

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS

Archdeacon Bob Barrett

Criticism - How Do We Respond?

**Criticism can be responded to in a Christian manner
– both criticism that comes our way
and criticism that needs to be given.**

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS Number 16

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This includes criticism that comes our way and criticism that needs to be given.

This series of Booklets provide practical ideas to help leaders develop their skills in a variety of ministry areas. Experimenting with them, growing your own ideas, discussion with ministry teams will help both you and others grow in skill. Good modelling, evaluation and training will inspire worshippers to worship, pray and grow in their Christian life and ministry.

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21 Principles for Managing the Local Church.

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***Leaders are criticised.
Anyone who 'has a go' is likely to be criticised.
As we grow to maturity we and our Church
become better at handling
"critical analysis", ideas, concerns and suggestions
in a positive up building manner.***

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*A Church that handles criticism well
is founded on our individual attitudes,
our behaviour and
our personal methods
of giving and receiving criticism.*

WHY THIS BOOKLET?

1. . . . because of the reality - everyone in ministry faces criticism!

- Whether we fulfil the role of Vicar or Pastor, worship leader, preacher, Sunday school teacher or toilet cleaner – criticism is likely to come our way.
- The more we do, the more criticism we are likely to face. The only people who do not open themselves to criticism are those who do nothing – except criticise those who do something!
- Criticism “goes with the territory” – especially if we are in leadership positions.

2. . . . because of the need to grow in the skills to handle criticism.

- The **problem is not criticism**. The potential problems are the **way criticism is given**, and the **way criticism is received**.
- Handling criticism (both giving and receiving) requires skill. We can all grow in skill – so that we handle it in a mature way.
- This **booklet aims** to help Church members grow in the skills of “critical analysis”. The points it raises should help all members, not only share potentially negative things, but should also encourage people to share and receive the positive ideas and suggestions which every Church needs.
- When the booklet gives an idea on one aspect (e.g. giving), those ideas, should also help us grow in the other aspect.

3. . . . because we need to improve the way the Church deals with criticism.

- As we grow in our ability to handle criticism **we should**:
 - Be more able to understand why people criticize us.
 - Understand our own responses to criticism.
 - Have tools to cope with criticism and our responses to it.
 - Be discovering methods to help people express their critical analysis in less hurting, more constructive, ways.
 - Help our Church provide opportunities for people to raise questions and share their perceptions – including criticisms of what we do and how we go about “being Church”.
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GROWING IN OUR ABILITY TO HANDLE CRITICISM

To get the most out of this booklet.

1. This booklet does **not have “all the answers”**. The answers “for us” are discovered as we understand ourselves, then build appropriate attitudes and behaviour, into the way we operate.
2. Spend time working at the **suggested exercises** – preferably discussing your ideas with others, so that you learn from the perceptions each can bring, to enable growth in this aspect of Christian life and ministry.
3. The tools we use to handle complaints and criticism will also help us handle hurts (often “arriving on our doorstep” without the knowledge of the one who has caused the hurt).

How to get the most out of the exercises.

1. Exercises 1 and 6 are personal exercises – to do on your own – although for the sake of our growth we may like to use a friend or supervisor to help us understand our responses and grow in that area.
2. Exercises 2, 3 and 4 can be done in two ways:
 - Firstly on our own – work through the questions and list our answers/responses.
 - Secondly – in a group, brainstorm our ideas, so that we can learn from each other’s perceptions.
 - The group could be: vestry, ministry team, staff, elders, home cell group, management team or a group of friends who wish to develop their ability to both, receive criticism, and give critical analysis, in a positive way.

You will also find help in other ‘Developing Your Skills’ booklets which link into this topic and outline further skills we will find helpful when handling criticism.

See especially:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Booklet 4: | “People Helping Skills” |
| Booklet 11: | “Change – Introduce New Things Successfully”. |
| Booklet 13: | “Handling Hurts In The Church”. |
| Booklet 14: | “Managing Conflict In The Church”. |

EXERCISE ONE –

HOW WE, PERSONALLY, HANDLE CRITICISM GIVEN TO US.

Before reading the following sections reflect on the questions this exercise raises.

*“Criticism won’t kill us but it sure hurts
. . . . and it carries the possibility
of ‘killing’ the potential effectiveness
of our ministry”*

1. The Exercise

Spend some time thinking and writing about how you, personally, handle criticism, which is “thrown in your direction”?

This is criticism given “to you and about you”.

- How do you respond?
- What do you say or not say?
- What do you feel?
- What are you tempted to do?

Note:

- To get the most out of this exercise (and the other exercises) we will need to be determined to **be honest** with ourselves and with anyone we ask to help us.
- This exercise is not how you should respond; it is about **how you do respond**.

