



Accountability:
The Mark of a Wise
and Protected Leader

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THE MARK OF A WISE AND PROTECTED LEADER

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In mid-January 2008, the Wall Street Journal published an article about church discipline, choosing for its focus a case in which a 71-year-old woman was expelled from her congregation. The article made almost no use of concepts that are central to church discipline—redemption, unity, and discipleship. Almost immediately, a small niche of the blog world erupted at the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of discipline. A few secular blogs picked up on the article, too, and they used it to bolster cynicism.

There are ways that leaders and church members can survive the pitfalls of conflict. In the article below, Ken Sande, president of Peacemaker Ministries, explains several steps that leaders can take to avoid destructive conflict.

Josh was slowly crumbling under a steady barrage of criticism. For a few weeks after he began as pastor, the people at his new church seemed friendly and supportive. But Josh soon discovered that many of them were perpetually dissatisfied. They constantly complained about weak sermons, unmet needs, or a lack of vision and growth.

The elders did little to help the situation. They failed to confront gossip and slander, and seemed to accept accusations against their pastor as being true until he proved his innocence. He spent hours each week responding to complaints, and then the cycle started all over again. Josh might have lasted longer, but he saw how bitter his wife had become toward the church, and he handed in his resignation.

Glenn's church had the opposite problem. His elders supported him so consistently that they could not admit any wrongdoing on his part. They stifled questions and concerns about his leadership and minimized his mistakes. They sent a clear message that any disagreement with Glenn damaged the unity of the church.

When a woman accused Glenn of inappropriate conduct during counseling, the elders assumed she had imagined it. When another woman made a similar complaint, the three elders who were closest to Glenn volunteered to investigate. After a few conversations with Glenn and the woman, they accepted his version of events and asked her to leave the church. It was not until Glenn was caught in a motel room with a third woman that the elders finally admitted their pastor had a problem.

Chris, on the other hand, is blessed to serve a church where the leaders understand his weaknesses and are committed to helping him develop and use his gifts to the fullest. They evaluate and affirm his work regularly, and they do not hesitate to respectfully point out areas where he has erred or needs to grow. They have taught the congregation how to express questions and concerns respectfully, which helps to prevent a buildup of disagreements.

When Chris was accused of failing to fulfill an important pastoral responsibility, the elders thoroughly investigated the matter. When they concluded that the complaint was legitimate, Chris accepted their judgment and willingly confessed his failure to the entire church. Instead of losing respect, both Chris and the elders gained credibility as the congregation saw their commitment to genuine accountability.

I was personally involved in each of these situations, and I have seen these patterns repeated again and again. Every year hundreds of churches and ministries are thrown into turmoil when someone criticizes or raises serious questions about the conduct of a pastor or ministry executive. All too many of these situations end in resignation, dishonor, or division—usually because leadership teams commit one of two major errors.

UNDER-PROTECTING YOUR LEADER

The first error is to *under-protect* the leader who is questioned or accused of wrongdoing. Under-protecting a leader may involve allowing gossip and rumors to spread unchecked, jumping to conclusions about a leader's guilt, or failing to give him a meaningful opportunity to defend himself. It may also involve expecting or allowing a leader to spend significant amounts of time responding to trivial or unsubstantiated criticisms voiced by a few dissatisfied people.

These patterns can lead to a “culture of criticism” that will wear down most leaders. When leaders are subjected to ongoing criticism, their credibility is needlessly eroded; this can diminish trust, commitment, and enthusiasm throughout their church or ministry. When leaders spend many hours responding to petty complaints, their effectiveness and productivity usually suffers. And if they are eventually forced out of office by continual complaints or because they were not given a fair chance to defend themselves, their supporters will often launch a campaign to punish the remaining leadership team.

OVER-PROTECTING YOUR LEADER

The second error that many churches and ministries make is to *over-protect* their leaders. They develop a self-confidence and blind loyalty that compels them to become defensive and automatically “circle the wagons” when a leader is questioned or accused of wrongdoing. They assume the challenge must be unfounded and immediately look for ways to minimize it or explain it away. They may rely on second-hand information or simply accept the leader's interpretation of his accuser's words and motives. And sometimes in an effort to justify or protect the leader, they attempt to silence, find fault with, or otherwise discredit or penalize the person who brought the accusation. As Jesus would put it, rather than humbly seeking to discern the “planks” in their leader's or their own eyes, these leadership teams jump immediately to pointing out the “specks” in the eyes of others (Matt. 7:3-5).

This excessively protective pattern can create a “culture of denial,” where differences and problems are automatically minimized or concealed. When there is some truth in a complaint, over-protection prevents a leader from addressing a problem in its early stages, when small changes on his part might easily lay the matter to rest. If a serious complaint is true, circling the wagons can have even worse consequences. It will delay needed changes, aggravate or multiply harm to others, and diminish the credibility of the people who should have been holding the leader accountable in the first place.

