

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has ever been a student understands the yearning to finish one's program of study and start doing whatever he or she have always wanted to do. After four years of the classroom, I, too, was eager to enter the real world of ministry. My idealism suggested to me that no matter where I landed in ministry, the people I served would be eager to receive me along with all of my ideas.

In only a short time, I discovered some of the challenges I would face in ministry. Unfortunately, I did not know how valuable a few years of experience and some necessary biblical teaching would be for me when the time came to deal with the problems that would arise in ministry.

Over the last thirty years, I have found that many who find themselves in a similar situation are unable to cope effectively with the problems faced in ministry. While much can be learned by having to deal with conflict, much harm can come to the leader and ministry if not responded to appropriately. Throw in a difficult person leading the charge of the opposition and quickly the leader faces a challenge only the spiritually fit and fully equipped can handle.

THE BEST AND WORSE CASE SCENARIO

I like people but I must admit that some are difficult to work with, even in the world of ministry. The reality is that the best and worst times for me as a pastor have been due to the type of people I have encountered, who come in all kinds of shapes, sizes, colors and yes, personalities. The extent of their similarities or differences usually depends on the context of ministry. Once understood, a pastor can begin to discern how best to effectively work with each person. While a pastor cannot always predict the impact a difficult person might have on a particular ministry, he can be certain that it will happen.

Certain people can be the source of joy as well as heartache for the pastor. The joy that comes through a meaningful relationship is one of the richest blessings one can experience. On the other hand, people can say and do things that can crush a spirit or destroy a dream. It takes a lot of work to build a healthy relationship with such a person, even within the boundaries of the church.

Seeking to build strong relationships is important, as seminars and books abound on the subject. However, despite these efforts, people regularly express the need for help in their relationships. History suggests that we still have much to learn. Countries continue to be at war over issues because of leaders who are unable or unwilling to negotiate mutual concerns. Communities are at odds with neighbor against neighbor partly because we have not taken the time to get to know each other. Divorce is occurring at an all time high, especially among Christian and often times, due to the simple fact that we do not communicate and the problems go on and on.

While it is true that relationship building is challenging, it is especially demanding if one of the persons involved is a “difficult” person. The reality is that the church is not absent of its share. Clergy and laity alike have testified to the destructive efforts of people who expect things to go their way. Those leaders, especially pastors who have tried to cope with the presence of a difficult person have discovered that the outcome is not always good.

Why does this happen? Why do we find ourselves in these kinds of predicaments? How can we get at the heart of understanding the dynamics of working with people in ways that will benefit everyone? Perhaps we need to understand that our pattern of working with people begins long before the actual encounter. Maybe then, we will begin to resolve a problem that has affected the church negatively for years.

MISCONCEPTIONS: THE PLAGUE OF MINISTRY

For me, growing up in a Christian home played a significant role in the formation of my values and perspectives on life. In an unsuspecting kind of way, it also provided an environment for the nurturing of misconceptions concerning the future. Misconceptions about ministry are often developed in this kind of shielded environment and eventually face a stern challenge to the realities of life and ministry faced by a pastor.

I can remember clearly the fictional ideas I had in the beginning days of church ministry and how these ideas were quickly tested by the demands of real-life ministry. As the years went on, I soon discovered that some of the misconceptions I developed about life in the pastorate followed me unless adequately dealt with. There was always the temptation to think that the next place of ministry would be different and absent of my nemesis. Unfortunately, this is not the case. That you escaped the workings of your last difficult person or situation does not take away the possibility of experiencing a similar situation somewhere else.

