

Foreword by
SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

PASTORS AND THEIR CRITICS



*A Guide to Coping with
Criticism in the Ministry*

**JOEL R. BEEKE and
NICK THOMPSON**

Whether a robe, suit and tie, or casual attire, all ministerial garb have one design in common—a target on the back. The unhappy reality is those targets show signs of frequent hits, many directly in the bull’s-eye. Every shot hurts, particularly those from unexpected places, and the wounds threaten the survival of the ministry. From a biblical foundation and personal perspective, Beeke and Thompson give practical instructions as to how to handle and heal from the darts of criticism. The old aphorism says that ministers should practice what they preach; to do otherwise makes them hypocrites. It is equally true that ministers should preach what they have first of all practiced; to do otherwise makes them merely theorists. *Pastors and Their Critics* is not theory. The principles outlined are biblical, and they have been proven to work in experience.

—**Michael P. V. Barrett**, Vice President of Academic Affairs,
Academic Dean, and Professor of Old Testament, Puritan
Reformed Theological Seminary

Receiving criticism is tough. It adds weight to the cross each pastor is called to carry. Its threads are interwoven into every minister’s suit. So how can I deal with criticism in a Christlike way? Read this book. It is rich in the two critical ingredients for nurturing Christlike responses in our hearts, thoughts, and actions. It points us to the trainer and deals honestly with our required training. Our Lord Jesus is the trainer. Look to Him. Did people not call Him the chief of the devils? Did they not drive nails through His hands and feet as He prayed for them? Is this not worse than that which anyone ever called or did to you? And by His Spirit this trainer trains His servants in the gymnasium of criticism. We only mature through exercise, and most when it is painful. He must increase and I must decrease is tough for our pride but profitable for our Lord’s glory. I know one of the authors, my dear brother, who has been called to exercise in this gymnasium and taught by experience to look to and trust his heavenly trainer. This book is not abstract theory, but reflects the rich benefits of real-life training.

—**James W. Beeke**, Superintendent, British-Columbia–Certified
Schools in China; International Educational Consultant

As a young pastor, I received a letter of constructive but rather direct criticism about my preaching from the person who had recommended my name to the pulpit committee of the church! To say that I was stung is to put it mildly. It hurt so badly, I filed it away after one reading and went on about my work. When I ran across the letter again, fifteen years into my ministry there, I realized that every word he said was right and helpful (though I am not sure that I would even have known how to follow his counsel until I had lived a little more life). But it did get me to thinking about criticism, and how to benefit from it and respond to it. This book would have been a help to me then, and will be to you now. To be a pastor, especially in our time, is to be criticized. So how we respond to that criticism, how we process the criticism, how we keep from being defensive or even paralyzed by the criticism, and how we learn and grow from the criticism is all of great significance. We want to be neither despondent nor discouraged but entreatable and correctable. Furthermore, we should learn how to offer criticism in the most God-honoring and helpful way possible. I'm thankful for the hard thinking that has gone into these subjects in this book. I think it will help you as you try to develop "tough skin and a tender heart."

—**Ligon Duncan**, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

Like every servant of Christ, I learned early that criticism is part of a minister's labor. But the last few years have brought a level of criticism beyond anything I have ever experienced. In this torrent of controversy and pain, I was asked to review and endorse *Pastors and Their Critics* by Joel Beeke and Nick Thompson. My words here, however, will not be as much an endorsement as a public expression of gratitude to men who have served me so crucially. Their rich work provided comfort, encouragement, correction, and solace that few books ever have. It brought light into a dark season. Pastor, you need the correction and comfort in this book. It is required reading for every minister of the gospel.

—**Heath Lambert**, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida

This book is an invaluable tool for those engaged in the pressures and demands of ministry. Biblically sound, theologically solid, and personally applied, *Pastors and Their Critics* will be a lifeline for every pastor facing the many challenges of ministry.

—**Steven J. Lawson**, President, OnePassion Ministries, Dallas, Texas

I listened to Joel Beeke preaching on “Faithfulness in Dealing with Criticism” at the 2019 Shepherd’s Conference, and I said to myself, *Wow, what a blessing! How I wish that sermon could be turned into a book. I would love to read it regularly and commend it to my pastoral friends.* Well, that sermon—and much more—is what you have in this book. Criticism makes and breaks pastors more often than we would like to admit. Often what makes the difference is not the type of criticism itself—whether it is right or wrong—but how a pastor responds to it. This book will help you react to criticism in a biblical way, a way that builds you instead of destroying you. Throw it into your bag when you go on holiday and make it part of your essential reading. You will return to your pastoral ministry a renewed man!