Even if accusations against a leader are largely unfounded, over-protection can still cause significant damage. When sincere concerns and complaints are automatically rejected, members will feel that their voices don't matter and give up on expressing concerns. When an investigating team fails to address complaints in a clearly objective manner, a cloud of doubt will often be left hanging over both the leader and the ministry itself. These doubts accumulate over time and steadily diminish the leader's reputation both inside and outside the church or ministry. In addition, if an organization develops a reputation for deflecting questions and making superficial investigations, it may lack credibility when more serious issues must be addressed in the future.

RESOLVING DIFFERENCES IN A CULTURE OF PEACE

Both of these errors—under-protection and over-protection—can be avoided if churches and ministries replace a culture of criticism or denial with a culture of peace, where both leaders and members are equipped and encouraged to discuss differences and resolve leadership complaints as well as other conflicts in a biblical manner. There are several concepts that are especially important when preparing people to deal constructively with differences or concerns about leadership.

1. Teach people to live out the gospel in all of their relationships.

Every Christian leader will stumble and fall at times—just think of Moses, David, Peter, and Paul! Therefore, people should be regularly reminded that their leaders, like everyone else, need the benefits of the gospel on a daily basis. This does not mean that we simply ignore wrongdoing or fail to exercise appropriate discipline. What it means is that we approach every situation in the light of the cross, eagerly looking for ways to bring God's truth, grace, mercy, and forgiveness to bear in a way that reveals the redeeming love of Christ (Eph. 4:29-32; 2 Cor. 2:7; 1 John 1:8-9).

2. Train all of your people, and especially your leaders, how to respond to conflict biblically so that they can put off worldly reactions to conflict, such as accusing, manipulating, and controlling, and work together to resolve their differences in a way that shows the wisdom and power of Christ in their lives (Matt. 5:9). This teaching may be summarized in several foundational principles of peacemaking, and may be studied more deeply through comprehensive Sunday school classes or small group Bible studies, or through advanced training in peacemaking.

3. Teach people to shun gossip and slander, especially against leaders.

Scripture warns us that the tongue is like a spark that sets whole forests on fire (James 3:5-6). These sparks could be substantially reduced by regularly teaching people to avoid speaking or listening to gossip or slander, to talk personally and privately with those who may have erred instead of talking about them, and to speak or write only words that will reflect well on Christ and benefit others (Prov. 16:28; 26:20; Eph. 4:15, 29).

4. Repeatedly commend the habit of making “charitable judgments.”

A “charitable judgment” is an inclination to believe the best about others and look for the best in others until clear facts prove otherwise (see Matt. 7:1-2, 12; 1 Cor. 13:7). This inclination protects people from jumping to conclusions or speculating about other people's motives, which only God knows for certain (see the booklet *Charitable Judgments: An Antidote to Judging Others*).

5. Encourage people to distinguish between style and substance.

Many complaints against leaders arise because church members or ministry staff are offended by a leader's personality or leadership style (2 Cor. 10:1, 10). While it is sometimes helpful to talk privately with a leader to discuss personal preferences, personality and style issues should not be elevated into allegations that a leader has sinned or committed a substantive wrong.

SUPPORTING LEADERS

As the apostle Paul revealed in his letters, Christian leaders are often exposed to criticism, complaints, and conflict. There are several ways that churches and ministries can support their leaders as they deal with this occupational hazard.

1. Encourage leaders to be “approachable.”

When church and ministry members feel that it is safe for them to approach their leaders with concerns or even criticism, there is a much greater likelihood that personal issues or offenses will be resolved personally, quickly, and constructively. In order to gain a reputation for being “approachable,” a leader needs to cultivate a number of Christ-like characteristics, which are described in detail in the booklet *Approachability: The Passport to Real Ministry and Leadership*.

2. Establish meaningful, constructive accountability.

Only a fool, or a person who does not understand the doctrine of sin, will surround himself with people who will always agree with him (2 Tim. 4:3). If leaders hold one another to a high standard (1 Cor. 4:2; James 3:1), develop relationships of genuine love and trust, and respectfully correct one another when they stumble (Ps. 141:5), many leadership failures can be prevented or resolved in their early stages.

