

How to Deal with Those who Oppose Your Ministry

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The presentation that follows is based upon the premise that pastors will meet with some sort of opposition in the course of their ministerial pursuits. This opposition may range all the way from mild suggestions he do some things differently, to rather strong criticism, even sharp, stiff opposition. When any opposition involves the clear Word of God, a pastor has no recourse but to use God's Word to meet the opposition. But even then, the confrontation can be either evangelically firm or brutally legalistic. In "The Shepherd Under Christ" we find: "...it will be necessary to distinguish between the principles which are set forth in the Word of God...and the manner in which these principles are applied...The principles are timeless...(but) the manner in which these principles are applied...may change" (P. XIV-XV). Not to observe this distinction, the authors warn, may lead to abandonment of the principles of God's Word or to rigid legalism. Either extreme can arouse strong opposition against a pastor.

In addition to differences of opinion on how the principles of God's Word should be applied, there is much opportunity to invoke opposition in matters quite separate from the Word. For example, a pastor might debate a resolution regarding some secular matter or hold to an opinion on a matter not directly related to the Word and knowingly or unknowingly arouse mild to vigorous opposition toward himself. This opposition can carry over to spiritual matters when the parishioner refuses to listen to anything the pastor says because he is irritated with the pastor over a non-religious matter. From this we should see that even though a pastor has a privilege, and sometimes a duty, to take a strong stand in matters that are adiaphora, he should be aware that he might be inviting opposition that could affect his ministry negatively.

To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, a pastor will soon learn that he can please all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but hardly can he please all of the people all of the time. When you fail to please people, no matter how secular the issue may be, it could have serious results because rejection of the pastor may lead to rejection of God's Word and salvation.

Our human nature, filled with sinful pride as it is, will tell us that we are in the right; the opposition is in error; and if they truly believe we are in the wrong, it is up to them (him or her) to approach us to clear the air. We might even say that according to Matthew 18:15 they owe it to us to bring their grievances to us. But we should recognize that our position, our training, and, very likely, our stubborn insistence that caused the irritation in the first place might give us the appearance of being unapproachable. Jesus covered this situation when He said: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother *has something against you*, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23, NIV). Considerable legitimate debate could center on this passage regarding the precise meaning and implementation of it. That we cannot deny. But we have a hard time escaping the fact that if someone has something (Greek - *τις*) against us, we should do something about it.

The message of Scripture is important both in what it says and what it does not say. For example, the Lord says: "Honor thy father and thy mother..." It does not say, "...providing they meet certain moral standards." A child may recognize certain personality, even moral, weaknesses in his parents. But this does not give the child the right to dishonor his parents. Likewise, Matthew 5:23 does not say that the "something" must be identifiable as a sin. If your opposition has "something" against you, and you are aware of it, it is up to you to take steps to settle the matter. That is what Jesus said.

The great hindrance in carrying out this command of Christ is one's pride. Pride is a high opinion of oneself. Pride must have been in Eve's heart when she ate the forbidden fruit. She assumed for herself the right to be like God. This was arrogance of the highest sort. When she disobeyed God, she threw off His authority and tried to establish herself in His place. (Prof. W. Gawrisch has stated: "(Sin) is in reality an attempt to

dethrone God.” [“Eschatological Prophecies and Current Misinterpretations,” p. 24].) Without any difficulty we can see pride in Cain, the people who mocked Noah, those who built the Tower of Babel, and other Biblical personalities.—When the world today claims the right to live life contrary to the laws of God, arrogant pride is evident at its worst.

Humility is not one of the fruits of the Spirit directly mentioned by St. Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. But in verse 24 we read: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have *crucified their sinful nature* with its passions and desires” (NIV). Since sinful pride is part and parcel of human nature, genuine humility would follow upon crucifixion of one’s sinful nature. This conclusion is supported by the next two verses: “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (Gal. 5:25-26, NIV). That is just what we are talking about: Conceit (pride) which provokes people.

In one of his commentaries Lenski related a conversation with a Roman Catholic priest. The latter revealed that in his many years in the confessional he had heard of just about every sin imaginable. But never once had anyone confessed to the sin of pride. Is it unfair, unkind, or un-Scriptural to say that we are subject to the sin of pride? And that we are extremely reluctant to admit to this sin?

We may want to think we are exempt from sinful pride, but our parishioners will not be fooled. Not too long ago I heard a woman complain of her pastor saying that he is always right; he is never wrong. This was a parishioner’s opinion of her pastor. Another woman who in her 80 years has known many pastors in our Synod wrote to her grandson at our Seminary: “Sad to say, there are also arrogant men in the ministry, and they can only serve to give the whole group a ‘bad name.’” A third woman, whose brother served as a pastor in our Synod, spoke very sharply of her brother’s pride, arrogance and conceit which had hindered his ministry, strained his marriage, and wounded his family so severely that only judgment Day will reveal the damage.