2. Following the Exercise

After having completed this exercise you may like to do either, or both, of the following:

- Look at the responses in Appendix one – these come from others who have done this exercise.
- Discuss your answers with a supervisor or supportive friend.

3. Another personal exercise is found in Appendix 2

UNDERSTANDING THE REALITIES OF CRITICISM

It is easier to find faults to criticise than positive good to encourage.

Criticism is inevitable.

1. One thing we can guarantee about ministry is that criticism will come our way - from obvious and from surprising sources.
 - From parishioners, colleagues in ministry, staff, outsiders.
2. We will never avoid it, if we are doing something worthwhile.
3. We will never avoid it if God knows we want to grow in the Lord's service.
 - We may find that criticism is one of the ways the Lord is able to "speak to us" and help us grow to maturity, so that our ministry becomes even more effective.
4. Another reality for many of us – is that we are also tempted to give negative criticism to others.

Criticism is necessary.

1. The best critical analysis is vital for any Church.
 - We need it if we are to correct our weaknesses.
 - We need it if we are to seize God's opportunities.
 - Sadly we slip into thinking that negative criticism (in a way that seems to "take people down") is the best way to do it.
2. God does not want people hurt or destroyed – but that is the result if we don't offer the best in this area. God does not want Churches to be ripped apart because we offer a second best approach to handling our perceptions or concerns.
3. There will be things in the life of any Church we are concerned about – ideas we have, things we may feel negative about. Questioning something is not a problem – being excellent at it is the issue.

There is a difference between Constructive and Destructive Criticism.

1. We need constructive criticism and we need to learn how to give criticism in a way that enables it to be constructive for all concerned.
2. If criticism comes, in a way that is potentially destructive, we need to:
 - Work hard at handling it.
 - Seek help to ensure it does not destroy others or us.
 - Find ways to encourage people to "re-bring" the criticism in a way that is more helpful.

3. Things that can make criticism more constructive or more destructive include:
 - The way criticism is given.
 - The timing.
 - The aim a person has – to build up or destroy, to help or to hurt.
 - The words and manner used.
 - The added suggestions of positive ways forward.
 - The love and care that comes with it.
 - The praise and support given for other aspects of a person's ministry or the things they have done.
 - The way the 'critic' keeps relating to and helping the 'criticised'.
 - The relationships existing – including the level of trust and openness - between the critic and the person they are seeking to help (by the criticism they bring).
 - As a critic, the way we help the "criticised" explain why they have done what they have, and help them reflect on their "performance".
 - As the criticised, the way we listen and allow the critic to express their concerns.

The way we handle criticism will make or break our ministry.

1. In the eyes of others.
 - Handling it well they may come to respect us, trust us and learn from us helpful responses for their life.
2. Criticism may change the way we see ourselves and, possibly, how we view God.
 - It may affect what we feel the Lord can trust us with in the future.
 - It may affect whether we feel we can trust our Lord enough to pick up future ministry opportunities and challenges.
3. If we handle criticism wrongly.
 - It can destroy us, creating:
 - Debilitating discouragement.
 - Cynicism.
 - Withdrawal.
 - Loss of vision.
 - It can destroy relationships in the Church
 - Us with others;
 - Others with others.
 - It prevents the Spirit from working in the way the Lord wishes to.

4. If we handle criticism rightly.
 - It will grow us as people and as effective ‘ministers’.
 - It will be a model for others – they learn from our examples.
 - It will build the whole Church – encouraging growth to more mature responses and methods; and building good relationships in the Church.
 - It will open everyone to the ongoing work of God.

Criticism hurts – but is not damaging, if handled well.

1. We feel the hurt, often acutely, because
 - We have done our best and people do not seem to realise that we are trying hard.
 - We have tried to be fair and treat everyone equally.
 - We actually do love and appreciate people – and are seeking to ‘minister’ with their best interests at heart.
 - We are serving and giving up so much, to pour our lives into people and the Church – and people do not always seem to appreciate all we are doing and how hard we are trying. *“All they do is criticise us.”*
2. Here we need to be careful because we should not be “doing our ministry” to be appreciated by others.
 - We are ministering because God has called us and, in obedience to the Lord, we will be the person we are called to be.
 - Expecting recognition can often lead to disappointment - when the desired thanks does not come – and even worse we receive criticism, instead of thanks.
3. Criticism can also hurt when it is true – we have not done as well as we should or could have.

Individuals and Churches can grow to be better at giving, receiving and handling criticism.

1. We can help people see that, on many occasions, different views and interpretations are possible – and that many issues are not completely “black or white”.
2. People can become more sensitive to other people
 - As they watch and decide whether to give criticism.
 - In the way they do give criticism.
 - In the way they allow others to bring constructive criticism to them.
3. People can become more understanding about ministry and about the life of the Church and therefore find they have different perceptions about what is essential and what is not.
 - They can become more accepting of differences and people’s different ways of doing things – realizing that just because others do something differently does not mean it is therefore done wrongly.