For this reason, it would be wise for each pastor to learn to deal with the problem at hand. Where, then, should one turn for help concerning this need? Without question, the Christian leader or pastor must first turn to the Word of God

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Perhaps it will be surprising to you to discover that the Bible has a great deal to say about dealing with difficult people. In fact, Paul the apostle wrote the book of Second Timothy in an attempt to warn his young apostolic delegate to be careful in the handling of “his” difficult person named Alexander (2 Tim. 4:14-15). Alexander had become a problem for Timothy and a poison in the church in Ephesus. For Timothy’s work to go forward in Ephesus, something had to be done to resolve the situation. Paul’s first step toward reaching

this goal was to inform Timothy of Alexander¹ and warn him of his potential opposition.

Nestled within Paul's closing remarks to Timothy (2 Tim. 4) we find these words:

Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.²

Identifying Alexander was not the problem. This is often the case. A difficult person's behavior, is usually noticeable. In this case, when Paul told Timothy to remain behind in Ephesus³ it was for the sole purpose of dealing with a group of people who were stirring up controversy rather than God's work. It is almost certain that Alexander was a member of this group (1 Tim. 1:20).

Even though Timothy would know his adversary, dealing with him in an appropriate way for both his sake and the church would be his most formidable undertaking. Fortunately, he had the counsel of the Paul. Together, they would confront the problem and seek to bring the church back to wholeness.

The telling of this story (2 Timothy 4:14-15) is often overlooked in Paul's letter concerning the ministry in Ephesus. Yet, after further consideration, its significance cannot be overstated. Alexander had become a ministerial "thorn in the flesh" for Paul and now Timothy. However, through careful reflection on how Paul advises Timothy regarding this problem, this letter can become a *prescription for wholeness* for anyone seeking to understand how to deal with a difficult person in the ministry of the church.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR WHOLENESS

Recently I went to the doctor because I noticed some disturbing physical symptoms. In many cases, a visit to the doctor will result in the prescribing of a plan for treating the illness. Every patient has the responsibility of carrying out the doctor's orders to insure that

the healing process takes place. Failure to follow the doctor's directions can result in extreme sickness, even death.

In an attempt to bring healing to the church, people usually turn to a pastor for a proper understanding of what is causing the church to be sick. After a close examination of the problem, the pastor will usually prescribe a plan for dealing with the problem. Paul knew that the ministry in Ephesus was sick. Now, he wanted Timothy to lead the charge in bringing about its healing.

Paul had ministered in Ephesus for three years (Acts 19:8, 10; 20:31) and taught them sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:11) yet the church was spiritually sick⁴ and filled with difficult people. Being unable to continue his work himself, he sent Timothy to continue the work in Ephesus in order to bring healing by providing the antidote.⁵ Timothy's work in Ephesus was to be a prescription for wholeness.

By studying the books of 1st & 2nd Timothy, along with other relevant biblical passages, any pastor can discover a series of guidelines and principles used by Paul and other NT leaders to deal with difficult people. By following these guidelines and principles, the pastor or leader can guide their church in the effective resolution of a problem situation.

A CONCISE STATEMENT OF THEOLOGY

The pastor who fails to realize that effectively dealing with people is an indispensable part of the ministry will soon find himself in an unstable situation. At times, one will be tempted to think that sound doctrine alone will solve a problem but I have discovered that to deal with a difficult person a leader needs more than doctrinal purity.

Doctrine is extremely important and there will be times when a pastor faces a situation when he must make a choice between taking a stand for God's truth and pleasing people.⁶ In the end, God's truth is supreme.

Paul realized that God's truth and right living must go together. Since he knew that God often used doctrine as an instrument to bring about change in the lives of people, he offered these words of advice to his young co-laborer:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.⁷

It is very possible for a leader to have sound doctrine but lose the privilege of being heard due to the way he treats people. Apparently, Paul understood this basic truth:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, Able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.⁸

Paul was able to see that it was not impossible to work successfully with a difficult person. In some cases, when a pastor or leader is patient and offers godly instruction a difficult person will change for the good. On the other hand, it is sometimes necessary to exercise a carefully thought out plan of discipline with the person. The goal in either case is reconciliation and restoration.

WHAT NOW?

