

Leadership Principles & the Pastoral Epistles – 2015 WEEK 7: DEAL PROPERLY WITH OPPONENTS

Interpretive comments on 2 Tim. 2:23-26

Read 2:23-26. This sixth and final element of effective spiritual leadership in 2 Tim. 2 concerns how we are to respond to people who oppose God from *within* the church. This passage is one of several similar passages in the Pastoral Epistles which describe a *spectrum* of corrective responses to such people.

Generally, Timothy is to combine “preaching” the Word with “reproving, rebuking and exhorting” errant Christians with great patience and instruction (2 Tim. 4:2). Good leaders ask their people how they’re doing with the Lord, and they urge their people to keep taking scary steps of faith (and encouraging them when they do). (This is a key aspect of the “mother-father” metaphor of leadership Paul describes in 1 Thess. 2:7-12.) It is striking how few adult home group leaders seem to do this! Even churches that are spiritually vital soon become stagnant without this ministry.¹

Timothy and Titus are to authoritatively challenge (“prescribe;” “teach;” “exhort;” “reprove”) Christians to represent Jesus well in their social roles, and to do their best to overcome Christians’ resistance to this (1 Tim. 6:1,2; Titus 2:15; see also 1 Thess. 2:11,12; Acts 20:31).

Timothy is to “instruct” certain people not to teach strange doctrines (1 Tim. 1:3).

Timothy is to publicly “rebuke” leaders who continue in sin (1 Tim. 5:20).

Timothy is to “correct” people who have become opponents within the church (2 Tim. 2:23-26). These are people who are both in *sin* (because they need to *repent*) and in *error* (because they need to be *instructed*). They are in serious sin and error, to the point that they have been trapped and “drugged” by Satan to be used as his tools (2:26)—presumably to ravage the church.

Titus must “silence” rebellious teachers (Titus 1:10,11).

Titus is to “reject” factious people after duly warning them (Titus 3:10). Paul refers to having disfellowshipped Hymenaeus and Alexander for blasphemy/false teaching (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17,18).

The frequency of these passages suggests that this “ministry of correction” is both a *common* and *important* feature of church leadership. Paul’s urgent reminders also suggest that we are prone to *neglect* this ministry. We must be *willing* to do this, and we must be *able* to do it in a godly way!

¹ “As the history of New Life church unfolded and the church grew rapidly, I think in reflection that much of my contribution lay right here. I was surprised at how, lacking exhortation and admonition, a newborn, renewal church like ours can drift into complacency.” C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1999). p. 79.

Why is this so important?

Because we will misrepresent God if we don't do this. God is both holy and loving. As leaders, we are called to accurately represent both His holiness and His love. We don't have the luxury to choose one or the other. It is a sobering thing to misrepresent God! Moses incurred God's severe discipline because he struck the rock in anger (Num. 20:2-12). Likewise, Eli was severely disciplined by God because he did not discipline his sons when they were wicked priests (1 Sam. 2:27-34). God is zealous for His reputation!

“We live in an age where people do not successfully integrate holiness and love. This is causing havoc in the theology and practice of Christians in almost every area of life. This affects leadership. Just as God's nature is characterized by perfect mingling of holiness and love, leaders also must exemplify this dual nature. We respond to God's holiness with respect. We ‘worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28-29). We respond to God's love with intimacy. So ‘we have confidence [or boldness] to enter the Most Holy Place’ (Heb. 10:19). In the same way, the relationship between a leader and those led is characterized by respect and intimacy.

But today we find it difficult to integrate holiness with love . . . How can leaders who are intimate with those they lead win their respect? By integrating holiness with love . . . Leaders, because of their holiness, must “*correct*” and “*rebuke*” (2 Tim. 4:2). Their intimacy does not prevent their responding to error and sin with indignation. The ability to encourage and to rebuke is essential for integrating love and holiness. These two ministries are placed together by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:2. The leader's hatred of wrong will build respect if backed by exemplary living and loving concern for wrongdoers . . . If mingled with true concern, holiness will win affection and result in a marked influence for good in the lives of all who follow such leaders.”²