We cannot, in all honesty, exempt ourselves from the danger of sinful pride. It is bound to be present within us and be at least somewhat of a barrier between us and some of our parishioners who are looking for the humility of Christ. Our Savior, “...humbled himself and became obedient to death---even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:8, NIV) Literally, He made himself low, which is the very opposite of elevating oneself. To follow Christ’s example we will have to lower ourselves from our exalted position of being a ‘reverend’ (someone worthy of deep awe and respect) and work toward being a servant, minister, pastor. With the same breath, however, we warn against trying to be humble by being very sociable and easy-going. An earthy worldliness can be just as bad as arrogant pride, perhaps worse.

All of the above is in no way intended to imply that the “opposition” to our ministry is innocent of sin and that the pastor is always the guilty party. In fact, “legally” the exact opposite will more likely be true. But it is incumbent upon the pastor to deal with this opposition, even when he is the “innocent victim.” Our point is that pride may keep the pastor from dealing with the problem or it may hinder his efforts. If that be the case, then his pride will make him just as guilty in the matter as his opponents. Therefore, the word of St. Paul to the Galatians is applicable: “Brothers, if a man is trapped in some sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself; you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each man should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each man should carry his own load” (Gal. 6:1-5, NIV).

Several personal experiences will serve to illustrate what has been presented above.

#1-Mr. G. was severely handicapped, unable to work, living on a small pension. He was regular in church attendance but welcomed a visit to his home now and then. Invariably he apologized that he could not give more money to the church. After a visit, as I was leaving, I noticed that Mr. G. had a new typewriter, and I said something to show that I was sincerely happy for him over this new acquisition. Several days later a member of our congregation visited Mr. G. and found that he was infuriated by my visit. He had taken my comment about his typewriter as a suggestion that he should give more to the church. He vowed he would never come to our church again.

Fortunately, the other member had the courage of reporting the matter to me, instead of peddling it all over the congregation, and I was able to call on Mr. G., explain to him what had happened, apologize, and ask his forgiveness. Although I felt I was innocent of any deliberate wrongdoing, I had obviously done something that threatened to keep Mr. G. from worship. Within weeks he suffered a stroke and because the problem was settled, I was a welcome guest at his bedside.

#2-Mrs. C. was a very loyal Christian and dedicated church worker. It was a real blow to her to learn that her daughter was pregnant before marriage. When I learned of her distress, I called by telephone to see if I could be of any service to her. She angrily said I had already done too much and she slammed down the receiver. I had no idea what she meant. Instead of letting the matter simmer, I hurried to her house. My presence at her door flustered her, but she invited me in and we were able to talk out the matter. Again, I felt innocent of wrongdoing, but I had done something to upset her (I think she felt I was pouring salt into her wound) so it was up to me to attempt to settle the matter.

#3-Mr. H. was a trustee who worked almost too hard for the church. Without consulting others he decided to expend congregation funds. Not only could we not afford the expense but, in my opinion, we could not allow such action without congregation approval. In a voters' meeting the congregation backed my position. I won the battle but lost the war, for though Mr. H. gave the appearance of friendliness, he refused to hold office until after I had left the congregation. Then I learned that he had been quite active in opposing my ministry, and I left a serious problem for my successor to clear up. My mistake lies in this that for several years suspected his opposition but did nothing about it.

Had I crucified my pride and in sincere humility approached the man, things might have been far different for me, him, and the entire congregation.

In summary of what has been offered so far, we list the following points:

- 1-In our ministry we can expect opposition:
 - a-because of the manner in which we apply Scriptural principles;
 - b-because of an adamant position on an adiaphoron. (Gal. 5:26)
- 2-The Word (Mt. 5:23) obligates us to attempt to settle the matter.
- 3-Sinful pride will interfere in our dealing with the opposition.
- 4-Sinful pride must be crucified (Gal. 5:24) and replaced with the humility of Christ. (Phil. 2:8)

What follows is an adaptation and expansion of material presented at a seminar held in Anaheim several years ago:

A-Thank God for the opposition.

St. Paul told the Thessalonians: "*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put off the Spirit's fire...*" (1 Thess. 5:16-19, NIV). When there is opposition of any sort, one's pride is bound to be wounded. One may react from the hurt with anger, sullenness, or stubborn determination. One certainly will not be inclined to be joyful. But by being thankful for opposition, a pastor will be in the right frame of mind and heart to deal with the matter.

When it comes to secular matters within the church, it could very well be that there are better ways of doing things than those thought of by the pastor. The master plan of the property, style of architecture, color schemes and a host of other matters may seem to be wrong (from the pastor's point of view), but is it necessary that decisions follow the pastor's desires and opinions? If parishioners complain at our selection of hymns, might we not be guilty of taking our favorites at their expense?—Criticism or opposition from our people over

matters such as these may well indicate that we are not in tune with our people. We may be riding roughshod over their feelings. Their opposition is communicating to us a valuable message for which we should be thankful.

When it comes to spiritual or doctrinal matters, we may be absolutely correct in principle but “dead-right” in the manner of applying the principle.—The most impressive and powerful safety message I have ever seen on TV showed the shiny boots of a highway patrolman as he walked the highway near the scene of an accident, kicking debris from a smashed car into the ditch. Then came a solemn voice: “This driver was right... dead right!” He had the right of way, took it, but did not live to tell about it.

