my perspective is limited and my perceptions are flawed. In this conversation I can express my concern to my pastor and not assume my perspective is infallible (Proverbs 18:13).

A conversation also provides your pastor the opportunity to observe your facial expressions and hear the tone of your voice, which are both critical to effective communication.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/cj-mahaney/post/2011/03/25/Pray-for-Your-Pastor.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/cj-mahaney/post/2011/02/18/What-to-Do-When-Your-Pastor-Preaches-a-Sermon-Dud.aspx>

## **Bring Observations**

In this post I have used the word “observations.” By this I mean that you are not approaching your pastor as a prosecuting attorney conducting a deposition. Rather than bringing charges and accusations against him, you are bringing personal observations—something you have observed.

There is a critical difference between an accusation and an observation. The former is the fruit of a proud and offended heart; the latter the fruit of a heart that has been humbled by the gospel, and is aware that one’s perceptions are fallible.

Recognizing this will help me see two important things: (a) that I may be wrong in my criticism, and (b) my criticism may not be as important as I think it is. Approaching issues with this kind of humility will position you to come to your pastor with questions and not accusations.

## **Success**

So what constitutes a successful meeting? First of all, it was successful if you cared enough to approach your pastor and have this conversation with him. And it was successful if your pastor took the time to listen to you and to consider your observations. Do not expect or require that he immediately agrees with all your comments or that he immediately responds to them. Allow him the time necessary to pray, reflect on your correction, and talk with his wife and his friends about it.

But if you find yourself offended if your pastor doesn’t immediately respond or if he disagrees with you, then it could be that your own heart has been revealed, and maybe your motives weren’t as pure as you might have thought. You then have an opportunity to humble yourself before God and to entrust your pastor to God.

So meet personally with your pastor, humbly offer him your observations, but do not require an immediate response from him. As long as you have communicated your correction clearly and in love, you have served your pastor and honored God in the process.



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