This introduction has revealed the need for an effective plan in dealing with a difficult person in the life and ministry of the local church. To be effective the plan should include the following phases.

- Recognizing the presence of difficult people in the pastoral setting
- Reconstructing any misconceptions one might have about the role that a difficult person can play in the ongoing work of the church.
- Reviewing the Bible's teaching on how one can deal with a difficult person
- Realizing the potential of the Church when pastors/leaders learn how to deal effectively with difficult people

In chapter one we will explore the first part in the process of dealing with a difficult person which will include topics such as...

- Gaining a general understanding of the environment out of which a difficult person emerges.
- Developing better recognition skills that will enable one to see the most common behavioral tendencies of a difficult person.
- Having a clearer perception of the type of leadership skills needed when dealing with a difficult person.
- Gaining a basic understanding of the types of intervention that can be used when dealing with a difficult person.

Chapters two and three will take a close look at the New Testament books of 1st & 2nd Timothy from an exegetical perspective. Through a careful study of these texts, we will discern the way in which the apostle Paul advised young Timothy to deal with his difficult person. This material will reveal the importance of...

- Understanding the dynamics of preparing oneself for effective confrontation
- Balancing one's perceptions with the reality of a situation
- The importance of exercising patience in a situation of conflict
- The significance of prayer when dealing with conflict

In chapter four we will expand upon the study in 1st & 2nd Timothy to include other relevant New Testament passages which shed light on our subject.

The purpose of this book is to take a biblical and practical look at this most important task by offering some fresh and simple thoughts on how a leader can help resolve conflict, which has been caused by a difficult person, while continuing to lead the church body forward into effective and healthy ministry.

If you are ready to make a difference in the life of your church and allow the Lord to make an impact through you as you serve Him, even when dealing with a difficult person, then this book is for you.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

CHAPTER 1

The great and everyday Commission is recorded four times in the New Testament.⁹ The Matthew account is the most memorable and certainly the most quoted. It is here that we find not only what the disciples were expected to do after Jesus' departure, but also in which they were supposed to carry out the Lord's command.

It is thought by many that to obey the Great Commission that the gospel must be preached to every nation. While others suggest that the fulfillment of the Great Commission is only completed when believers become disciples. A disciple in this context would refer to a person who not only believes in the person of Christ but lives faithfully according to the Word of God, "...*teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:20).

Still others argue that the Great Commission is fully obeyed when we establish individual churches that can carry on the work of evangelism and discipleship.¹⁰ If planting churches is the biblical criteria for determining whether or not the gospel is being brought to the world, then it would appear that the disciples were successful in their evangelistic venture, particularly in light of the number of churches in today's society.

The church is seemingly everywhere. In virtually every community, regardless of the size of the town or city, a church can be found. Some places have more churches than others,¹¹ but the truth is that finding a church in most locations is never a difficult task. This is also true in areas where church attendance is significantly low.¹² While each of these interpretations offers insight into an understanding of the Great Commission, an additional thought is worth consideration. Gerber suggests that a two-fold task is presented in the New Testament's Great Commission regarding the fulfillment of Christ's command: 1) to make responsible, reproducing disciples and 2) to make responsible, reproducing churches.¹³

The strategy of planting churches wherever the gospel was preached was apparently a normal practice for the apostle Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy.¹⁴ Their work in carrying out this strategy suggest a more balanced interpretation of the Great Commission's primary purpose, namely: 1) to preach the gospel in order for people to be saved and 2) to organize them into an active body of believers called the local church.