3. Provide leaders with regular, performance evaluations.

Candid performance evaluations conducted in the spirit of Ephesians 4:15 and 4:29 can provide encouraging affirmation of strengths and successes, and address weaknesses or failures in a positive manner instead of waiting for problems to build to explosive levels. When a leader is graciously encouraged to improve in one or two specific qualities each year, he can experience noticeable growth and continue to flourish in his ministry year after year.¹

4. Shield leaders from minor complaints.

In a large church or ministry, it is unrealistic to expect the senior pastor or CEO to respond personally to every complaint. Therefore it may be necessary to appoint a spe-

¹For example, Peacemaker Ministries requires that “The Board Executive Committee shall perform an annual “360 degree” performance evaluation of the President, seeking candid input from the President’s family, pastor, spiritual accountability partner, Ministry executive team, other Directors, and any other person the Committee deems appropriate. At the beginning of each twelve-month evaluation cycle, the Committee shall establish specific written criteria and expectations to serve as the basis for the evaluation. The evaluation process will seek to reinforce specific leadership strengths, identify areas of weakness, and propose specific growth plans. Each year the President will be encouraged to focus deliberately on improving one or more specific areas of leadership, and to report to the Board on his progress.”

cific person (such as a member of a church's Peacemaking Team) who can respond to initial complaints against top leaders. It is essential that this person not show favoritism toward leadership (Lev. 19:15; James 2:1). This person can often resolve minor issues and misunderstandings, so only serious unresolved complaints would have to be brought to leaders' attention.

5. Admonish people who persist in making inappropriate complaints.

If people are found to have a habit of making trivial or unsubstantiated complaints against leaders, it is appropriate to admonish them, both for their sake and that of your church or ministry. If they persist in this conduct, the leadership team may need to implement more deliberate discipline to help them understand the seriousness of their sin (Gal. 6:1; see *Church Discipline: God's Search and Rescue Plan*).

6. Trust God to protect your reputation.

When leaders are accused of wrongdoing, they often become defensive, especially if they believe the charges are largely false. At times like this, leaders need to pray with St. Augustine, "Lord, deliver me from this lust of always vindicating myself." Another way to maintain a calm and objective confidence in the face of criticism is to spend time meditating on the promises God gives us in passages like Psalm 37, Proverbs 26:2, Isaiah 30:15, and Matthew 11:28.

SUPPORTING STAFF AND CONGREGATION

Many complaints against leaders are magnified or mishandled because people do not know how to express their concerns in a constructive way. Churches and ministries can provide needed encouragement, guidance, and support to their people in several ways:

1. Encourage and equip people to share concerns personally with their leaders.

Many complaints against leaders can be resolved if people are taught and occasionally reminded to go to leaders in private to graciously discuss issues that seem too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11; Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1; Prov. 22:11). This principle and other peacemaking concepts are summarized in the foundational principles of peacemaking. In depth teaching can be provided through Sunday school classes or small group Bible studies.

2. Encourage pure motives and respectful communication.

Proverbs 22:11 promises that "He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for a friend." The wisdom of this principle is illustrated again and again in Scripture (see, e.g., 1 Sam. 25:1-35; Dan. 1:1-16; Acts 24-25). Therefore, when

coaching people on how to bring a concern to a leader, encourage them to pray that God will help them to put off selfish motives, discern ways to bless the leader, and use words that are filled with wisdom and grace.

3. Provide informal assistance in challenging situations.

If a complaint is not satisfactorily resolved through a private conversation, or if a private meeting with the leader seems unwise,² it is appropriate for the concerned person to ask an objective third person go with him to discuss the problem with the leader (Matt. 18:16). This third person could be another leader, a member of the Human Relations staff, or someone in the church who has been trained in peacemaking and is part of their Peacemaking Team.

4. Develop a written grievance process.

In larger churches and ministries, it would be wise to incorporate the steps above into a written grievance policy that provides clear guidance on how to communicate and follow through on serious complaints. This is especially important in the context of employment relationships, which have special legal considerations.

RESOLVING FORMAL COMPLAINTS

When a complaint against a leader cannot be resolved through informal measures, and the matter is too serious to overlook, it will be necessary to implement a formal investigation and resolution process. This process is likely to end constructively if it provides everyone involved with the “3 P’s of Satisfaction:”

1. **Process satisfaction**, which requires a clear and fair process where everyone involved agrees that they have had a reasonable opportunity to present their side of the matter (1 Cor. 14:40);

2. **Personal satisfaction**, which requires treating everyone respectfully and equally, just as you would want to be treated (Matt. 7:12, James 2:1-4); and

3. **Product satisfaction**, which requires a final solution that is as just and equitable as is humanly possible (Micah 6:8; Prov. 28:5).

Even when people do not agree with the final outcome (product) of a complaint process, they will usually accept the result if the investigative team provided them with both process and personal satisfaction. I cannot emphasize this point too much: *give people process satisfaction and personal satisfaction, and they will usually be content, even if they disagree with your substantive decision.* If, on the other hand, a church or ministry fails to give these two levels of satisfaction, their leaders will often be forced to spend many hours responding to a proliferation of complaints against them.