Because our church will become sick and ineffective if we don't do this. Church history is replete with examples of whole churches and denominations which have succumbed to impotence, immorality and/or apostasy simply because their leaders failed to properly oppose sin and error (cf. 2 Tim. 4:1-4; 1 Cor. 5:1-8; Rev. 2:14,15,20). It is not the presence of sin and error in the church, but the *toleration* and *justification* of it, that gradually destroys spiritual health and fruitfulness. This is true individually and corporately. (EXAMPLES)

Because Christians are more likely to repent if we do this (2:25,26). This is the main point of the passage. Though they are trapped and drugged by Satan because of their volitional sin and error, God can still deliver them by helping them to repent. And although only God can do this, He does it *through* leaders who represent His truth and love properly (“if perhaps”). This is a sobering responsibility—we can make it easier or more difficult for opponents to repent by how we respond to them!

² Ajith Fernando, *Reclaiming Friendship* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1993), pp. 50-54.

Because others in the church will often be influenced by how we handle these situations (1 Tim. 5:20). People in the church need to see both that we are standing on what God says (rather than opinion or compromise) and that we have a genuinely loving and redemptive attitude. If we do both, we can have a good conscience when and if onlookers leave the church. If we do only one or neither, we have actually helped Satan ravage the flock!

This is real servant work! No wonder Paul switches metaphors from household vessels to bond-servants (2:24 – *doulos*). A Christian *doulos* is “one who gives himself up to another’s will . . . who is devoted to another to the disregard of one’s own interests.” (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance) Others (including the people who are closest to the situation and should deal with it) will often be unwilling—leaving you to do the “dirty work.” *Yet to be ommissive in this ministry is to be disloyal to Christ, unloving to people—and it is enough to ruin the ethos of your entire home group!*

In our opinion, this is one of the most common weak areas in adult home groups. We’re not sure why this is the case—there are probably many factors. Sinful people are innately aversive to correction. Our culture exacerbates this aversion because it is relativistic, individualistic, and therapeutic (EXPLAIN EACH). Our culture also places a premium on personal comfort—and confrontation is the antithesis of this! Also, while young people are more used to being corrected, adults are not. But whatever the factors, this remains a key responsibility for Christian leaders.

How can we become more effective in this ministry?

This is a complex issue. There are many variables (e.g., severity of the issue; position &/ influence of the opponent; how many are involved; etc.), so there is no formula.³ Consider these scriptural principles:

Be sure that you have friends who are also committed to help you with this ministry (SPOUSE; CO-LEADERS; FRIENDS). Such friendships are important for many reasons. Through them we model receiving correction and experience its benefits (which motivates us to provide this for others), and we support one another when we need to correct others in our home group.⁴ Conversely, without these partners, we will be far less likely do this difficult work.

If you are not living under God’s grace, you will probably handle this ministry poorly. This ministry is therefore a key arena for our own sanctification!

You will tend to *avoid* them (because you fear their disapproval or others’ disapproval if they leave), or *write them off and drive them out* (because you are threatened by them or self-righteously concerned with your own vindication). What is your

³ See Dennis McCallum, *Organic Discipleship* for an excellent section on confronting others.

⁴ “One of my co-pastors . . . labored with me in my chief role, as an affirmer of the brothers and sisters and as a confronter of my sins and theirs. Our being willing to do this impossible work was in itself an expression of God’s glory. For me it is natural to avoid conflicts. But through mutual admonition God prospered our work with a peace and a unity that would have been impossible (otherwise).” C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, pp. 79,80.

tendency? What is the character issue that is connected to it? What part of God's gracious provision do you need to affirm? What scary step of faith do you need to take?⁵

Be sure to pray beforehand! This is spiritual work, and spiritual work is birthed and bathed in prayer.

Pray about your own attitude toward them and ask the Lord to give you His "Good Shepherd" love for them. Repent of any sinful attitudes He exposes in you, but don't listen to Satan's accusations that this disqualifies you from correcting others.

Pray about your own fears. Consider the worst case scenario, and then remember that the Lord is with you and choose to trust Him to protect and uphold you. Reflect on situations in which people have repented—and the wonderful results (e.g., closer relationship; growth surge; impact on others, etc.).

Pray for wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit when you speak to them (Lk. 12:11,12 application).

Pray for spiritual protection for the whole situation.