—**Conrad Mbewe**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia

As Dr. Beeke’s colleague for thirteen years, I’ve had the privilege of watching him live out this book in real time. I’ve learned from him how to respond to criticism better and also how to use it to become more Christlike.

—**David Murray**, Pastor; Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Author, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture*

What a helpful and encouraging book! While our culture conditions us to be overly sensitive, fragile, and defensive, Beeke and Thompson give rich biblical wisdom to fortify and prepare pastors for the inevitable criticism we all face. It should be added to the list of books all pastors and seminarians should read if they are to endure with joy and without bitterness.

—**Michael Reeves**, President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology

Receiving just criticism humbly is very difficult. Receiving unjust criticism humbly is equally difficult. Every Christian will be subject to both, and pastors (because they are public figures) are not immune to either. This well-written book will prove lifesaving when the trials come (and come they will). Every pastor, seminarian, office-bearer, and leader will profit from the sound and practical advice given in these pages. I wish I had read this a half century ago. It might have spared me the embarrassment of far too many inappropriate responses on my part. Life changing, Christ exalting, God honoring advice from a pastor whom I love dearly, together with an able seminarian. *Tolle lege.*

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

When God gave a thorn in the flesh to Paul, it was a messenger of Satan that God knew, and indeed ensured, would do much good to the apostle. In the examples Paul gives of what such thorns might be, he suggests reproaches and distresses (see 2 Cor. 12:10). Criticisms focused on the minister are certainly a distressing reproach, but permitted by God for our increased usefulness, and always accompanied by the promise of all-sufficient grace. This helpful book is a healing balm indicating how we may experience grace—that is, Omnipotence determined to sanctify—during the painful heat of hostility. Every minister and church leader would greatly profit from reading it.

—**Geoffrey Thomas**, Emeritus Pastor, Alfred Place Baptist Church, Aberystwyth, Wales; Conference Speaker; Author

Beeke and Thompson's guide to receiving and responding to criticism is a wonderful gift for the church. From beginning to end it is personally informed, biblically framed, and Christ-centered. If you experience or fear opposition, this little volume is a must read. My only criticism of the book is that it was not published ten years ago.

—**Chad Van Dixhoorn**, Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

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R&R

P U B L I S H I N G

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For
Jonathan Engelsma,
exemplary friend and peacemaker,
honest and constructive critic, and able leader.
“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.” (Phil. 1:3)
—JRB

For
Mike Waters,
faithful under-shepherd, spiritual father, and wise mentor.
“Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.” (Eph. 6:10)
—NJT

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FOREWORD

They say you should never judge a book by its cover. Nor should you gauge its value by its size. True, *Pastors and Their Critics* is brief by comparison with Dr. Joel Beeke's "major" works. But, make no mistake, this is one of the most important books he has written. Indeed, I suspect it may help as many people as his major treatises—not only the ministers, for whom he has written it, but all of us, whether pastors or people.

Perhaps the title leaves a sour taste in your mouth. It should. But this is a book to help pastors—and others—to respond to criticism in a way that shows their mouths and their hearts have been sweetened by the taste of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, then, is a book for the *criticized*, especially the criticized pastor—and what pastor has *never* been criticized? But it is also a book for the *critic*—and who among us has *never* criticized a pastor? To minister to this situation, I know, has been, for Joel Beeke, "the burden of the Lord." He has discharged it here—wisely, I think—in little less than two hundred easily read pages (including a helpful appendix written particularly for seminary students by his able coauthor, Nick Thompson).

Joel Beeke is a theologian and trainer of pastors. He has also been a model and mentor to other pastors because he himself is

a pastor. He is, therefore, equipped to give counsel that not only encourages but also challenges us all. There is a message here for every Christian—for the self-pitying pastor (“Why am I being so unjustly criticized?”) and the self-assured one (“Surely they can’t possibly be criticizing someone with my gifts and position!”), and the critical church member who enjoys having “roast pastor” for Sunday lunch and nibbles at the leftovers during the rest of the week—if we have the honesty to recognize ourselves.

The counsel given in *Pastors and Their Critics* will prepare the seminary student for his calling and give stability to the pastor in his ministry. It underlines the fact that as it was with the Master and his apostles and prophets, so it will be with us: we will experience criticism; we should expect nothing less. Nor should we ever lose sight of our blessings: the high privilege of ministry and people who encourage us. And we should not forget that the Lord can use even hostile instruments to sanctify us and make us fruitful. At the end of the day, the only words that will really matter to us will be our Lord saying, perhaps in a way that brings us to tears of mingled relief and unimaginable bliss, “Well done . . . faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your Lord.”

