

Advice to Church Leaders I: How Church Leaders Should Respond to Criticism

Text: 1 TIMOTHY 4:9-16

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Last Sunday was Installation Sunday in our church. And for that reason I took time to recognize and pray for everyone from our congregation who serves in any kind of leadership role. My message today has been prepared with those people in mind. It is a message for people who are serving or who aspire to serve as leaders in the church.

Now, many of you may think that leaves you out, because you are not a leader in the church. You may understand a leader to be a person who has been elected or appointed to be in charge of doing something, and you have not been elected or appointed to be in charge of anything. You may think a leader to be someone who has a title like deacon or elder or trustee or teacher or group leader, and you have no title next to your name. For these reasons, you may feel you are not a leader.

But, if this is how you think, then I would like to challenge your thinking. The main thing that makes a person a leader is not his election or appointment, neither is it the title he has next to his name. And that is not to say that elections and appointments and titles are not important. They are extremely important, because they give definition to the structure of an organization, and every church needs structure of one kind or another in order to carry out its business in an orderly fashion.

However, as important as elections and appointments and titles are, I do not believe we should use these things to define leadership. Over the years I have learned that a person can have these things and not be a leader. And the reverse is also true. A person can lack the title or election or appointment and still be a strong leader. The thing that makes a certain person a leader is the influence he has over other people. A man named John Maxwell puts it like this, "Leadership is influence, nothing more and nothing less."

Now, imagine me last week asking for everyone in the congregation whose behavior and words are influencing other people in this church to stand up. If everyone who truly is having influence in the lives of others in this church were to stand up, I think we would have more people stand than the number of people who stood last week.

And then, imagine me asking everyone in the congregation who aspires to be a leader to stand up. In other words, imagine me asking everyone who desires to have his behavior and words influence other people to stand. If I were to make that appeal, I think everyone in this congregation should stand. "Let your light shine before men," Jesus said, "that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." All of us should desire that our behavior and words influence other people so that they may know God more.

So, when I am talking to leaders and those who aspire to be leaders, I should really be talking to all of us. Every Christian should want to become a leader, and every Christian should eventually become a leader whether or not he ever holds an official title or position.

Today, I want to encourage church leaders. There are many passages in the Bible I can use to do this, but I have chosen 1 TIMOTHY chapter 4, because I believe it is very relevant to our current situation. Most of the leaders in our congregation are relatively young in age. And, the environment in which we find ourselves is undergoing tremendous transition and change, and it will continue to do so for some time to come. Wherever there is a lot of transition, there is bound to be some amount of confusion, and that brings on criticism.

The words from the Bible I have chosen are directed to a leader who was relatively young, and they words set in the context of controversy and criticism taking place within the church.

Please notice how the passage I have chosen applies to young leaders. 1 TIMOTHY 4:12 says, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young..." According to William Barclay (who knows a lot more about Greek than I do), the Greek word used for "young" found in 1 TIMOTHY 4:12 can describe anyone of military age, that is up to the age of forty. Although Timothy was young in comparison to the apostle Paul, he was not a teenager. It was fifteen years since he had become Paul's helper. So I conclude that the instruction given in 1 TIMOTHY 4 applies to the majority of people in this auditorium.

And, notice how 1 Timothy 4 is set in the context of controversy and criticism. The first five verses of this chapter paint a picture of people in the church with different opinions about what is appropriate behavior and what is inappropriate behavior. Whenever and wherever there are a lot of different opinions in a church, there is bound to be a lot of criticism.

So, in the context of controversy and criticism, advice is given to the young leader. The advice is meant to help the leader respond to the controversy and criticism that surrounds him. I think the advice can be summed up in two sentences. First of all, work to silence the criticism. And, second, keep focused on doing the things you know God wants you to do.

I believe these two sentences sum up the advice given in 1 Timothy 4:9-16. Now let's consider the advice in more detail. And, let's begin by reading the passage.