4. People can grow in their ability to accept that mistakes will happen in ministry and in the life of any Church and therefore not be so quick to criticise – especially as they realise that they too will make mistakes and are “not yet perfect”.
5. To bring about this growth we need to educate and train the members, of the Church – using sermons, studies, ministry training events and pastoral conversations.
 - Question: In our Church, how do we educate and develop in people the ability to bring constructive criticism? How do we develop their ability to handle criticism thrown at them?
 - What are we doing now?
 - What should we do in the future?
 - What specific methods and content are necessary for our Church – considering where it currently is on its journey of growth to maturity?
 - How big is the impact of our example?

There are a variety of underlying sources of criticism.

1. Think carefully about ‘where’ the criticism is coming from. If we can identify what the source of this criticism is, it may then become easier to deal with.

Criticism may come from:

- Fellow Christians – colleagues or opponents; people from other Churches or fellow members of our Church; from within or outside our ministry teams.
 - Non-Christians – who often will not understand the basis from which we live and work, and will therefore criticise us for some of the choices we make. However, we do not want to behave in such a way that gives them undue cause to criticise, as this weakens our witness.
 - Ourselves – some people are their “own worst critic’ and often end up taking themselves down – which is quite different from correctly done evaluation and assessment of our ministry.
 - God – in the sense of challenging us – the Lord may be trying to teach us something – to both, develop our Christian life and to improve our ministry performance – making it more effective for those who could benefit in the future.
 - The devil – will seek to use criticism (and people’s responses to it) to create distrust and divert our attention.
2. Realising the different potential sources, underlying any criticism we receive, should make us determined to:
 - Listen carefully to the criticism – to understand what it really is all about.
 - Be open to learn – in case there is an aspect of ministry we need to grow in.
 - Be accepting of the people - as we discern their message.
 - Be ready, while correcting our mistakes, also to stand against anything that would divert us from the Lord’s calling on our life.

There will be various reasons for criticism.

1. Criticism may come because of any combination of:
 - The critic – what they are going through is making them (more) critical of others.
 - What we did or did not do – the issue/event/words.
 - The way we did it.
 - The interpretation that others placed on our actions – the way they received it. Their perception is important.
 - Lack of understanding, by others, of what is happening in the Church and why things are happening in the way that they are.
2. It can come when there is no failure (either on our part or on the part of others) – for example, because:
 - People have to cope with change.
 - They fear the future.
 - They may disagree with a decision or the way things are to be done.
 - They may have different values or vision.
 - They may not see the positive impact this course of action is having on others.
 - They may have wished to be consulted – needing their views heard before a decision is made or acted upon.
 - They may (quite possibly wrongly) be concerned that they are about to be sidelined, or that the particular aspect of Church life which is important for them and their spirituality, is to be 'done away with'.
3. Criticism can arise because of genuine shortcomings on our part, as we struggle to develop the skills we need for current and future ministry requirements. We are not doing it as well as we could.
4. Some criticism comes because people see the mistakes and potential dangers that we have not yet become aware of.

With regard to people and criticism.

1. People are different and handle criticism differently.
 - Depending on their upbringing, background, methods learnt, experience etc.
 - Some get extremely hurt by criticism while others hardly notice it.
 - Some can share critical analysis in a genuinely loving way, others have difficulty visibly demonstrating their love and inner feelings.
2. People criticize more if they are affected by such things as:
 - Uncertainty.
 - Frustration.
 - Insecurity.
 - Fear.

3. Not all people (yet) have the skills to bring criticism in the most constructive way.
4. Some people do not feel they have appropriate opportunities to express their ideas – perhaps there is no way in the Church for them to do so.
 - Many Churches do not have clearly understood ways for people to express their concerns, ideas, suggestions or criticisms.
 - People do not know who to go to (what person or group), where, when or how.
 - Some people try, but feel what they say is rejected without being “heard”.
 - Some people try, but end up feeling they have been attacked for making such comments. This drives criticism underground – and even valid constructive criticism is lost.
5. People often make assumptions about criticism -
 - Assuming it is there when it isn't.
 - Assuming it is not there when it is.
 - Thinking it is bigger or smaller than it really is.
 - Assuming, if they ignore it the criticism will go away – evaporate.

Criticism may say more about the critic than it does about the person criticized.

1. Wise leadership takes this into account when processing criticism.
2. Ministry personnel may need help to understand what is happening in the lives of those who are criticising them.
3. We may need to sit with critics and help them work through events which are impacting their lives – but do so in a way that is still “hearing the criticism”. They may need help:
 - With what they are going through.
 - To see the underlying threat the issue is for them.
 - To sort out their thoughts and words so that they can express their criticisms in a better way.
 - To work through their desire for perfection etc.