Perhaps I may be allowed a few personal words here, without intruding into the work of the authors. Although by no means the longest standing of Joel Beeke’s many friends, we share a friendship that began at a seminar on the theology of John Calvin at Westminster Seminary in the early 1980s. What neither of us could have predicted then was that our meeting would be the beginning of a now four-decades-long friendship. During these years, I have watched the gradual emergence of his ministry, rooted in a self-recognized conservative Dutch-tradition congregation, into one that has reached the ends of the earth.

It is in this context that I am eager to commend *Pastors and Their Critics*. For during these years, I have watched my friend experience the realities he describes in its pages, and much more

besides; indeed very much more—experiences calculated to discourage and destroy even strong and able men.

Throughout these years, Joel Beeke has sought to maintain a single eye for God's glory and to model a pastor's concern that all under his care (not to mention many others) should enjoy full assurance of faith in Christ and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. He has by no means done this alone. As he would be the first to acknowledge, he has been wonderfully supported by his wife Mary, surrounded by his children and his wider family circle, and strengthened by elders and God's people in his church who have devotedly shared his ministry, as well as by a team of fellow workers at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and Reformation Heritage Books and a brotherhood of fellow pastors bound up together with him in a common vision and fellowship.

It is, therefore, out of his knowledge of God's Word, God's providence, God's servants, and God's people that the burden to speak and now write on this theme of handling criticism has developed. In *Pastors and their Critics*, he has ably discharged this "burden of the Lord." May the wisdom he shares in it help to humble our pride, strengthen us in our weakness, comfort us in our pain, and make us more deeply sensitive to one another. This is Joel Beeke's desire for his fellow pastors and their people because it is, surely, the desire of the One who is the Bishop and Pastor of the flock for which He laid down His life.

Sinclair B. Ferguson

INTRODUCTION

A LARGELY UNADDRESSED PROBLEM

The day has finally come. You have survived seminary, sustained your ordination exams, and been called to pastor a local church. You experience a profound eagerness in your soul as you step out to follow God's call. You have a hopeful expectation that the sheep entrusted to your care will be built up in faith and holiness through your labors. You have a sanctified aspiration to bring the gospel to lost souls. You have an energy and excitement about the things of God more far-reaching than you have ever experienced before. *What an awesome privilege it is to be a pastor*, you think to yourself.

Soon, however, this sense of ministerial privilege begins to wane. What is the cause of the decline? The prospect that initially appeared bright as the noonday sun has quickly been overshadowed by the clouds of ministerial problems, and in particular, ministerial opposition. On the day of your ordination, dealing with criticism was the farthest thing from your mind. And as you think back on your seminary career, you can't recall ever being taught how to handle such verbal opposition. But here you are, only months into the ministry and already the target of negative

words. Perhaps it is your preaching they are unhappy with or the fact that you are not as gregarious as their previous pastor. Whatever it might be, you find yourself receiving verbal backlash. Sure, you expected such opposition from unbelievers. But from your own sheep? The disillusionment begins to sink in. It becomes a daily fight to keep the joys of knowing God, proclaiming His Word, and serving His people from being swallowed up by the harsh words of your congregants or colleagues in the ministry.

This is by no means an uncommon experience. While not every pastor experiences serious criticism from his people in the first months of his ministry, every pastor will meet with it sooner or later. As an old Dutch saying goes, “He who stands in the front will soon be kicked in the rear.”

While being criticized is a common pastoral experience, it is, by and large, an unaddressed problem. The majority of men being trained for gospel ministry are not being taught how to handle and respond to such verbal blows. And the consequences of this neglect are grave. A lack of training can quickly lead to disillusionment regarding the ministry, and in far too many cases, even resignation. Being on the receiving end of criticism for any length of time can result in exasperation, insomnia, cynicism, burnout, and even despair.

We have written this book to address this largely unaddressed problem. Helpful material has been written on the subject; as our footnotes will make plain throughout, there are valuable resources dealing with different facets of ministerial critique. But to date, we are not aware of a book that deals comprehensively with the various dimensions of criticism in the Christian ministry from a biblical and Reformed perspective. Such a work is urgently needed for pastors today.

Pastors and Their Critics is broken into four parts. In part one, we lay the biblical foundations for coping with criticism. Broadly tracing the theme of verbal flak from Genesis to Revelation, we

seek to ground our understanding of the criticism we face today in its proper biblical and redemptive-historical context. In part two, we provide practical principles for coping with criticism in the ministry. This section comprises the bulk of the book, setting forth the biblical wisdom necessary to receive and respond to criticism in a God-honoring, Christlike way. In part three, we offer practical principles for constructive criticism in the church, discussing how to give criticism as a pastor and how to foster a culture open to criticism in your local congregation. We conclude in part four by setting forth a theological vision for coping with criticism in the gospel ministry, followed by an appendix addressing how to prepare while in seminary for the fires of criticism.