The practice of planting churches continues to this day. According to one research report,¹⁵ there were over 150 protestant denominations and as least 325,000 local congregations in America as of 1990. Nevertheless, despite the plethora of churches on the American scene, they are not as visible as one might think. George Barna, a noted researcher of church life in America states:

The name recognition of the average church is lower than might be expected. Less than one out of every five people on the average are aware of the existence of the typical church within their community.¹⁶

This fact alone raises an extremely important question: "What's going on in the churches of America that prevents them from making a significant impact on their communities?" The suggestion that this is the present day condition of the church was hinted at by George Barna when he identified ten critical, achievable goals for the church as it faces the 1990s.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that at least five of Barna's list of ten goals pertains directly to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.¹⁸ Apparently, something has been blocking the ability of the local church to reach these goals. A closer look at the dynamics of the local church will provide the answer.

UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

The apostles were obviously dedicated to planting churches as a part of their commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission. The mere presence of so many churches throughout the apostolic world demonstrates that this part of the Lord's command was

taken very seriously. However, in order to understand more clearly why the Church today is not having the impact that God intended one must take a closer look at the daily life of the church.

Thankfully, the apostle Paul and other New Testament writers cared enough about their newly planted churches to communicate with them regarding what was expected when it came to the ongoing ministry of the local church. Fortunately, this communication included those things that needed praise,¹⁹ as well as the issues which had become problems for the believers.²⁰

THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

The books of 1 & 2 Timothy, known as the Pastoral Epistles, provide a great deal of insight into the problems encountered by a church and its leaders when the ministry of the church is blocked. In these letters Paul gives advice to his young apostolic delegate on how to handle problems that of this nature. By examining these epistles one will not only discover the types of problems that can arise in this type of situation but what can be done in order to insure that God's work goes on despite the presence of conflict.

THE CHURCH IN CONFLICT

Paul had just been released from prison in Rome (apparently after Acts 28), and had made his way back to the church in Ephesus.²¹ His intent was to move on and visit other churches, as well as continue his evangelistic work. Unfortunately, the ministry at Ephesus had taken a turn for the worse. Paul, intent on going to Macedonia, was deeply concerned about the church and left young Timothy in charge.

The church in Ephesus, as Timothy soon discovered, was filled with problems. Almost immediately he encountered men and women who opposed the "sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:11) which Paul had taught in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). The false

teaching that was present in Ephesus at this time soon began to make itself known in a variety of ways: 1) women began to function outside of their God ordained roles with no respect for their husbands or men in general (1 Timothy 2:8-15); 2) the false teachers started to advocate a lifestyle contrary to the normal relationship between a husband and a wife (1 Timothy 5:11), men used seductive logic in order to fulfill their own selfish needs (2 Timothy 3:6-7); 4) believers were bringing accusations against their leaders (1 Timothy 5:19); 5) and people were beginning to place an unhealthy emphasis upon money versus contentment through godliness. These distortions of God's truth, as well as many others, ultimately caused the faith of many people in Ephesus to be "shipwrecked" (1 Timothy 1:19).

The ministry in Ephesus was becoming a major responsibility for Timothy. He was not only responsible for dealing with a variety of problems in Ephesus, but he was discovering that problems are sustained by people who strongly support the issues at stake and have definite reasons for their viewpoints. Paul was already aware of certain men in Ephesus who would most likely give Timothy a hard time in the ministry. In particular, he knew of one Alexander who was almost certainly going to cause trouble by opposing his work and the message of Christ (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

It is not quite certain how much time Timothy spent in Ephesus but it seems safe to say that the majority of his time was not spent in an evangelistic ministry, but rather in solving problems. Much effort was given to dealing with difficult people who for various reasons opposed "sound doctrine" and all that it represents. Fortunately, Timothy's experience in Ephesus provides us with a valuable lesson about the pastoral ministry. Sometimes, ministry cannot move forward as desired due to the fact that leaders have to spend an enormous amount of time dealing with petty issues and difficult people. The Great

Commissions cannot be carried out effectively when leaders are burdened with the work of dealing with difficult people and petty issues that have turned into major concerns.