²For examples of when it is appropriate to involve others immediately, see *The Peacemaker*, pp. 146-147

Each situation will have its own unique challenges and requirements, but there are several general principles that help to ensure overall satisfaction with a formal complaint process.

1. **“Do to others what you have them to do you”** (Matt. 7:12). Continually ask yourself, “If I had brought this complaint, or if I was the person accused of wrongdoing, how would I want the investigators to proceed at this particular step?”

2. **Appoint an investigative team whose objectivity and impartiality is beyond question** (Lev. 19:15). Tell both the accuser and the accused who has been nominated for the team. If either of them doubts the objectivity of a team member, make every reasonable effort, within the limits of your governing structure, to replace that team member with a more acceptable person.

3. **Seek advice or involvement from an outside conciliator.** When faced with particularly complex issues, it may be wise to involve a trained conciliator who can offer advice to all those involved in the situation and help them follow a process that promotes understanding and reconciliation (Prov. 13:10).³

4. **Insist on receiving firsthand information.** Do not accept hearsay, anonymous or secondhand reports (Deut. 19:15; 1 Tim. 5:19). Do not depend on the accuser’s interpretation of the leader’s conduct, or on the leader’s interpretation of the accuser’s words or motives. Go to original sources and hear the relevant information with your own ears.

5. **Avoid surprises.** Give people ample notice of planned meetings and discussions so that they have time to adjust their schedules and prepare what they want to say.

6. **Give the accused leader the opportunity to hear testimony against him and to make a prepared defense** (Deut. 19:16). In some cases it may be appropriate for investigators to gather preliminary information and talk with witnesses on their own, but the accused leader should eventually have the opportunity to hear and respond to any adverse witness or evidence that may be considered by those who will render a final decision in the matter.

7. **Take time to prayerfully seek consensus.** When an investigative or leadership team reaches a decision by a slight majority, it will often experience a severe backlash from people in the church or ministry who feel that they did not diligently seek God’s will in the matter. Ensuing attacks can overwhelm the remaining leadership team, which will be weakened by its own lack of unity. Therefore, unless extenuating circumstances necessitate an immediate decision by a simple majority, it is wise to take time to thoroughly investigate a complaint and prayerfully arrive at a decision that the entire team can sincerely support, especially if others are likely to criticize their judgment.

³Names of qualified conciliators may be requested from Peacemaker Ministries as well as from many denominational offices that have trained conciliator teams through our programs.

8. Fully explain the reasons behind your final decision. Avoid every appearance of a cover-up and leave no room for doubt as to why you decided as you did. List the central facts and guiding biblical principles, and explain your conclusions clearly and specifically.

9. If a leader has done something wrong, encourage him to confess it, take responsibility for his actions, and make needed changes (Prov. 28:13; 1 John 1:9). In cases of serious sin or violations of trust, or when there is a lack of genuine repentance, he may be required to resign his office. But when he clearly demonstrates a repentant and teachable spirit, and the offense does not automatically disqualify him for office, he should be reassured of God's grace and forgiveness, and given an opportunity to show how God is helping him to change. Similarly, if it is discovered that the accuser brought the complaint without valid grounds, he should be encouraged to repent and change.

10. Provide a way to appeal unresolved issues. When a dispute between a member and a leader in a local church cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties, Scripture indicates that the church should provide some kind of appeal process that allows the parties to appeal the matter to a person or persons who are not involved in the matter and whose objectivity is beyond question (see Exod. 18:19-26; Deut. 1:17; Acts 15:1-31). Most denominations have established processes for such appeals. Independent churches will still be operating within traditional independent ecclesiology if they establish processes to seek assistance from respected outside Christian leaders who can offer insights and advice (without dictating solutions) on how to resolve difficult internal conflicts involving questions of leadership, doctrine, or discipline.⁴ Regardless of polity, any church can adopt a policy to resolve legal disputes through biblical mediation or binding arbitration rather than taking the matter to civil court in violation of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.⁵

When these principles are consistently practiced, most complaints against leaders can be resolved in a redemptive manner. In the process, people can be encouraged to express their concerns productively. Leaders can be protected from false accusations and encour-

⁴For example, the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith provides that "In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not intrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers" (Chapter 26, section 15).

⁵Sample wording for a clause: "If we have a legal dispute with or within our church and cannot resolve it internally through the steps given above, we will obey God's command not to go into the civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Instead, we will submit the matter to mediation and, if necessary, legally binding arbitration, in accordance with the Rules of Procedure for Christian Conciliation of the Institute for Christian Conciliation, a division of Peacemaker Ministries (www.Peacemaker.net)."

aged to grow where needed. The reputation of the church or ministry can be preserved. And most importantly, God's name will be honored as his people respond to one another as Christ would, with justice, integrity, and righteousness.

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