If you are not a pastor and have no aspirations for pastoral ministry, this book is still for you! While we have chosen to focus more narrowly on gospel ministry, the main truths and principles found herein apply to every Christian and every vocation. None of us are exempt from receiving or giving criticism. Thus, we encourage you to take up this book and read!

Pastors and Their Critics has been a joint collaboration, but because of Joel's forty-plus years of pastoral experience, almost all the real-life scenarios found in these pages are his. He rather humorously, yet seriously, asserts that this is finally a book he feels qualified to write because he has had plenty of experience coping with criticism! Rather than continually clarifying this and drawing unnecessary attention to the author, we have decided to only make note when a personal example is from Nick's experience. We trust this will not cause confusion.

As will become clear in the pages ahead, learning to cope with criticism and to give criticism in the Christian ministry is largely a matter of the heart. There are painful lessons we must learn here, and they are seldom learned quickly or easily. For this reason, we encourage you not to breeze through this book in an hour, but to prayerfully ponder and slowly digest it.

As authors, we are grateful for the opportunity to work together on this book and are also thankful for our wives, Mary and Tessa, who helped us rather than criticized us as we pressed on with writing! What a gift a largely affirmative spouse—who also knows how to give constructive criticism—is to a minister (or theological student) who wants to truly grow in serving God faithfully and well! We are grateful to Dave Almack and P&R for pursuing us and cooperating so effectively with us in writing this book. Thanks also to Paul Smalley for his assistance on the first two chapters of this book and to Ray Lanning for doing a helpful editorial pass for us. And finally, thanks to our critics—without them this book would not be what it is and we would not be what we are, by God’s grace!

We pray that God will use *Pastors and Their Critics* to work the sanctifying influences of His Word in your soul and ministry, enabling you to endure with joy through the furnace of criticism and come out the better for it. As with any other cross, criticism cannot be so heavy that God’s grace cannot sustain you under its weight and enable you to profit from its pain.

PART 1

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR COPING WITH CRITICISM

1

OLD TESTAMENT FOUNDATIONS FOR COPING WITH CRITICISM

In waging spiritual warfare, God's people often must advance under withering verbal fire from critics of all kinds. This is true today, and it was true in ancient times. Unjust criticism is woven like a black thread throughout covenant history.¹ While it is not possible to provide a comprehensive biblical theology of criticism in these pages, we want to present some of the most striking Old Testament examples. As we study them, we discover principles for coping with criticism that apply to all who would follow the cross-bearing Messiah.

PRELAPSARIAN CRITICISM: GOD

Who was the first target of unjust criticism? The answer may surprise you. The earliest appearance of character-distorting

1. While this book addresses both constructive and destructive criticism, this chapter will focus primarily on the latter as it is found throughout God's old covenant revelation. There are certainly many examples of constructive critique found in the Old Testament. One thinks, for example, of the prophetic witness critiquing and rebuking Israel that she might be brought to repentance for her covenant-breaking.

verbal abuse was actually in the garden of Eden. And the object of this destructive criticism was God Himself.

Having created a cosmos in the space of six days, God created man as the crowning jewel of His creation. He placed Adam in a garden paradise to tend and keep it as a priest-king, generously providing His image-bearing creature with a vast array of trees and fruits to eat from and commanding him not to eat only from one tree (see Gen. 2:15–17). In the bond of the covenant of life, God and man enjoyed perfect fellowship unhindered from sin and mistrust.

Into this prelapsarian bliss, however, a serpent intruded himself. He was a crafty beast, the vehicle through which Satan would carry out his destructive scheme to deface the glory of God. How would he do this? By words—deceitful, godless words. The chatter by which he seduced our first parents was in the form of criticism. And though spoken to man, this criticism was directed squarely at God Himself. The serpent’s temptation came in the form of a lie about God, attacking “both God’s generosity and his integrity.”²

He began with a seemingly innocent question: “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” (Gen. 3:1). But this question was anything but innocent. By it he not only questioned the veracity of God’s Word (“Has God *really* said?”), but he also subtly distorted the nature of the prohibition. God had not forbidden our first parents from eating of *every* tree in Eden. He had clearly told them, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat,” keeping from them only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16–17). The serpent’s question portrayed God as stingy and restrictive.

2. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, & Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 69.

