



Editor's Note

The other day, a neighbor walked into my yard and greeted me. "I need a couple of bolts to fix my lawn mower," he said, holding out the broken ones. "Glad to help," I said, as we entered my basement workshop. Opening one of a dozen drawers filled with various sizes of bolts, mostly old but a few new, he picked out the ones he needed.

I noticed he chose the shiny new looking ones. He's a banker, not a craftsman. How could he know that the metal in the old ones

is usually stronger than ones made today? It reminded me of our Lord's reference to the householder "who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old" (Matt. 13:52). We need both.

One mission of ESN is to help assembly elders by setting out things new and old. We pray that both the timeless Scriptures and some relevant ideas for application in today's world will be a blessing. That's also a prayer request!



Leadership Principles

How Should Elders Handle Criticism? *by Jack Spender*

No one likes to be criticized, and the word has such negative connotations that it's hard to imagine any good coming from it. The dictionary gives the meaning, "to express disapproval of someone or something based on perceived fault."

One would like to think that in the light of such verses as Eph. 4:32—"And be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you"—criticism would have no place in the church. Alas, such is not the case, even in the most pious settings. Sooner or later, everyone receives criticism, and the elders are no exception. So how can a godly leadership team handle criticism in a Christ-honoring and constructive manner?

Here is a checklist of 7 practical steps or guidelines to follow. I am taking obvious things for granted, such as prayer, study of Scripture, open communication, etc.

1. Avoid It

Oddly enough, the list needs to start here, because once we accept the fact that it's impossible to avoid all criticism, we must also admit that we can avoid much of it. Failure to keep our word, simple acts of discourtesy, and unwillingness to confront small problems before they get bigger invite criticism. Sometimes when I'm tugging at stubborn weeds in my garden, I remember that there was a day not so long ago that a quick swipe of my hoe would have removed them when they were tiny. Don't invite criticism!

2. Face It Head-On

The example set by the leaders in the early church in Acts 6 is worth pondering. Certain widows in the church felt neglected, and began to complain. Doubtless, the apostles bore the brunt of it, as is usually the case. The apostles

did not ask for the names of the complainers! They did not blame subordinates who were involved in the ministry. Nor did they discourse about spiritual warfare or the need to be thankful for what blessings we do have. They wisely understood that if some people had a perception of unfairness, there likely was a problem, and they took action. Remember, admitting there's a problem is often 51% of the solution.

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3. Investigate It

Unless it's frivolous, and doesn't merit your time, there are things that should be weighed, such as the source, the manner in which given, and the basis, i.e., is it founded on facts or emotions? The goal here is not to discredit the criticism, but to discern how seriously to take it and how best to deal with it. Remember the need for a plurality of witnesses is biblical (I Tim. 5:19).

4. Where Necessary, Own Up to It

Terms like repentance, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, restitution should be understood and practiced by believers. The goal is to "clear the air." And, contrary to what we might think, diligence in this will increase the respect and support of the leadership by the majority of the saints. Ask yourself how long

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How many times have you heard this seemingly hollow greeting—"Sorry I'm late"—by someone who is notoriously late—to everything? You probably didn't say it, but you thought it nonetheless: "Was that a genuine apology?" You reason if they are truly sorry, wouldn't there be an effort to change? But because the person does not, you conclude a lack of sincerity. Obviously, there are situations beyond our control which make us late (e.g., a soiled diaper, a flat tire, heavy traffic, etc.). Grace and patience should abound at such times. But how do we help a person who is persistently late adapt a more punctual lifestyle?

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Why Is Punctuality Important?

Before answering this question, it should be understood that believers should be ruled by the Lord and not the clock. It is possible to become so focused on punctuality that we can become anxious about it and put undue stress on others by our staunch conviction. Adjusting meeting schedules if saints spend extra time in prayer or if a preacher speaks longer than expected is wise. Nevertheless, the very definition of a church meeting demands that we be time-focused: "when you come together as a church," "when you come together in one place" (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:23). For the church to come together in one place means that all the saints need to be present at the same time.

The Lord Jesus exemplified this truth when He met with His disciples for the Passover meal and to institute the Lord's Supper: "When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with

Him" (Luke 22:14). Though the disciples did not have smart phones or wristwatches, they knew that there was an appointed time that the Lord wanted to meet with them—and they were all there. The same is true each Sunday when saints in various locales gather to be with and to remember Him (Matt. 18:20).