Criticism does not imply failure, disloyalty or the end of the road.

1. Criticism is unlikely to be saying we are a failure.
 - Often critics recognise how good we are at what we do – and have a deep desire to help us be even better at doing our ministry.
2. Criticism is not usually a statement of disloyalty.
 - It often comes out of the love the critic has for the Church and for us.
 - Critics often have a deep desire to improve the life of the Church - for the sake of its evangelistic impact, its growth and its development.

3. Although we may feel hurt, criticism is not “the end of the road”.
 - It may be hard – but we will get through it.
 - There can be growth for both the criticised and the critic if we find a way to positively share and explore the issues and its implications.

There are degrees of criticism.

1. Criticism **can be easier** to receive when it comes from colleagues or fellow team members with whom we have built a trusting relationship and, who we know, will still love and accept us (and they show they do) in spite of any mistake we may have made.
2. **Behind the back** criticism is harder to cope with than face to face.
 - When it comes directly to us we can tell who it is from, how they are feeling, the real concern – and we have an opportunity to clarify any aspects of that criticism we are not clear about.
 - When it is “behind the back” we are left uncertain about the exact details, unclear how to respond, and we probably read into it more than we should.
3. **Silent criticism** is usually harder to cope with than spoken to the face criticism - e.g. when people leave rather than talk through their criticisms.
4. **“Criticism given via someone else on behalf of the critic”** needs to be handled with extreme care.
 - Where possible people should be encouraged to bring their criticisms directly to the person concerned – although they need an accepting, trusting environment to do so.
 - People should be encouraged to refrain from delivering other people’s criticisms.
 - People who bring other people’s criticism often “get it wrong”.

Handling our responses

1. All criticism needs **some** kind of **response** – at least to talk through the issues with the critic, so they know their thoughts have been considered. This will help them – especially if we decide not to adjust things in spite of the ideas they have brought.
2. When someone signals that they wish to discuss a criticism with us it is usually important not to take too long to respond to the request.
 - The longer we leave responding:
 - The bigger it may become in our life and therefore “eat away” our confidence, self esteem, ministry ability, functioning etc.
 - The bigger it may be to the person who has the complaint – because of the delay in responding and the consequential uncertainty for them - they may be more upset and may begin to “spread the word”, which will make things even more difficult for both critic and criticised.
 - Negative criticism is like a truck running downhill – the further it runs the faster it goes and the harder it is to stop.

Criticism may have a physical impact on those criticised – and perhaps on those who feel they must give the criticism.

- Criticism can lead to anxiety attacks.
 - Stress responses can affect our physical system; our ability to function normally (e.g. we are unlikely to eat and sleep normally); and impact our ability to relate to others in a healthy manner (not just to the critic or the person we have criticised).
-

BEING THE KIND OF PERSON WHO CAN HANDLE CRITICISM WELL

“Treating criticism as a personal assault can drive us to despair and disillusionment

As our Christian life grows we will find we are better able to handle criticism.

The following are some of the attitudes to build into our life – attitudes and behaviour that will improve our ability to handle criticism.

This does not mean we will therefore find criticism easy – but we should find we are better able to process it and have skills to respond to both the critic and the particular criticism they bring.

1. Accept that criticism is **inevitable and necessary**.
 - Then it will not catch us totally by surprise.
 - We will be ready for it to help our ministry develop.
2. Develop an attitude, which expresses a **willingness to receive** and listen to any ideas, or criticism that is brought to us.
 - This gives people permission to bring ideas and constructive criticism into the open and not have to keep them behind our back.
 - Such an attitude will help people come, in love; and it will help us relax as we listen.
3. Be secure in own **relationships** with the Lord, our family and other people.
 - One who can allow others to be different from us.
 - We will then give people permission to have their own thoughts, make their own choices and process ideas in a mature way.
4. Be strong in **Spiritual Disciplines** so that we can keep our eyes on Jesus.
 - Prayer, reading the Bible, worship.
 - Belong to a supportive fellowship group.

5. **Understand people** – how they “tick”.

- It is easier to handle criticism if we have a real feeling for people and knowledge of the things that affect how they function.
- Always being alert to how people’s past has shaped them and how their present circumstances may be impacting them.
- This enables us to make allowances for the way they might bring criticism – but should not, normally, give us an excuse to reject the criticism.

6. **Understand ourselves.**

- Know how to interpret our reactions and the phases criticism takes us through.
- Understand the impact of our particular personality type.
- Be aware of our weaknesses and work at them.
- Be aware of our strengths and use them.
- Be aware of any learned behaviour responses we have from our family background and the models we have been given – especially those we might need to ‘unlearn’ or those we might need to adjust in any given situation.
- Watch the impact of tiredness, illness and exhaustion.