Satan began with a pallid criticism easily undetected, but when Eve's response indicated that he had succeeded in planting seeds of doubt in her mind concerning God's word and character, his verbal attack on God became undeniably bold. He now asserted in no uncertain terms that God was a liar, emphatically declaring, "Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). The serpent "openly accuses God of falsehood," writes Calvin, "for he asserts that the word by which death was denounced is false and delusive."³ And the reason given by the deceiver as to why God lied was that He did not want mankind to rival His deity (see Gen. 3:5). Satan was in essence saying, "God is one whose motives make His word unreliable. He lies from selfishness."⁴ A major question mark was placed over the trustworthiness of His word just by marring His character. The thrice holy God was slandered as a restrictive, envious, unloving liar.

When we suffer from the false accusations and character-disfiguring words of others, our minds should be quick to return to this grim garden conspiracy wherein our Creator was vilified by the serpent. It is one thing for a creature to be criticized unjustly by another creature, but it is the atrocity of atrocities for the Creator of all things to be verbally assassinated by a mere creature. The first person ever criticized was the only One who has nothing in Him worthy of criticism. When we are criticized, even falsely so, there is usually at least a sliver of truth in what is being said. This sliver of truth gives the criticism clout. But not so with God. "God is not a man, that he should lie" (Num. 23:19). He "is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). There is not the slightest blemish in the divine character worthy of criticism. In the garden we find verbal injustice in its most concentrated form.

3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 150 (exposition of Gen. 3:4).

4. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 36.

The first account of abusive words in covenant history resulted in the fall of mankind, which in turn became the source of all destructive criticism thereafter.⁵ What we find as we read through the Old Testament is a history littered with the Serpent's deceit. And we can be certain it will continue so long as the cosmic war between Satan and the Savior continues (see Gen. 3:15). As you face unjust criticism in the ministry, it is imperative for you to understand that your suffering is not a personal, isolated experience, but a part of the great redemptive-historical drama whose chief antagonist is the devil (literally "the slanderer").

This truth ought to be comforting, though it is not always easy to cling to in times of criticism. I must confess that I've had numerous times in my life where I felt more alone than taken up in this great redemptive-historical drama. There was a season in my thirties when Satan became very real to me, and I felt attacked from all quarters by him and a few colleagues. I remember vividly telling the Lord aloud in a desperate tone of voice that there was no minister on earth attacked at that moment like I was. Certainly no one had experienced what I was going through! Loneliness, self-pity, the reality of Satan, and a sense of desperation seemed overwhelming to me. I felt the rushing river of satanic criticism would never be calm again. There was no end in sight. Nights were often sleepless, though at times God would give me some respite. One night in particular, when sleep was impossible until around 4:30 a.m., two texts entered my mind that served me better than any sleeping pill ever could do: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15) and "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful,

5. All constructive criticism likewise has its source in the fall since there would be no fault to be found in man prior to sin.

who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Then I saw and understood my part in the redemptive-historical drama and was able to gain the victory over the devil—at least for a few weeks! What a blessing that God’s Word is stronger than Satan’s actions!

PRIESTLY CRITICISM: MOSES AND AARON

The Serpent in his craftiness strategically aims his disparaging lies at the anointed leaders of God’s people. Few Old Testament leaders suffered from these fiery darts of Satan to the degree that Moses did. From day one of his ministry, he faced seething verbal abuse from his own people (see Ex. 5:21). Within a week of their mighty deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the people were venting complaints toward their God-appointed deliverer (see Ex. 15:24; 16:2–3). Their forty years of wandering in the wilderness were marked by recurrent floods of unjust criticism hatefully aimed at this man of God, even by his own brother and sister (see Num. 12:1–3; 14:1–4).

In Numbers 16 we are introduced to four men, a Levite named Korah and three Reubenites named Dathan, Abiram, and On. These men united with other members of the covenant community in order to assault the leadership of Moses and Aaron (see vv. 1–2). Filled with envy and hatred, they issued devastating critiques of the ministries of these men of God.

First, Korah and his band of followers uttered accusations against Aaron, claiming that he had abused his authority and arrogantly exalted himself above the people: “Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?” (v. 3). Notice the truth that is carefully twisted in order to undermine Aaron’s

high priestly ministry. Korah's premise is true; his accusation is false. Israel was indeed a holy nation (see Ex. 19:6), indicated in the immediately preceding context by the commandment to make fringes on the peoples' garments to remind them of their part in the covenant, to do all His commandments and be holy unto their God (see Num. 15:37–41). There is truth here, but it is abused, or used to a bad end.⁶ The “set-apartness” of the people did not eliminate God-given order or authority structures among the people. The Lord Himself had called Aaron (see Heb. 5:4) as the representative high priest of His people. Thus, we find here “an expression of unjust criticism. . . . an unkind and untrue allegation” leveled against Aaron.⁷ Such verbal abuse typically warps some form of truth. Scripture may be wrested or handled deceitfully to make it appear that God is on the side of the critic. As leaders of God's people, we must exercise great wisdom to discern whether “biblical” criticism is truly biblical.

