

# Pastoral response to criticism

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Criticism inflicts emotional wounds. We dread it, and we dream of being free from it. Yet life's events remind us about its overpowering presence. "When we are pounded by the missiles and depth charges of friends and enemies," writes Hans Finzel, "it does have a devastating effect on our emotions. It can bring our work to a screeching halt and we find ourselves having to deal with the criticism itself."<sup>1</sup>

One wonders, what triggers the vicious onslaught of criticism, and how does one deal with its impact?

## Roots

The spirit of criticism arises out of "the desires that battle within you" (James 4:1–3). In other words, human nature contributes to conflicts, quarrels, and fights. Finzel identifies the following causes for criticizing: jealousy, unfulfilled expectations, misunderstanding, organizational crisis, values conflict, failure, distrust, pride, and arrogance.

Rarely have I experienced criticism originating from the well of pure intentions. If this were often the case, the outcome would have always enhanced the relationship. However, the criticism I am referring to includes the devious, dehumanizing, judgmental, and self-orientated flood of opinionated views, which devalues character—the criticism that we all know so well. Usually the biased and opinionated arrows target the nerve center of emotional responsiveness. In effect, the pain-inflicting criticism activates

human defense mechanisms, evoking the attitude of fight or flight. In that sense, both criticism and an emotionally heightened response are reactionary and equally harmful. Finzel lists the following reactions to criticism: quit, run, hide, get angry, get depressed, seek revenge, fight back, belittle the criticsizers.<sup>2</sup>

## Personal rights

Let's discuss another view so widely promoted in our contemporary climate—mainly the fight for personal rights. When used as a defensive countermeasure against criticism, this can be equally damaging. Both offensive and defensive responses reduce objectivity, and so the parties in conflict continue an endless dogfight, which increases the depth of emotional wounds and defrocks human dignity. My analysis of different conflicts suggests that individuals who are reactionary in responses to criticism amass greater emotional damage than their opponents. In addition, because of the high level of emotional tension, crossing the boundaries of relational morals becomes easier.

Figure 1 explains this point. The arrows in the text box represent the build up of emotional tension. Clearly at the center of the conflict is the increasing build up of emotions. In this frame of mind, hurting individuals see other people and issues through the sensitive and emotionally volatile screen of distorted reality.

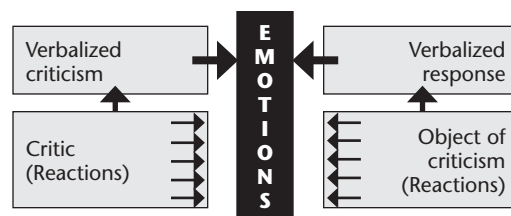


Figure 1

## The God factor

How does God fit into this equation? If we consider the responsibility of pastoral care as leading people into God's presence, how does one carry this task in trying circumstances? Interestingly enough, Finzel introduces God in this context in a whole new light. "God," Finzel asserts, "uses criticism and personal attack to deepen and mature us."<sup>3</sup>

What? Does God do this? If so, is God in the business of playing emotional games with us? Says Finzel, "It seems to be a process that He uses to knock off the rough edges and to deepen our humility and our sense of dependence on him."<sup>4</sup> To support his belief, he quotes James 1:2–4.

In this day and age, when God seems so distant, and at times when we are so self-dependent on our wisdom to solve life's problems, the notion of stepping into the workshop of the Divine Potter (Isa. 64:8) creates nervousness. Yet rather than seeing this experience in a skeptical light, consider it as a response to God, who heals human brokenness. As stated previously, reactionary responses intensify the pain of emotional wounds. These responses lack the healing power and openness to deal with criticism objectively. Confronting it in the garments of our "nakedness," we adhere to mechanisms of our "self-enclosed egos standing over against each other."<sup>5</sup>

### The first human conflict

Commenting on the nature of Adam and Eve's conflict, Elizabeth Achtemeier unfolds the futility of the first couple's attempt to resolve the trauma of the existing conflict. She states, "And so they made coverings to hide behind, flimsy protection against one another."<sup>6</sup> I suggest that in this case the air was loaded with emotional pain, frustration, shame, and blame. In fact, as figure 2 shows, separation from God invaded life with new emotions. This condition opened gates for unexpected and perplexing reactions.

Note the likeness between Adam and Eve's responses (flight, blame, hide) and Finzel's list of human reactions to criticism.