7. Understand the **realities of ministry.**

- Do not lose sight of our vision and our calling.

8. **Understand God** and the way the Lord develops our life.

- Know that God wants us to grow in our ministry and may use criticism to help us face issues.
- The Lord will then help us grow in those areas.

9. Be a **member of a** Home Group, good leadership team, ministry and/or staff **team** where people are trustworthy, encouraging and supportive.

10. Be a person who is **willing to change.**

- One who can handle change well and do things in a way that helps others cope with change.
- Be able to explain ourselves and introduce change carefully.

11. Be a **positive person** in attitudes and responses.

- This helps get criticism into perspective and helps us respond in a way that encourages the critic to share with us.
- If we have difficulty being positive, remind ourselves of our trust in our Lord, who can “work all things out”.
- However, watch that “positiveness” does not cause us to come across as rejecting the comments people are bringing to us. Some people are so positive they do not notice things that might not be going well. Some people are unable to even consider the possibility of something being wrong.

12. Be **physically fit** – with appropriate stress releasing-lowering activities.
 13. Want to be a **good model/example** to others in the way we handle criticism.
 - Want to help people learn to give and receive criticism in more appropriate ways.
 14. Be committed and **determined to act professionally**.
 - In what and how we do things so that we do not unnecessarily create reasons to be criticized.
 - In the way we respond to criticism – an open listening and controlled manner.
 15. **Have a supervisor**, confidante or mentor.
 - One who is experienced and skilled; someone we can trust to share our feelings with; someone who will not judge us or disrespect our feelings and look at us in any lesser light because of our struggles.
 - Use this person to gain perspective; to consult; to help us work through any criticism and its impacts.
 16. **Develop appropriate skills** – especially:
 - Listening skills.
 - Conflict management skills. See Booklet 13: 'Handling Hurts in the Church' and Booklet 14: Managing Conflict in the Church.
-

EXERCISE TWO: THE BIBLE AND CRITICISM

1. **What biblical passages help you keep in equilibrium when facing criticism?**

Spend time building a list of passages that enable you to keep appropriate attitudes and behaviour when giving or receiving criticism.

 - Think about “why” those passages are helpful to you.
 2. You could do this exercise in a Home Group and/or use some of ‘your passages’ for Home Group studies.

When covering such passages ensure questions include “how this helps when facing criticism.”
 3. After you have done the exercises you may like to reflect on the passages others have suggested. See Appendix three.
-

WHAT DO WE DO WHEN WE ARE BEING CRITICISED?

*Not every criticism is a word from the Lord
but it might be,
so don't immediately dismiss it.*

1. Pray and handle it prayerfully.

- Give the criticism, the person and our response to the Lord.
- Pray specifically regarding the criticism (as it comes and afterwards).
- Seek a prayer response not a moan response.

2. Listen very carefully.

- Be thinking, *"I need to understand what this is all about – what are the details, the information, and the feelings."*
- Let our body language show we are listening.
- Listening - to gather accurate information and fully understand what the person is actually saying – try to hear everything that needs hearing **before** responding.
- Avoid the danger of immediately talking, and talking too much – especially "at" the critic.
- Evaluate the message behind the words and emotions.
- Clarify, by repeating back to them, a summary of what we believe they have said – to ensure we are accurately hearing and interpreting. Allow them to correct our comments and again summarize their message.
- Listen to the Lord too – allow the Lord to interpret the criticism.

3. Recognise the reality behind the criticism.

- Where it is coming from? What is actually causing it?
 - How much do they know – about the subject and this issue?
 - How accurate are their perceptions?
 - How reliable are they at 'hearing from the Lord'?
- Why is this person being critical? Always seek to understand why they are reacting the way they are – whether they recognise why, or not.
- Who is it from – how many? Do they have an "axe to grind"? How expert are they at the issues?
- How important is the issue?

4. Work hard at handling the criticism.

- It may not be easy – to receive, think through, understand, get a perspective on, or work out what to do.

5. Do not let our initial response be wrong.

- Thank the person for sharing with us, having the courage, bringing their perceptions, etc.
- Avoid an instant response.
- A natural tendency could be to do one of the following:
 - Defending – trying to change the persons mind.
 - Attacking - the person rather than the issue.
 - Ignoring what they are saying and the issue they are raising (even ignoring it because of the way they are saying it). It is even worse to make it quite clear that we are ignoring it. However after listening and thinking it through we may choose, rightly, to ignore it.

6. Avoid confusing the criticism with the person who brings it to you.

- Listen to the issue – do not reject the person.
- Do not reject the issue because of the way the criticism is “delivered”.