What led Korah to distort the truth and wrongly oppose his spiritual leader? He was jealous of Aaron's position. Ironically, Korah was a Levite, possessing a noble vocation and the high responsibility of caring for the tabernacle of God. The two hundred fifty men with him were “princes” (KJV) or the “chiefs of the congregation” (Num. 16:2 ESV). These were not men of low estate or “sons of Belial.” “It is not those at the bottom of the heap who rebel against God's order,” comments Iain Duguid, “but those who are close to the top and who think they ought themselves to be at the top.”⁸ This is why after highlighting the uncontested privilege of being a Levite, Moses asked, “And seek ye the priesthood also?” (v. 10). Korah was hankering after that

6. This, of course, was the tactic of the serpent in the garden.

7. Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers: Journey to the Promised Land*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 145.

8. Iain M. Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence in the Wilderness*, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 201.

which was not his, hungry for more power and jealous of those whom God had placed over him. Truly, “jealousy is cruel as the grave” (Song 8:6).

At this point the flood of unjust criticism had only begun. Dathan and Abiram, though they had schemed together with Korah, were not willing to oppose Moses and Aaron face-to-face. They freely gossiped about their leaders behind their backs, but left the “dirty work” of confrontation to Korah.⁹ So Moses called for them, but they refused to appear before him (see Num. 16:12). The reasons given came in the form of scathing criticism directed, this time, at Moses. They accused him of murder, bringing them out of Egypt (which, in verse 14, they tellingly called “a land that floweth with milk and honey”) only to kill them in the wilderness. And having done that, Moses had aspired to make himself a “prince” over them (v. 13). He had moreover failed to bring them to the promised land. Though others might be blinded by his deception, they would not be duped by his empty promises (see v. 14).

The reality was that this generation of Israelites would die in the wilderness; they would never reach the promised land. But was this due to a failure on the part of Moses? Had Moses deceived them? Absolutely not. They could not enter Canaan because of their own unbelief (see Ps. 95:7–11; Heb. 4:1–11). Rather than owning their sin and repenting of it, they point the finger at their leader. “Moses is a deceitful, power-hungry murderer,” they propounded. What devastating deception!

We learn here that hidden beneath the surface of destructive criticism are sinful motivations. Such hateful speech may be fueled by an envious hunger for promotion and prestige (Korah) or an attempt to appease one’s conscience by shifting the blame

9. Gordon Keddie, *Numbers: According to Promise*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2010), 114.

of one's own sins to another (Dathan and Abiram). But it never comes out of nowhere. Leaders must be skilled in getting to issues of the heart, as Moses was, helping opponents to see that in their deceit, they are actually siding with the Serpent and against God (see Num. 16:11).

Before responding to his critics, however, it is notable that in both instances Moses first went to God.¹⁰ After Korah's initial verbal assault, Moses "fell upon his face" (v. 4), indicating his humble submission to and dependence on God. Again, after Dathan and Abiram's brutal denunciation, Moses turned in righteous indignation to the Lord (see v. 15). He committed his case to the Lord, seeking His help and wisdom, and only then did he turn to his critics and address them. His prayerful resignation and evident fear of the Lord are exemplary for those who would lead God's people today. We must be slow to rebuke our critics and quick to humble ourselves before God in earnest prayer.

God vindicated His servants in response to their petitions. He caused the earth to devour Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, along with their households (see v. 32). He also consumed with fire the two hundred fifty leaders who had accompanied them in their slanderous escapade (see v. 35). You would think such a manifestation of divine judgment would bring an end to Israel's destructive criticism of their leaders, but they did not get the message. Rather, the next day the entire congregation now murmured against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of wholesale murder: "Ye have killed the people of the LORD" (v. 41). This again led to judgment, but remarkably, Moses and Aaron interceded on behalf of the people, saving the entire congregation from being wiped out by divine wrath (see vv. 43–49). In so doing, they

10. This is characteristic of Moses's entire ministry. It seems that at every point where he is recorded being unjustly criticized, he immediately goes to prayer (see Ex. 5:22–23; 15:25; Num. 14:5), or the Lord immediately intervenes in the situation (see Ex. 16:4; Num. 12:4).

exhibited profound humility and love toward their persecutors. If we would honor the Lord when receiving unjust verbal abuse, we must do the same.