Paul also reminds us that, "God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14:33). What generally happens if an assembly repetitively delays a meeting to accommodate the chronic latecomer is that others begin to adapt the same being-late disposition (because they reason, "We are not really late"). After this, the compulsive tardy person realizes that the meetings actually do not start on time, so they arrive even later. In other words, a pattern of delaying church meetings to oblige a tardy person can cause disorder. Let us remember that when two or three believers have come together in the Lord's name, He is present, which means the Lord is never late to be with us.

With this said, it is good to remember that His meetings should be governed by grace and peace also. For example, it would be ungracious to commence the Lord's Supper, just because it is the exact appointed time if there were saints in the foyer hanging up their coats and would be joining the group in a minute or two. This is seen in Paul's exhortation about the meal the saints enjoyed together: "My brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another" (1 Cor. 11:33). When we have an opportunity to give preference to others we should do so with willing hearts—let others go first. However, when we gather to praise and

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worship our Savior, He should have our preference, including our time!

Evaluating Chronic Tardiness

There are several reasons why people can settle into a tardy lifestyle. First, it may be the accepted culture norm. We were once told by missionaries that people in their country generally arrived an hour late to everything, including the church meetings. While we cannot change such a cultural dynamic, we can encourage a different pattern of thinking for believers that are chronically late when they are expected not to be.

Second, there may be a lack of time management skills. The late individual is not able to conceptualize all the needed tasks, or their sequential order, or the potential "what ifs" to produce a schedule that ensures promptness.

Third, the late individual has the organizational aptitude to be prompt, but lacks the discipline to follow through.

Fourth, the late individual simply views their time as being more valuable than others.

How people respond to exhortation about their tardiness usually reveals what their root problem actually is. A tardy person lacking organizational skills might respond by saying, "I know, but no matter how hard I try, I am still always late." The individual without discipline might say, "You are right, I just get so focused on what I am doing, that I lose track of time." If pride is the root problem then the exhorted person will be defensive and

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Sorry I'm Late (continued from page 2)

may even attack the exhorter. "By pride comes nothing but strife, but with the well-advised is wisdom" (Prov. 13:10).

Strategies for Promptness

If the tardy individual lacks management skills, then counsel from someone who has them should be sought. Listing all the tasks in order with an expected amount of time to accomplish each will help the individual learn to work backwards to determine when they need to start getting ready. They should be taught to think through what issues might randomly arise, and what would be an acceptable buffer of time to pad their schedule to provide for them. If experience proves the "what if" buffer is inadequate—increase the padding. The problem may stem from the individual trying to do too much; in such cases, a prioritization of activities should occur to remove the clutter from one's life. People who have too many things to do rarely do any of them well.

For the individual who lacks disci-

pline, more accountability is needed. This may be gained through more unyielding measures or by asking others to be involved. For example, if the tardy person is a heavy sleeper, then solutions that force the person to get out of bed when necessary should be employed. If multiple alarm clocks do not stir the slumbering person, then perhaps turning on bright lights or a fan to blow air in one's face (or whatever causes discomfort) should be tried. Additionally, dads can give a 15-minute warning and then a 5-minute warning to the entire family in order to depart for church meetings at a specific time. This ensures that everyone is aware of the timing.

Individuals who value their own time more than others need to adopt the mind of Christ in serving others: "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of

others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:3-5). Thinking that our time is more important than others is contrary to Christ's example. He humbled Himself and stepped into time to suffer and die on our behalf.

While visiting an assembly in New England, I noticed a husband, his wife, and their five young children quietly sitting in the front row about ten minutes before the Lord's Supper was to begin. Afterwards, I complimented the father for his good leadership. He told me that he wanted to set a good example for his children to follow and to show others that habitually being late was a choice. The same principle applies to church elders; punctual leaders set a good example for the sheep to follow.

May we have grace not to be anxiously ruled by time, but also the discipline to manage time in such a way that Christ is honored and others are encouraged, rather than frustrated. 

Criticism (continued from page 1)

it's been since the elders of the church admitted they made a mistake!

5. Learn From It

Here is where we so often miss out! Once we determine that the other party has done the greater wrong, we mentally dismiss the matter until they want to face up. However, even if our part in the wrong is only 10%, should we not want to settle that small part? Perhaps in the process, a door might be opened for the other person to take some steps. Likely the woman in our Lord's parable (Matt. 13:33) reasoned that her hidden leaven (yeast) was only a very small piece, but what a surprise she had when she opened the flour bin!