UNDERSTANDING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Noticeably, things have not changed much in almost two-thousand years. Just as Timothy faced challenges in the first century years ago, pastors of today are continually confronted with obstacles that prevent them from effectively carrying out the ministry of the church. As in the case of Timothy, the modern day pastor struggles to maintain a balance between promoting the spiritual maturity of believers in the church while battling the immaturity of people who are opposed to any ministry effort which contradicts their own views, feelings and convictions.

THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

¹ See Hebrews 12:14-15. Knowing Paul's character which is based on his New Testament writings, it is safe to assume that Paul had tried to put into practice the advice of the writer to the Hebrews. Paul gives similar advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:22-24.

² 2 Timothy 4:14-15 (New International Version)

³ 1 Timothy 1:3-4

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:6; 2 Timothy 2:16-18; 3:1-5.

⁵ William Morris, Ed. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, (New York: American Publishing Co., and Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), pg. 57. Here the antidote is defined as "remedy or other agent to counteract the effects of a poison." Timothy's role in Ephesus was somewhat like an antidote. He was urged to stay in Ephesus to counteract the disease of false teaching and unacceptable behavior going on in the church.

⁶ In my third pastorate (located in Oregon), I was brought to this point in my ministry. I was faced with a group of people who did not believe in the deity of Christ. I reached a point where I could no longer pastor the church even though I cared very deeply for the people. In this case, doctrine was most important.

⁷ 1 Timothy 4:16, ESV.

⁸ 2 Timothy 2:25-26, NIV.

⁹ See John 20:21; Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19-20; and Luke 24:46-48.

¹⁰ C. Peter Wagner, Church Growth: State of the Art, (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL, 1986), pg. 143. In chapter 14, entitled, "The Great Commission implies that church planting is the primary method to evangelize the world. To reach lost people in every culture a church must be established in every culture to communicate the gospel and nurture those who are saved."

¹¹ Some cities have a great number of churches. For example, Jacksonville FL has over 1000 churches within its city limits.

¹² In 1988, while I was living in the Northwest section of the United States (Portland, OR), it was reported that Oregon and Washington were the #1 and #2 un-churched states in the United States. Yet, these two states were filled with churches, big and small. In fact, Portland, OR was noted for some very large churches that had received international recognition for their ministries.

¹³ Virgil Gerber, God's Way To Keep A Church Going and Growing, (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1973), pg. 18.

¹⁴ See the following biblical texts for an account of the apostle Paul's missionary journeys: Acts 13-14; Acts 15:36-18:22; Acts 18:23-21:16.

¹⁵ Source: "Churches in America as of February 1990," (Arlington, TX: American Church Lists, February, 1990).

¹⁶ George Barna, The Frog in the Kettle, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), pg.130.

¹⁷ Ibid. pgs. 226-230.

¹⁸ Barna's list includes: 1) Win people to Christ, 2) Raise Bible Knowledge, 3) Equip the Christian Body, 4) Establish Christian Community, 5) Renew Christian Behavior, 6) Enhance the image of the local church, 7) Champion Christian morals, 8) Live by a Christian Philosophy, 9) Restore People's Self-Esteem, and 10) Focus on reaching a World for Christ. Note particularly 1, 3, 5, 8, and 10 as those relating to the completion of the Great Commission.

¹⁹ Colossians 1:3-6.

²⁰ 1 Timothy 1:6-11.

²¹ This is only one possible viewpoint regarding the life of Paul following the happenings in Acts 28. Another possibility for Paul's experience following his imprisonment in Rome which is recorded in Acts 28 is that the experience in the Pastoral Epistles (see 2 Timothy 4:16, "At my first defense...") refers to what JND Kelly identifies in his commentary as "primo action" (i.e. primary investigation). JND Kelly, A Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, (Guilford, London and Worcester: Billings & Sons Limited, 1963) pgs, 216ff. For a brief consideration of the most common viewpoints (strengths and weaknesses) please refer to FF. Bruce, Commentary on the Book of Acts, (William B. Eerdmans

Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, MI, 1954) and I. Howard Marshall, The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980).