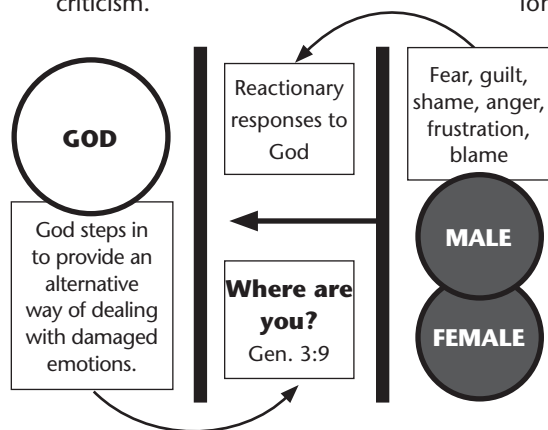


Figure 2

Clearly in the original experience, solution to the tension did not emerge from the spontaneous reactionary

responses. Rather, it was embedded in the healing power of the voice that searchingly called, "Where are you?" Exploring further the deceitful egocentricity of human nature, Achtemeier writes, "How often we cover ourselves with lies and deceits and rationalizations to protect ourselves in our deepest relationships."<sup>7</sup>

### Our responses

The deeply ingrained insecurity of our brokenness affects the way we respond to criticism. We are prone to handle it from the depths of our fears, guilt, shame, anger, frustration, blame, and hurt. Thus, as Finzel has said, is it possible to consider this as God's way of helping us to mature and to deepen our trust in Him? In 2 Corinthians 5:2–5

Paul expresses his desire "to be clothed with the heavenly dwelling" (NIV). He reasons that this heavenly dwelling covers up human nakedness. I suggest that by *naked* he means the full exposure of self with all its inconsistencies. Yet, God has created us for eternity. This present state makes us uncomfortable and reluctant to be transparent (2 Cor. 5:4). The inner longing involves human response of trust in the One who enters our emotional pain and hurts calling passionately and lovingly, *Where are you?* A reply to this invitation means to "release control of our relationship with God to God, coming face to face with the kind of a person we are in the depth of our being."<sup>8</sup> Here, God desires to cover our fears and shame by shaping gently the rough edges of our humanity. Yes, adverse life circumstances and all that human

brokenness offers shape characters for eternity. They touch the responsive chords of our emotions, enabling us to see ourselves in the true light. What Finzel views as God's way of knocking

off the rough edges of our egocentricity I define as a human response to divine defusion.

### Divine defusion

Divine defusion has to do with the process by which one begins to handle criticism from a relationally oriented and God-centered perspective. Because we consider God as the Healer and the Potter, the priority in handling criticism was not meant to provide a reactionary response to our opponents but to find out the lesson God tries to teach us. As figure 3 suggests, the increase of emotional pain is directed to the source of healing (Mal. 4:2; Isa. 40:28–31).<sup>9</sup>

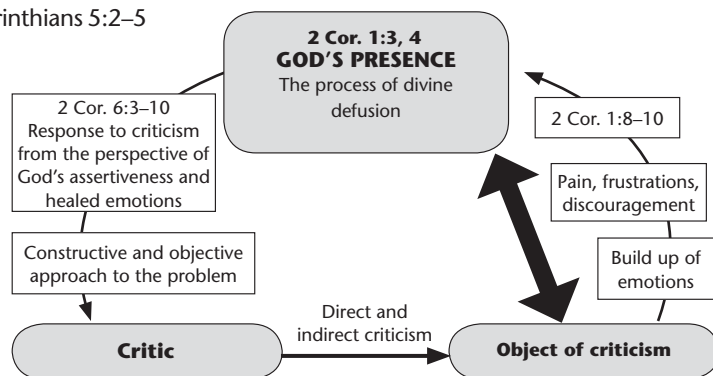


Figure 3

The wide arrow represents the constant current of relational reciprocity. Opening our lives to God's presence and surrendering into the hands of the Divine Potter, we give the dangerous weapons of our damaged defense mechanisms over to the healing power of God's grace. The relational reciprocity simply indicates the opening of God's heart to the measure of our trust in Him. Said the psalmist: "In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears" (Ps. 18:6, NIV). Note the following:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot slip—  
he who watches over you*

will not slumber. . . .  
*The LORD watches over you—  
the LORD is your shade at  
your right hand;  
the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The LORD will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over  
your life* (Ps. 121:1–3, 5–7, NIV).