This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young,

but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.

Watch your life and doctrine closely.

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

Let me tell you something that I have learned from experience about adults. I used to think that most adults looked down on young people just because they were young. But that is before I became an adult.

So, when I was younger than I am now, I assumed that most adults didn't like kids. They just liked being around other adults. When I read the words, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young," my interpretation went something like this: 'Adults naturally look down on young people, but don't let that bother you, because God sees you differently.' That used to be my interpretation of 1 TIMOTHY 4:12.

But, now that I have become an adult, I see the verse in a different way. I now see that, when I was young, I was not being fair in my judgement of adults. Adults don't naturally try to think the worst about young people. Instead the opposite is true. When adults see a certain young people behaving in a way that they feel is not proper, they will try to make excuses for that young person. This is especially true if that young person is the adult's own child. Adults and parents will try to excuse the bad behavior of young people by saying things like, "He's just a child. Wait until he gets older and gains a little more experience, then he will grown out of it." In other words, the reason why the kid is doing the bad thing is because he just hasn't grown up yet.

Now, I believe what the older Paul was trying to tell the younger Timothy was simply this, 'Do not give adults the opportunity to blame your bad behavior on the fact that you are a young person.' Don't give them the opportunity to say things like, 'Oh, he still needs to grow up.'

While serving as a pastor in Taiwan, I discovered that people were a lot more tolerant of my mistakes than they were of mistakes made by local pastors. The reason for their tolerance was the fact that I was a foreigner. They made an excuse for the foolish things that came out of my mouth and the stupid things I did by saying that I did not understand the language and the culture. Local pastors did not have the same excuse and were treated much more severely when they made mistakes.

But, I learned that missionaries who take advantage of the excuse they have never improve. Even though I had a convenient excuse for making mistakes, I determined that I should strive not to allow people to say, 'the reason why Pastor Pigott (Bi Mu Shr) said or did that foolish thing is because he is a foreigner (Lau Wai). I decided to be careful not to allow people to look down on the fact that I was a foreigner.

In the same way, even though you are young and thus have a convenient excuse for doing stupid things, you should be careful not to allow people to look down on the fact that you are young by doing stupid things.

We cannot avoid making mistakes altogether.

Criticism is going to come whether we like it or not. But even though we cannot avoid criticism, we can work to silence it. The older apostle Paul gave the younger Timothy some very specific advice to help him silence the criticism. The advice can be seen in the last half of verse 12. He told Timothy to set an example in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. In other words, when people hear the words we speak and observe our conduct, what they hear and see should be love and faith and purity.

This is very difficult advice to follow, because what we must do involves not only our words, but also our conduct. But let me assure you that there is no other way to silence criticism. Plato was once falsely accused of dishonorable conduct. "Well," he said, "we must live in such a way that all men will see that the charge is false." Verbal defenses alone will not silence criticism. Speech must be accompanied by real life conduct. For this reason, I oppose using the internet to deal with complaints and conflicts and misunderstandings that arise between people in the church. The internet limits us to word communication only. E-mail does not allow you to see the tears or even hear the sorrow in the person's voice. It is a convenient way to communicate, and for some people it is about the only way they communicate. But a leader must go beyond verbal communication. He must let people see his conduct. Let's consider in a bit more detail the traits of the kind of conduct that will silence criticism.

First, and most important of all, there must be love. And I am talking about the highest kind of love, *agape* love. This kind of love is concerned about knowing God and helping others know God more than anything else. But, to experience this kind of love in a church, we must see God. What did you see when you entered into this building today? Did you see God? Do you see Him now?

There are always two ways of looking at a church. One way is to see people and programs and buildings and structures. But when we look at these things only, we are bound to become discouraged. The people we look at will always be far from perfect, and the programs will never run exactly like they're supposed to. The buildings will seem inadequate and there will be flaws in the structure of the organization. When you look at people and buildings and programs and structures only, you can always find something to complain about.