POLITICAL CRITICISM: DAVID

David was another anointed leader among God's people who was no stranger to the slander of the Serpent. One of the darkest times in David's life was the rebellion of his son Absalom, which resulted in nothing less than his attempt to kill David and usurp the throne. When news of this rebellion reached Jerusalem, David and his servants fled the city in great distress (see 2 Sam. 15). Part of the humiliation of this debacle was the knowledge that David had brought this suffering on himself by his own sins (see 2 Sam. 12:10).

To make matters even worse, as David fled from Jerusalem, a kinsman of the late King Saul named Shimei came out and erupted against David like "a human volcano."¹¹ He hurled both words and rocks at the refugees, though it seems from a safe distance (see 2 Sam. 16:5–13). He cursed David as a "bloody man" (a person guilty of bloodshed or violence) and "man of Belial" (a worthless, wicked person), and said, "The LORD hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead thou hast reigned; and the LORD hath delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom thy son: and, behold, thou art taken in thy mischief, because thou art a bloody man" (2 Sam. 16:7–8). Shimei's criticism was especially unfair in that he accused David of doing the very thing that David had not done. Saul, Ishbosheth, and Abner were all at times within the reach of David's vengeance, but David touched none of them.

11. Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 202.

Such unfair criticism is often an irresistible bait for bitter self-justification. When we suffer from abusive words or false accusations, our anger tends to flare up much more easily. Embittered within ourselves, we can respond savagely to those who abuse and irritate us. In fact, David's servant Abishai answered Shimei insult for insult ("this dead dog," v. 9) and offered to remove his head with a sword—and it would have been no surprise had David permitted it. The king would have been justified in having Shimei put to death, for the law of God says, "Thou shalt not . . . curse the ruler of thy people" (Ex. 22:28). However, David did not exact retribution because greater than any personal vindication David might have wanted was his conviction that God was ordering this event in His sovereign mercy and chastening love.

First, David remembered *God's sovereignty over all things*, saying, "Let him curse, because the LORD hath said unto him, Curse David" (2 Sam. 16:10). Not once but twice, David said, "Let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD hath bidden him" (v. 11). David was not suggesting that God had directly spoken to Shimei and commanded him to deliver this unjust criticism. Instead, he recognized that God had decreed all things, even the verbal abuse of his enemies. God had ordered the event, so it came as discipline from the Lord, though the sin involved was from Shimei and Satan.¹² While Shimei had no right to treat David in such a way, God had the right to bring this affliction on David, and David bowed under God's sovereignty, acknowledging that this criticism was from the Lord, as well as justifying the

12. John Gill wrote that God did this "not by way of command, or a precept of his; for to curse the ruler of the people is contrary to the word and law of God (Ex. 22:28); nor by any operation of his Spirit moving and exciting him to it; for the operations of the Spirit are to holiness, and not to sin; but by the secret providence of God ordering, directing, and overruling all circumstances relative to this affair." *Gill's Commentary* (1852–1854; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:285.

Lord, approving the Lord, and even clinging to the Lord. How often in moments of severe criticism we fail to bow under God's sovereignty—just when we need to do so the most! And it is precisely that failure that often brings us into restlessness, distress, and agony. No wonder Martin Luther, who was often criticized on every side, said letting God be God is more than half of all true religion!

Second, David responded meekly because he entrusted himself to *God's omniscient mercy and overruling justice*: "It may be that the LORD will look on mine affliction,¹³ and that the LORD will requite me good for his cursing this day" (2 Sam. 16:12). God had promised to treat David and his offspring with fatherly love (see 2 Sam. 7:14–15), and David submitted to God's discipline with a childlike trust in his Father's goodness. It was God's Word rather than Shimei's words that controlled how David responded. William Blaikie said, "It was better to bear the wrong, and leave the rectifying of it in God's hands; for God detests unfair dealing, and when His servants receive it He will look to it and redress it in His own time and way."¹⁴

These two principles are powerful means of enabling us to respond to criticism in a manner that shows "true greatness,"¹⁵

13. There is a textual issue here. The Masoretic text reads "my iniquity." The marginal reading of the Hebrew text, appearing in some other Hebrew manuscripts, is "my eye," which was interpreted by rabbis as "my tears." The ancient translations such as the LXX and most English translations read "my affliction" (Davis, *2 Samuel*, 203–4). The phrase "look upon iniquity" does not seem to appear in Scripture; the expression "look upon affliction" appears in a number of texts referring to God's compassion (see Gen. 29:32; 31:42; Ex. 3:7; 4:31; Deut. 26:7; 1 Sam. 1:11; 2 Kings 14:26; Neh. 9:9; Pss. 9:13; 25:18; 31:7; 119:153; Lam. 1:7, 9), and therefore is the most likely reading.