7. Avoid over-reacting by:

- Reading more into the criticism than is actually there (our imagination is dangerous).
- Jumping to conclusions – e.g. the “poor me” – “I’m a failure”.
- Losing control of our responses.
- Taking ourselves down.
- Taking other people down – don’t take it out on others, especially in the emotional heat.

8. Later check with others.

- With regard to the facts and the interpretation – but being careful whether, or how, we mention the name of the person who has criticised.
- Take time to reflect and work through the words and information given.
- What really are “**the**” facts.

9. Check yourself – the criticism may be accurate.

- Did you get it wrong – be prepared to admit wrong.
- Were you misunderstood because, for example:
 - You did not communicate well.
 - Assumed people would understand.
 - Assumed they would all agree.
- Ask: Is God saying anything to me in all of this? Anything I need to learn or do? Is their suggestion scriptural?
- Be alert to areas for change and personal growth. Ask, for example, will acting on the criticism make me more Christ-like?

10. We need to discover what type of response is appropriate and required.

- Different types of criticism – that given for differing reasons – often require a different response.
- Tom Marshall, in his very helpful book “Understanding Leadership” gave useful suggested responses. See Appendix four.

11. Spend time with the person.

- Go back to them with your reflections on their comments, and allow them to respond to your reflection.

12. Apologise – we can always apologise for, or say we are sorry about, something (without accepting guilt or liability), for example:

- For hurting the person and/or
- That they feel hurt, and/or
- Not explaining the issue properly, and/or
- Doing it badly and/or
- Not doing what we should have been doing.

13. After it is over - with regard to the critic.

- Never change your attitude to the attacker/critic.
 - This is vital for ministry!!!!
- Never hold anything against the person, for example:
 - “I’ll never forgive”.
 - “I prefer it if they left the Church”.
- Never cut ourselves off from the person.
 - Go out of our way to project ourselves towards that person.
 - Don’t break relationships.
 - Don’t exclude them.
 - If they break the relationship always seek to keep it open from our side.
- Don’t take it out on other people – neither the critic nor others.

14. After it is over, with respect to ourselves

- Be honest about how we are feeling and coping.
 - If necessary get help (from the Lord and others) – especially if we begin to struggle with such things as:
 - A sense of failure from making the mistake.
 - Low self esteem.
 - Feeling like giving up – changing roles or Churches.
 - Bad feelings towards the person – resentment or wanting any kind of revenge.
 - Undue negativity about ourselves or our ministry roles.
 - Being obsessed by the criticism.
-

EXERCISE THREE: HANDLING CRITICISM

Firstly: reflect on our own:

1. What practical things can we do to:
 - Test the critical comments people make?
 - Respond to the criticism?
 - Keep in good relationship with the bearer of the criticism?
 - Handle our feelings?
2. What aspects of “being criticized” do we personally find particularly hard to handle?
 - What tools or responses do we have to handle these aspects?

Secondly: In a group.

Brainstorm and discuss your ideas, so that you learn from each other’s perceptions.

IF WE LET CRITICISM GET AT US

*Criticism not only has the potential to destroy the present –
it can also impact how we feel about the past,
and change how we might tackle the future
It doesn't take much for people to lose their peace of mind.*

If criticism is allowed to eat away at us it can cause a number of negative results in our lives. It may:

1. Steal our individuality.
 2. Rob us of creativity.
 3. Stop us fulfilling our destiny – causing us to lose sight of the vision God has given us.
 4. Prevent us from seeing opportunities.
 5. Lead us to come under the “power control” of the critic.
 6. Cause us to become controlled by fear.
 7. Take away our joy.
 8. Make us tentative.
 9. Reduce our efficiency and maybe our effectiveness in ministry.
 10. Rob us of appropriate self-confidence.
 11. Destroy our self-esteem.
 12. Make us feel like giving up.
 13. Cause us to change plans or choose a middle way so that we keep “everybody happy”.
 - Allowing critics to turn us away from choices we should make “for the sake of peace and quiet” may mean we miss God’s opportunities and don’t keep anybody happy.
-

SO . . . THERE ARE DANGERS TO AVOID

1. Do not automatically reject criticism as wrong.

- We should be thankful for criticism and use it to test the rightness of our motives and methods; our actions and aims.
- Tom Marshall wrote:

“Honesty compels me to admit that there are times when exactly the wrong person at exactly the wrong time with exactly the wrong motives has nevertheless said the right thing.” “Understanding Leadership”, 1991.

2. Do not blame others.

- It is wrong to blame others for our inadequacies.
- It is wrong to divert the attention of the critic away from us to someone else they should criticize.

3. Do not lose perspective – especially if we tend to internalise what the criticism is (or maybe) about.

- Criticism can cause us to view the past, present and future through faulty spectacles – even when the criticism is brought gently, in love and from someone whose judgment we respect.