In our ministry we come across many problems that require keen insight and delicate handling. The lodge, scouting, mixed marriages, alcoholism, pre-marital sex, abortion, illegitimacy, unfaithfulness, divorce; questions concerning altar, pulpit, prayer fellowship, close communion, who qualifies for baptism and marriage; the list has no end. Opposition in these matters could well be God’s way of showing us that we are not as evangelical as we should be.

If we are legalistic in our practice, that spirit of legalism is bound to find its way into our instruction classes, Bible classes, and sermons. In other words, what we do in a private or semi-private matter will reveal itself in our public ministrations.

Not one of us wants to be known as a legalist. But it is very easy to see how legalism (which seems to be the greatest cause of opposition in evangelical circles) can creep into one’s ministry without his even realizing it. For example, let us consider Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God...” (NIV). From young on, we have known that dynamite is an explosive that works with a fierce, blasting, burning power. Then when we took Greek, we learned that the word dynamite comes from the Greek δυναμις. Although the process is backwards, it is easy to see that a person can readily impose English meaning into the Greek and associate Gospel power with a blasting, burning, explosive power.

It is far better to think of Gospel-power in terms of today’s miracle drugs and medicines which demonstrate the power to heal. Or we might associate Gospel power with the bonding adhesives and cements that are on the market today. For the Gospel brings to us and binds to us the righteousness of God in Christ. But if we carry in our subconscious the concept that the Gospel is a dynamite power, we may be inclined to try to use the Gospel as a club or prod to achieve a sanctified life and/or impose our convictions on others. We should be genuinely thankful if there is opposition to anything in our ministry that smacks of “evangelical force.”

We can learn much from Jesus who used gentle, patient persuasion to accomplish His purpose with Nicodemus. Even though Jesus warned His followers that whoever did not confess Him before men would not be confessed before the heavenly Father, yet He did not force Nicodemus to separate himself from the Sanhedrin and identify with Him openly. It took the shock of Christ’s crucifixion and the work of the Holy Spirit to move Nicodemus to a bold, open identification with His Savior.—Thank God for the opposition that reveals weaknesses in our ministry.

B-Put yourself into the place of the opposition.

At some time or another a pastor will have to correct or discipline members of his congregation. Hopefully, correction is offered and received in the spirit of Christian love. When opposition, in the sense that we are using opposition, arises within the congregation, that opposition is taking on the role of a parishioner offering correction to the pastor. Then we should be ready to receive “discipline” in the same spirit we expect of our parishioners. However, because a parishioner is approaching his pastor—an awesome task for many parishioners—he may lack the tact we would use. He may have had to force himself to approach his pastor with a complaint, or he may have waited until the exploding point. In any case, his choice of words and the tone of his voice may seem anything but loving. But his difficulty in communicating with us in a kind, calm, loving manner does not invalidate his message. If we can empathize with him, we will understand what he is saying. If our critic has a point, we should set an example of listening and doing, just as we would have him do in our dealing with him.

Putting ourselves into the parishioner's place may help us to realize that he sees things in us that we do not see in ourselves. Undoubtedly, we can justify just about every word we speak and every action we take, but this does not make them right. We do well to bear in mind the warning of King Solomon: "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight" (Prov. 16:2, NASB). To help us see ourselves as others do, we should indulge in some introspective self-examination, and we might ask ourselves the following questions when we find a parishioner has cooled in his relationship to us:

- 1-Have I expressed proper appreciation to him for what he has done for me (or the Lord)?
Perhaps a parishioner has been taken for granted. Maybe he has given you gifts and you have learned to expect them.
- 2-Have I provided adequate concern for him when he came to me with a personal problem?
Sometimes peoples' problems seem so trivial we pass them off or talk down to them, not showing real care or concern.
- 3-Have I given him an example of Christ-like living with my own actions and in my own family relationships? Complaints of inadequate salary, poor living conditions or neglect of wife and children; snide remarks or stinging sarcasm; off-color jokes and the like can turn a parishioner against his pastor.
- 4-Have I forced my ideas or programs on him (or the church)? Something like a Christian Day School can be a distinct blessing to a church, but not if the pastor forces it on his congregation.
- 5-Have I rejected or discounted the ideas, suggestions or advice he has offered? A parishioner's suggestion may be his way of saying: "Pastor, you could be doing this a better way."
- 6-Have I betrayed his confidence by telling others what he shared with me in private? Pastors and pastors' wives are among the worst of gossipers.
- 7-Do my words, actions, or attitudes reflect a contempt for the wisdom of his age or the value of his experience? He may seem to be old fashioned and out-of-date, but there may be a great deal of wisdom behind his old, stubborn ways.
- 8-Have I expressed impatience toward him which he may see as a lack of love and concern?
Jesus was never too busy for anyone.
- 9-Have I neglected important areas of his spiritual feeding? Are we properly studying the sermon text and Bible class material so that we give the full counsel of God?

St. Peter gave us good counsel in how to deal with all parishioners, both those who favor us and those who may oppose us, when he wrote: "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...*not lording it over those entrusted to you*, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:1-3, NIV).