But, the other way to look at the church is to see Jesus. It is to see Jesus as the One who sacrificed everything to establish the church. It is to see His perfect love for the church. And it is to see Jesus working in the hearts and lives of each person. Jesus

lives within the heart of every single Christian in this auditorium, and His grace is hard a work to make improvements. Somehow we must see that and desire, more than anything else, to assist our Savior in what He is doing.

This is not to say that we neglect trying to make needed changes in our programs and structures. But those changes are not priority. The number one priority is to love. And the best way to love is to see Jesus working in the lives of those around us, and do our best to assist our Master in His wonderful work of grace. When we keep our eyes on Jesus and His work of grace in the lives of others, then it is impossible for us to feel bitter and resentful and vengeful. When we possess this kind of love, then we will never hate and we will never refuse to forgive. This kind of love will work to silence criticism.

And then, there is the matter of faith. Much can be said about faith, but I will try to limit my comments to the aspect of faith that works to reduce or silence criticism. And the aspect of faith I want to emphasize is loyalty—not loyalty to a particular person—but loyalty to God. If I am loyal to another person, it must be because I believe God wants me to be loyal to that person. I may disagree with a particular person's style of leadership or even the particular decisions he has made, but I still remain loyal, because God's Word tells me I should support those who are over me, unless they command me to do something contrary to the moral law of God.

Over the years I have seen too many people give up and walk out of fellowship groups and churches. According to my observation, the top two reasons why people give up are: 1) They have done something real stupid, and they are too embarrassed to return and face the crowd; and 2) they have seen someone else do something real stupid, and they cannot stand being around that person. But the reasons why we make decisions should never be based on our actions or other people's actions. That is not faith. That is not being loyal to God. We should do things because we believe God wants us to do them and for no other reason.

The most embarrassing thing that ever happened to me as a young person happened in a church. I was in college and had been given the responsibility of helping out with communion. I was not conducting the communion service. I was just assisting by handing the plate of bread to the person who was conducting the service. Somehow I let go of the plate before that person had a good hold of it. The plate and the bread hit the floor. In this case, the bread was in the form of white, round wafers that rolled very well when they hit the floor. To make matters worse, it was

a large Catholic Church, and the priest had just spent half an hour going through the process of consecrating the bread. That meant that, in the minds of everyone in the auditorium, the bread had already changed into the actual body of Christ, and the only one who could touch it was the priest. So the poor priest had to get down on his hands and knees in front of all those people and pick up the mess I had created. I was mortified. I never wanted to serve again. In my mind I could hear the people saying, 'Look at the stupid thing that kid did.'

Since that embarrassing moment, I have had many other embarrassing moments in public ministry. There have been a couple times that I have had to sit down right in the middle of a sermon because I was too nervous or too welled up with emotion to finish. Each time an embarrassing thing happens, I am tempted to give up. But each time I am reminded that I must not quit what I am doing unless God tells me to. The only reason we should be doing what we are doing is because we believe God wants us to do it. And we must remain loyal to Him no matter what.

Sometimes, I hear people say, "That was a total waste of my time. I should have never taught that Sunday school class or led that small group." But, those kinds of words should not be heard coming from a leader. If God wanted us to do it, then it was not a waste, regardless of the outcome. If God did not want us to do it, then we had no business starting in the first place. The kind of faith that silences criticism is a loyalty to what God has called us to do regardless of our own stupid mistakes or the stupid things done by the people we are trying to lead.

The third trait that silences criticism that is listed in 1 TIMOTHY 4:12 is purity. Earlier on in his letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul made a list of the qualifications for church leadership. A careful examination of First Timothy, chapter 3 will reveal that the qualifications listed there all have to do with being holy and pure.

Now, Paul is telling the younger Timothy that holiness or purity is not only something that qualifies people to become leaders in the first place, it is also a way working to silencing criticism.