4. Do not get discouraged and depressed.

- Criticism, probably more than anything else, removes the joy from Christian ministry.
- Keeping close to Christ and fellow Christians will help us overcome this.

5. Do not reject the person.

- Criticism is not usually a “battle between us and our critic”.
- The criticism should be kept as an issue and not made one of personal animosity between us and the critic.

6. Do not run away.

- Running away often causes us to “run into” the same people (with different names and faces) and the same issues (in different locations).

EXERCISE FOUR:

OVERCOMING DANGEROUS TENDENCIES

Firstly: reflect on our own:

How do we, can we, overcome the dangerous tendencies to:

- Blame others?
- Ignore messages we should receive?
- Turn our back on and hold grudges against the critics?
- Run away?
- Lose our perspective?
- Slip into discouragement and depression?

Secondly: In a group:

Brainstorm and discuss your ideas, so that you learn from each other's perceptions.

HELPING THE CHURCH SHARE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

1. We need to look for ways to shape our Church so that it is not afraid of criticism (positive critical analysis), but openly welcomes it as a way to hear all that God is saying to the Church and those who minister – in whatever ministry.
 - This will be linked to (and helped by) the way in which we encourage people to share ideas, suggestions, questions and comment on any aspects of parish life. We are not just seeking to improve the ability of our Church to handle negative comments, but also to develop the ability of the Church to share all ideas.
2. If there are not known channels for people to share ideas and criticism in a constructive manner, their criticism will be dumped on people such as Parish Secretaries (because they answer the phone and are visible in the office), or people they know.
 - One concern is that these people may not be equipped to handle criticism.
 - Another concern is that lack of clear channels will turn criticism into an undercurrent of negativity.
3. **We create a positive environment for sharing and receiving constructive criticism by such things as:**
 - Verbal and written encouragements to Church members, for them to share ideas and offer critical analysis.
 - By ensuring all leaders listen carefully to comments made.
 - By leaders being careful not to overreact nor reject ideas, without due consideration.

- By carefully explaining what is happening and why – not just once and not just by one method – use sermons, small groups, special gatherings, written information, etc.
 - By leaders admitting any mistakes they make.
 - By creating opportunities (questionnaires, meetings, feedback opportunities) so that people can easily share their perceptions, ideas, concerns, disagreements and criticisms.
4. **Bill Hybels writes** about a method he was using in 1993 to allow and encourage members of Willow Creek to share their criticisms in a positive manner. In an interview, printed in Leadership, Winter, 1993, “Standing in the Crossfire”, he says:

Once a month I stand in front of the whole congregation and emcee an open question-and-answer time for half an hour. People can ask anything and everything – financial questions, personal questions, rumour questions. If people feel hesitant to ask a question publicly, they can submit it in writing before the session. I address every question.

Recently, before one of these meetings, I reminded the congregation. “When you stand and ask your question, remember pastors have feelings too. So, if you’re going to come after me, remember my heart is as fragile as your own.”

Sometimes, though someone will ask a question that has an edge to it. When that happens I’ll ask that person to pose the question again, in a more careful way. That process is a subtle way of training the Church how to phrase disagreements so that no one is wounded and how to react when attacked.

Leadership Journal – comes quarterly from Christianity Today, Box 37060, Boone, IA 50037-0060, USA. It frequently has very useful articles to help us live out and lead in such things as hurts, criticism, conflict and other aspects of Church life.

EXERCISE 5:

The Way Our Church Approaches Criticism

Discuss Bill Hybels words, taken from the Leadership article “Standing in the Crossfire”, Winter, 1993. (as quoted in the previous section).

1. What is your response to Bill Hybels words?
2. How can we structure our Church and our lives, so that critical analysis has channels for expression?
 - How do we help our Church have a climate where people know that their observations, ideas and critical analysis are welcome?
 - What do we do so that people know how to share those things, where and to whom?
 - How do we give people an opportunity to share them?
 - How do we behave so that people know they will be heard and not criticized or rejected in return?

APPENDIX ONE: Responses to Exercise One

How we currently handle criticism

1. **The exercise asked:** Personally, how do we handle criticism?

- How do we respond?
- What do we feel?
- What are we tempted to do?

2. **Your responses.**

- We may have written things like

Anger	Numbness
Defending	Surprise
Worry	Embarrassment
Analysing	Shock
Hurt	Anxiety
Panic	Betrayal
Not sleeping	Blaming
Frustrated	Let down

- We may take it so personally that we feel like giving up.
- We may have expressed the **temptation to withdraw** into ourselves: from people, from that person, from ministry.
- We may have said we would **go to others**
 - Badly: ones we shouldn't go to.
 - Rightly: ones who can help us work it through.