Remember, defensive treatment of criticism evokes militant reactions. On the other hand, God's healing power creates new authenticity and openness. Relational trust in the Potter's hand empowers individuals to handle human brokenness with new confidence, as well as new openness to value people, even the most ardent opponent, as God's inheritance. Thus, guiding people into God's presence means to expose them to the authenticity of God's healing power—confirmed by the pastoral response to criticism that is no longer reactionary but relationally empowering. It includes a full measure of sensitivity and tact in handling lovingly those who inflict pain.

## Jesus' example

Jesus left us an example of implicit trust in God's fairness and justice. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. *Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly*" (1 Pet. 2:23, NIV, emphasis added).

Is it possible, then, to see our critics as God's instruments shaping our relational trust and dependence on Him? It is not out of place to suggest, at this point, that Jesus encouraged His followers to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44).

I am not suggesting that one should not address conflicts and criticism. However, the assertiveness I am referring to should display the presence of divine healing and relation-building qualities. Compare the reactions to criticism suggested by Finzel with the list of Paul's reactions to adverse circumstances as noted in 2 Corinthians 6:3–10 (see figure 4).

Paul highlights the reality of emotional discomfort created by difficult people. He refers to the experience of dishonor,

|                      |                 |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| quit                 | endurance       |
| run                  | purity          |
| hide                 | understanding   |
| get angry            | patience        |
| get depressed        | kindness        |
| seek revenge         | sincere love    |
| fight back           | truthful speech |
| belittle the critics | genuine         |

Figure 4

bad report, regarded as impostors, beaten, sorrowful, and poor (vv. 8–10). He also presents a contrasting view, "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (v. 10). It seems that Paul knew the secret of this empowering, refreshing, and energizing change in attitude. He anchored his trust in the power of God's grace as expressed in Jesus (2 Cor. 8:9). Consider the following:

- God's presence heals emotional wounds.
- God's presence provides empowerment, sensitivity, and tact to handle criticism with openness and to respond to critics with firm gentleness. One must not forget that critics have feelings and emotions.
- God provides vision needed for our personal growth and improvement.
- God provides patience.
- God provides reasons for praise, adoration, and responsive love.
- God provides a sense of objectivity, which helps us to distinguish between accurate criticism and unjust slander. As well, He provides strength to cope with unjust slander.

God's empowered response to criticism guides people into His presence. Amid hardship and trials, Paul stressed the purpose of God's mission. Firstly, God reconciled us to Him through Jesus. Secondly, He committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. Thirdly, we are the ambassadors (2 Cor. 6:18, 19). Note that in Paul's mind it involves personal healing. What follows is the accountability of tackling life's issues

as the ambassadors of God's grace. God's ambassadors respond to the pain-inflicting circumstances with the attitude of relational wholeness. How fitting are Ellen G. White's words: "If we keep uppermost in our minds the unkind and unjust acts of others we shall find it impossible to love them as Christ has loved us; but if our thoughts dwell upon the wondrous love and pity of Christ for us, the same spirit will flow out to others. We should love and respect one another, notwithstanding the faults and imperfections that we cannot help seeing."<sup>10</sup>

Commenting on forgiveness, J. P. Pingleton infers, "We are most like God when we forgive. No other description of godliness approaches the quality of forgiveness. Genuine forgiveness is necessarily empowered by divine love, mercy and grace."<sup>11</sup> This—the apex of pastoral leadership for receiving and sharing God's forgiveness—shows psychological and spiritual maturity and is, indeed, the essence of a successful life.<sup>12</sup> ■

1 Hans Finzel, *Empowered Leaders* (Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group, 1998), 76.

2 Ibid., 77.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Story of Us All: A Christian Exposition of Genesis 3" in *Preaching Biblical Texts: Exposition by Jewish and Christian Scholars*, ed. Fredrick C. Holmgren and Herman E. Schaalmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 31.

9 Figure 3 illustrates my proposed model of divine defusion. Note that the proposed model does not suggest disregard or a nonresponsive approach to criticism. However, assertiveness that derives from healing experienced in God's presence includes endurance, purity, understanding, patience, kindness, love, truthful speech, authenticity, and joy (2 Cor. 6:3–10).

10 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1892), 121.

11 J. P. Pingleton, "Why Don't We Forgive: A Biblical and Object Relations Theoretical Model for Understanding Failures in the Forgiveness Process," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25, no. 4 (1997): 411.

12 Ibid.