6. Move On

Despite our best efforts at reconciliation and peacemaking, some people will choose to move on from our friendship or fellowship. Sometimes they carry their bitter spirit away with them to the next stop. But if our conscience is right before the Lord that we have done what we could, it's time to leave it with the Lord. There is work to be done and new

challenges to attend to, and once again we will see the appreciation and support of those who remain and work along side of us. The father in the parable of the lost son in Luke 15 did not run down the road begging the son to change his mind.

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7. Refrain From It

The first point reminds us to avoid being needlessly criticized by others. This last point reminds us not to become critical ourselves! A critical spirit can become an enemy stronghold (see II Cor. 10:4). Our words must be good and edifying, ministering grace to the hearers (Eph. 4:29). And even if our assignment is like that of Jeremiah, to bring a message of warning and impending danger, we can still rejoice in the Lord, knowing He knows the motive of our hearts.

Conclusion

While we're on the subject, spiritual leaders are responsible for the "equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry..." (Eph. 4:12), and this matter is no exception. Doing the Lord's work faithfully requires keen discernment in many areas. The word of truth must be rightly divided (II Tim. 2:15), and the condition of the flock known accurately (Prov. 27:23). Careful judgment in relational matters, enjoined in I Cor. 6:1-5, is an important part of elders' work, and will at times be stigmatized by shallow people as "criticism." This goes with the Lord's work!

Saints must be mature to distinguish between hurtful criticism and healthy discernment on the part of their leaders, and leaders must always be watchful that a critical spirit is not allowed to thrive under the cloak of discernment. An assembly that is characterized for the most part by a sweet spirit of love, acceptance and forgiveness, will be a fragrant testimony to God, to the saints, and in the world. 

Wives' Corner

The Journey of Faith: Sarai *by Marti Miller*

Often, when I struggle through something, I stop and think, *who in scripture experienced a situation that could be similar to what I am going through?* In the last publication I referenced Sarai and her journey of faith. Scripture gives a few glimpses into her life and yet I wonder, as she followed Abram from place to place, how did she feel? What did she think?

God called Abram to leave his country and family behind for “a land that I will show you.” The promise “to make a great nation” included her. We are told in Genesis 11:30, “but Sarai was barren; she had no child.” I can imagine that this news gave her great hope and ignited an array of hopes and dreams.

Sarai followed Abram in his obedience; did she seek to obey and know God as he did? She needed to learn that God’s promise of provision belonged to her, personally. Her barrenness must change for them to have as large a lineage “as the dust of the earth” (Gen. 13:16). I believe from the moment God first called Abram, to the fulfilling of that promise, they both would learn much about God.

Remember the famine and how Abram took them down to Egypt? Scripture tells us that Abram expressed concern for his own safety because of her beauty. “Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake,

and that I may live because of you” (Gen. 12:13).

Hold on! That seems like faulty reasoning to me. Trusting in God’s promise to provide would include His care and protection of them throughout life. God showed Abram “it would be well with him” not because of Sarai’s identity but because of who He is! God not only stepped in to protect Sarai but to teach Abram that His promise included His care over them at all times! “But the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (Gen. 12:17). I imagine that this personal protection from God left a huge imprint on Sarai. He revealed Himself strong on her behalf as well as Abram’s. Dear sisters, God’s care for you is just as personal.

The years went by, her childbearing years slipped away and she doubted God’s plan. In Genesis 16, Sarai began to manipulate the situation and even persuaded Abram to agree to her reasoning, faulty though it may have been. We see her express doubt, make accusations, blame Abram, display bitterness, jealousy and even laugh at the promise of a child in her old age. Was she trusting God? When we doubt God, we step in to take control. Trusting God was hard! It took

Sarai years of personal refinement that led to a name change and her very own blessing! “And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her” (Gen. 17:15,16).

Believe in God and live in the good of who you are in Him. Sarai, meaning “my princess,” became Sarah, “a princess.” John Philips says, “The personal name

became the positional name. That is what the grace of God does for a person. It ennobles.” You and I also stand in this privileged place. What is more noble than to be called “the children of God” (1 John 3:1) or an heir according to the promise (Gal. 3:29)?

In 1 Peter 3:5-6, Sarah is even regarded as a “holy woman” who trusted in God, being submissive as she obeyed Abraham, calling him lord! When Sarah laughed, the Lord asked; “Is anything too hard for the Lord”? No, dear sister. Remember today, God’s heart is to “perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. (1 Pet. 5:10) My prayer is that each of you would find your heart strengthened in the loving and personal care of your kind and gracious God as you serve alongside your “Abraham.” 

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THE SMALL PRINT

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