Note: It is OK to recognize these things in us so that we seek to prevent the negative aspects from controlling our responses.

APPENDIX TWO:

Personal Reflection To Assist Our Growth

“WHEN CRITICISM COMES: UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING THROUGH OUR DEFENSIVENESS”

(Congregations Magazine November/December 1995)

It is worth taking time to work through the following exercise:

“To understand what happens when we “get defensive” and to find a different way of dealing with these reactions, I invite you to think of a recent confrontation when someone was angry with you or critical of you. Choose an incident that tugged at your defensive feelings and worried you afterward. With that image in mind, note on a piece of paper the following.”

1. When the person came to you
 - a. How did you feel?
 - b. How did you react physically (sweaty hands, etc)?
 - c. What did you say or do?

 2. Afterwards as you thought about it in off hours ...
 - a. How did you feel?
 - b. How did you react physically?

 3. Now as you look back ...
 - a. How do you feel about what happened?
 - b. Has there been closure to the incident?
-

APPENDIX THREE: The Bible And Criticism

From Exercise Two

This exercise was about the discovery of and reflection on biblical passages that help keep us in equilibrium when facing in criticism.

Others, who have done this exercise, came up with a number of passages including the following.

You may need to think carefully to see how some of the passages helped the group who suggested them.

- The Exodus story.
- Numbers 16.
- Deuteronomy 31:6.
- Joshua 1: 6-9.
- 1 Samuel 30:6.
- 2 Samuel 16: 5-14.
- Many Psalms, including 3, 23, 26, 46, 91, 121, 139.
- Proverbs 15; 27: 6; 24: 28.
- Job, especially 38-41.
- Isaiah 41: 10; 43: 1-3.
- Matthew 5: 11-48; 6: 25-34; 7: 1; 10; 11: 28-30; 18:15-20.
- Mark 7:31; 11.25.
- Luke 6: 3-7.
- John 14: 25-27; 15: 12, 18.
- Romans 5: 8; 8: 1, 8, 28.
- 1 Corinthians 4: 3-4; 10: 13; 13.
- 2 Corinthians 7: 4.
- Galatians 2: 20; 5: 12; 6:1-5.
- Ephesians 3:16.
- Philippians 4: 6, 8-9.
- 2 Timothy 3: 10-13; 4: 3-5.
- Hebrews 4: 15; 10: 32-37; 12: 7; 13:17.
- James 1: 2-4, 17-19; 4: 11-12.
- 1 Peter 2: 9.

APPENDIX FOUR:

Responding In Different Ways To Different Types Of Criticism.

Quoting from "*Understanding Leadership*", Tom Marshall, Sovereign World, 1991, page 97-98:

Seek to discover the reason behind criticism.

Many times a criticism or the way it is expressed does not represent the real problem but is only a result or a symptom of the real issue. Discovering the real reasons that lie back of a question or a criticism will often condition the response that is appropriate in the circumstances. The same thing said by different people may need quite different responses. For example, the reason for a particular criticism may be:

- a) *Fear of change or fear of the future. In this case what is called for is reassurance.*
- b) *Mistake, misunderstanding or lack of comprehension. This calls for information or explanation or enlightenment.*
- c) *Loss of heart in the face of difficulties or defying circumstances. The need for people affected to be encouraged or reassured.*
- d) *Perceived error or danger. The criticism needs to be heeded and action taken to correct the fault or avoid the threat.*
- e) *A diversion, or a profitless dispute that will achieve nothing. The criticism needs to be refuted otherwise it will dissipate people's energies and obstruct progress.*
- f) *An expression of hurt or woundedness because of what the person has experienced from leaders, present or past. In some cases leaders may need to acknowledge responsibility, seek forgiveness and bind up the wounds. In other cases, there may be a need for healing although no blame attaches to the leaders, for example, a person who has been passed over for a position they desired may be hurt thereby even though the decision was a correct one.*
- g) *Wrong attitude or wrong spirit, for example, envy, jealousy, contention or divisiveness. These need to be opposed. At the same time leaders must be wary of characterizing criticism as being wrongly motivated when the reaction to it may be their own defensiveness, or pride or insecurity.*

The best advice is that conclusions as to motives and attitudes should be cautiously and tentatively arrived at out of honest endeavours to treat the situation under one or other of the other heads listed above. But deciding motives should never be the first assumption; we are rarely able to be sure of even our own motives and therefore generally poorly placed to judge others.

Tom Marshall, "Understanding Leadership"

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- Number 14 "Managing Conflict in the Church"
- Number 15 "Every Member Ministry – Making It Work"
- Number 16 "Criticism – How Do We Respond?"

Please note that Number 7 on Planning is not available in the Electronic Series.