With our speech and in our conduct we must strive to demonstrate *agape* love and we must remain loyal to God and we must keep a pure testimony. We will never be able to stop criticism from happening altogether in a church. But we can sure fight it. We can take practical steps to silence the criticism. This is the first way church leaders should respond to criticism.

The second way is to remain focused doing the things we know God has called us to do. In other words, we must remain focused at performing the duties God has given us.

And, what are these duties? In general they can be summed up in the overall need for people to know the Savior. Jesus died for all men, and we must labor to help all men know that He died for them. And we must especially help those who have decided to receive the gift of salvation to experience God's saving grace on a day by day basis. This is our basic duty. It is to help people who don't know God to know Him, and to help people who do know God to know Him better. And we must keep focused on carrying out our basic duty.

What the instruction recorded in verses 13 through 16 does is to break this basic duty of leaders into smaller duties. We help people know more about the Savior through the public reading of Scripture, and by preaching and teaching the Word of God. The key here is to keep our focus. We must remain devoted to what I call the purposes of the church. We must be purpose driven. Of course, the list in verse 13 is not a complete list of things that church leaders must do in order to help people know God. Besides evangelism and Christian education, we also know that church leaders must concern themselves with the ministries of fellowship (often referred to as caring) and worship and community service. Church leaders must rely on prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit to do all these things. But for leaders who are called to be pastors, like the young Timothy, extra focus needs to be given to reading and preaching and teaching the Word of God. As a pastor, it is absolutely essential that sermon preparation and preparation for teaching God's Word appear as number one on my to-do list.

Verse 14 continues with the theme of keeping focused. Here the emphasis is focusing on developing and using the gifts God has given us, and to do so in the context of the local church. God gives us our commission in the context of the local church. The really important work of the Christian Church is never done by outside speakers or visiting evangelists; rather, it is done by those within the fellowship who have been commissioned by the local Body of Christ.

People from the local congregation must focus on developing their spiritual gifts to serve the body. Developing and using our spiritual gifts never should become easy, because our environment never stops changing. I have found it dangerous to rely on old messages to face current challenges. Even though I have been preaching for almost 30 years I still must spend the majority of my ministry time each week focusing on what God wants me to say now. When we

lose our focus, we get into ruts with our spiritual gifts. Only when we keep focused can we use our spiritual gifts in new ways to help people grow to know their Savior more.

Finally, in verses 15 and 16 we return to the main theme of presenting Christ to people so that they will be saved. As people watch our lives and understand what we believe and see our progress and our perseverance, we will fulfill our main duty as Christian leaders. That duty is the duty of knowing Christ and making Him known.

The words "devote yourselves" found in verse 13 and "do not neglect" found in verse 14 and "be diligent" found in verse 15 and "watch" found in verse 16 all are emphasizing the same thing. These words are telling us that we must remain focused in what we know God wants us to do.

People who are focused and people who are distracted have one thing in common. They both appear to be busy. But how they handle criticism is quite different. The focused person does not worry about criticism. He works to silence it. But he does not worry about it, because he is too busy focusing on doing the things he

knows God wants him to do. However, the distracted person does worry about criticism. He does not have confidence in his heart that he is doing the things God wants him to do. He is distracted, and that results in insecurity and worry.

I spend a lot of time in this church attending meetings where a lot of discussion takes place in an attempt to make improvements in our strategies for doing ministry and in the structures we use to make decisions. The time spent is not a waste. It must be done. But regardless of how much time people spend working at improving things, we will always have a flawed organization. And, as a result, there will always be criticism. Such is the nature of the church before Christ returns again.

In the face of criticism, we must work to silence the criticism. And we must remain focused doing the things we know God wants us to do. This is the advice I believe the Holy Spirit, through the elder Apostle Paul, wants to give to the leaders of this congregation. May the Lord help us to heed this advice. And, as a result of taking this advice to heart, may the Lord help us to become a better church.