Consider getting advice from other seasoned leaders beforehand. Ideally, they know you and the other person(s). If you seek this advice, be careful to give a full account of the situation—including your own mistakes and/or tendencies. And don't be surprised if they refuse to give you specific instructions. Do not quote/cite them unless they give you permission—speak from your own convictions!

Paul's words here provide us with three key guidelines:

Move toward them vs. withdraw from them, ignore the elephant in the room, etc. Paul calls on Timothy to take the initiative to speak to the opponents. Many leaders self-protectively look the other way and hope the problem will go away—but it usually doesn't. Then, when the problem becomes impossible to ignore, they intervene strongly out of nowhere. This is "Leave alone-zap"—and it is poor work. We have to be willing to wade into the mess when we see it, counting on God's power to protect and uphold us. When we have been guilty of omissive neglect, we should sincerely apologize for this.

Conduct yourself redemptively—with "kindness" (*epios* – mild, affable) and "patience" (*anexikakos* - forbearing of people's unkindness, patient toward their foolishness and tolerant of their foibles) and "gentleness" (*prautes* - humble, courteous and considerate rather than brash, haughty or rude; power under control for a redemptive purpose) vs. getting down in the mud with them being "quarrelsome," blowing up, being self-righteous, etc. If/when you blow it here, be sure to apologize promptly and sincerely (vs. withholding this because you fear you'll forfeit authority). This may make it easier for them to hear God's truth and more difficult to discount it as it comes through you (see below). We should also reflect

⁵ See C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*. pp. 114,115 for more on the relationship between willingness to confront others and living rooted in the God's grace.

on how patient and kind and gentle God has been with us when we have opposed Him.

Focus “vertically” on what God says by “teaching” (didasko – explaining what God says) and “correcting” (paideuo – practically applying God’s truth to their lives), calling them to “repentance” (in their heart attitude toward God) vs. mere external horizontal actions (e.g., meeting attendance), or how it affects you (“I’m disappointed”), etc. Their real issue is with God—not with you. You may need to cite objective actions or patterns of behavior, but these are symptoms of a wrong attitude toward God. What would it look like to “focus vertically?”

Ask/remind them of what *God says* about the issue, their attitude, etc. Humbly refer to scripture wherever possible. Make it clear that you are under God’s Word, and that you are only calling on them to join you under God’s Word. The power of God’s Word to convict others should encourage us in this work, even if we are not fast on our feet or persuasive orators.

Ask them what it looks like to trust God in this area. Chronic and serious behavioral sins usually stem from idolatry fueled by unbelief in God’s sovereign wisdom and goodness. Merely addressing wrong behavior without connecting this to mistrust in God is legalistic and will not help people truly change.

Ask them if they are willing to ask God to reveal His will on this issue—with an advance commitment to do what He says (Jn. 7:17; Jas. 1:5). This question is often very convicting because it exposes an unwillingness to trust/submit to God.

Ask them to pray with you during your conversation. This brings God directly into the conversation, and makes it crystal clear that this is primarily about our relationship with God. If they are unwilling to do this, consider asking why—and what vertical issues this may reveal.

Resist the temptation to “get it over with” in one conversation (2 Tim. 4:2b – “with great patience and instruction”). This is almost always selfish and/or self-protective. The goal is their repentance, not your convenience. You may need to ask them to prayerfully consider your input and get back together later to discuss the matter further. This communicates both that the issue is important (you’re not going away) and that you respect them to consider this carefully. Be sure to follow through on this!

If they respond negatively and leave fellowship, communicate firmly but redemptively (e.g., “I’m praying for you and want you to know I am ready to help when you decide you want to trust God in this area.”). Leaving may be better than remaining in a double-minded state. If the situation would have warranted formal church discipline, make it clear that they will need to resolve this with you before returning to fellowship.

If they respond negatively but stay, decide carefully your next step. If formal church discipline seems warranted, be sure to check with your consultant.

Formal church discipline is for serious commissive sin, *not* for chronic omissive sin.

But other sanctions for chronic omissive sin can be taken if judged to be

redemptive (e.g., discontinue discipleship; take out of public/leadership roles; challenge why they are coming to home group).

Consider carefully what you should or should not say to others about this situation. Avoid gossip or boasting. Also avoid staying silent when others need an explanation. Also, God may want you to share this experience to convict people about their softness, or to teach people about how to confront. In this case, there is usually no need to name names.