

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Handling Criticism Wisely

A friend once told me that the tallest tree catches the most wind. By that he meant leaders get criticized, and the greater the leader, the more criticism comes his or her way.

Bill Hybels, a well-known pastor from Illinois, once commented, "The people of our churches are unbelievably demanding and unbelievably short-sighted. Pastors live with a constant dull pain. I have told my wife Lynn that I believe that for the rest of my life I will live with a dull pain because of the pain of people criticizing me."

**"Failure is
our problem.**

**It is also
God's
program"**

-Grant Howard

Pastor Rick Warren puts it this way: "God loves you and everyone in your church has a wonderful plan for your life!"

Let's face it. If these two pastors get criticized, so will we. In fact longtime observers of church ministry tell us that receiving criticism is just a way of life for leaders of a church. Dave Roper, an encourager of pastors, offers the following four facts about criticism:

First, criticism usually comes when we least need it. What pastor cannot recall being criticized just before walking into the auditorium on a Sunday morning to preach?

Second, criticism usually comes when we least deserve it. What pastor cannot recall being criticized following a major accomplishment, such as after graduating with a new degree?

Third, criticism usually comes from people least qualified to give it. What pastor cannot recall being criticized for an error in speaking by people who have never spoken publicly in their lives?

Fourth, criticism usually comes in a form that is least helpful. What pastor cannot recall being criticized in a destructive manner?

Why are pastors criticized? Here are some reasons I've noted why pastors attract so much criticism in churches.

First, we often deserve it. Some pastors are poor organizers, others ignore problems, a few are overly aggressive, some violate social norms, and others just do stupid things.

Second, we are change agents. Pastors are constantly taking the church in a new direction, starting new programs, and asking difficult questions.

Third, we confront sin. Preaching the Word of God leads naturally to pastors challenging evil and calling people to account for their sins.

Four, we are safe targets. People believe we can take it because we appear strong.

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Truth is often channeled through trauma!

Nobody grows apart from confrontation.

Handling Criticism

So, since criticism is a way of life in ministry, how should we handle it? The following are some ideas gleaned from years of observing and talking with leaders.

Apply the doctrine of admonition.

Because we are imperfect, we make mistakes. Because we are in the body of Christ, we can expect to be evaluated by others in the body. Nobody grows apart from confrontation, correction and criticism. Remember: "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). Such admonishment comes to us as well as going out from us.

Apply the doctrine of sovereignty.

Failure is our problem. It is also God's program. What positive things can we learn from this experience? About ourselves? About our ministry? About people? About Satan? About the church? Truth often is channeled through trauma. Remember: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). God is using criticism to mold us into the people he wants us to be.

Apply the doctrine of relief.

Eventually, criticism comes to every leader. There is a way of escape, however. His grace is sufficient. God wants us to have contentment and joy. Not all of the time, but enough of the time to allow us to enjoy life as well as endure it. Remember: "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so you will be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). We will never be put in a position that we cannot handle through God's grace.

Apply the doctrine of support.

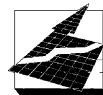
We need trusted friends, colleagues, and family members. God offers encouragement and support through honest individuals. Seek them out. Move toward them in times of criticism. Remember: "Encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Apply the doctrine of discipline.

Confront factious people directly and quickly. Hoping such people will go away leads to long-term pain. Remember: "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning" (Titus 3:10).

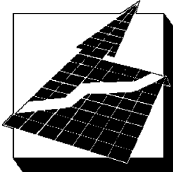
A beloved professor of mine wrote, "The *work of the Lord* will involve both success and failure, praise and criticism. The leader must see these factors as ways to better understand and do the work of the Lord. Nothing would ever be attempted if all possible problems and objections were first overcome.

God said it, even more clearly: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).



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For information about training workshops,
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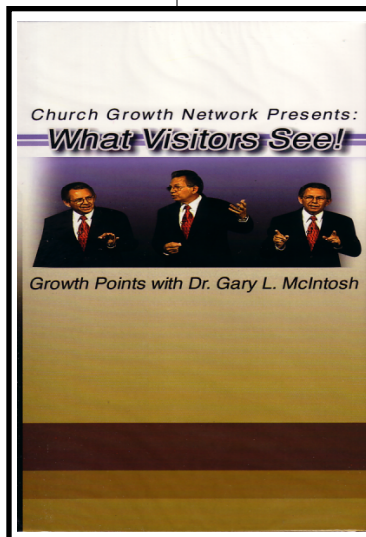
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As President of the McIntosh Church Growth Network, a church consulting firm, Dr. McIntosh has served numerous churches in over eighty-three denominations throughout the United States, Canada, and Southeast Asia.

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