14. W. G. Blaikie, *The Second Book of Samuel* (1893; repr., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1978), 247.

15. Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tynedale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 263.

indeed, “a strong resemblance to the meek resignation of Jesus.”¹⁶ We learn to see past the people who harass us and recognize the hand of God controlling all and the heart of God that will make everything right for His people. It is not easy to do this when the wicked pelt us with their verbal stones, but God’s promises give us everything we need to persevere in godliness.

Even after he returned victorious to Jerusalem, David did not exact vengeance on Shimei. Rejecting their counsel against Shimei, David called the bloodthirsty “sons of Zeruah” (Abishai, Joab, and Asahel) his “adversaries” (2 Sam. 19:22). He implied that those who would repay insults with vengeful words and deeds were just as much his enemies as Shimei was.

A real test of the godliness of our response to criticism is how we treat our enemies after the tables are turned—when they no longer have power over us, but we over them (see Ps. 141:5–6). Will we show them grace and mercy then? Or will we take the opportunity to repay them with the same verbal lashing that they gave to us? It is one thing to pass the test of meekness when you are powerless to counterattack. It is another thing to pass the test of magnanimity when your enemy cowers before you. If we use our power to avenge our honor, then we dishonor ourselves.

For several years I had a difficult time coping with one of my members who would come frequently to my study to sharply criticize something I said in a recent sermon. He was the kind of member who would say, “At 37 minutes and 24 seconds into your sermon, you said X, but don’t you think it would have been better and more biblical if you had said Y?” He came so often and was so detailed that I must confess that, apart from the times that he was right, it all became rather disheartening. Finally, I determined that the next time he came, I was going to ask him to save

16. Blaikie, *Second Book of Samuel*, 246.

all his criticisms and come to me with them no more than four times a year. When he sat down this time, however, he said, “You must be weary with me coming to you so often with criticisms of your sermons. Well, I want to confess to you that I have come in the wrong spirit, and I don’t know if there is any room in your heart to possibly forgive me, but I want you to know I am very sorry.” I jumped up immediately, and said, “Stand up, brother! I forgive you completely”—and I gave him a bear hug that I hope he never forgets!

Don’t make your enemies cower before you when they confess their faults. Receive them in the spirit that your heavenly Father receives you when you confess your faults to Him in Christ—immediately, freely, and fully He forgives you (see Ps. 32:5)! Meekness readily forgives our critics; when we are meek we remember what sinners we are as well.

But meekness does not mean standing by and letting the wicked have the upper hand; rather, it is the conviction that though “the wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth,” nevertheless, “the LORD shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming” (Ps. 37:12–13).

POSTEXILIC CRITICISM: NEHEMIAH

Aaron, Moses, and David suffered unjust criticism from those within the covenant community, but often it is those in the world who slander the Lord’s anointed.¹⁷ For an example of this we turn to the great leader of God’s postexilic people, Nehemiah. Exercising a remarkable combination of prayer and leadership skill, Nehemiah mobilized the Israelites who had returned to the ruins

17. Aaron, Moses, and David also knew what it was to be criticized from outside Israel. See, for example, Pharaoh’s false accusations of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 5:4–5 and Goliath’s hateful critique of David in 1 Samuel 17:43–44.

of Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls (see Neh. 1–2)—a strategic act for the future security, honor, and prosperity of God’s people. The inhabitants of Jerusalem responded to Nehemiah’s call with great unity, each family taking on a portion of the wall as its responsibility (see Neh. 3). Their progress, however, did not please the Samaritans (who professed to worship Israel’s God) and the Gentiles living nearby.

Sanballat the Horonite, governor of Samaria, was enraged at the news and scoffed, saying, “What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?” (Neh. 4:2). Tobiah the Ammonite joined in the mockery, saying, “Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall” (Neh. 4:3). Here we find the weapon of ridicule deployed, which “needs no factual ammunition; not even argument.”¹⁸ Yet ridicule “is effective because it strikes at the hidden insecurity or weaknesses which almost everybody has.”¹⁹

Notice that this criticism attacked every aspect of the work:

- the incapacity of the workers (“feeble”);
- the impossibility of their physical and spiritual goals (“fortify” and “sacrifice”);
- the constraints of their timetable (“in a day”);
- the sufficiency of their resources (“heaps of the rubbish which are burned”); and
- the quality of their workmanship (“a fox . . . shall even break it down”).

18. Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 90.

19. James M. Boice, *Nehemiah: Learning to Lead* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 77.

Sanballat and Tobiah literally had nothing good to say; the whole project was a disaster. Perhaps you have encountered such devastating criticism: not a constructive assessment of strengths and weaknesses, but a wholesale assault that makes it look stupid to even try. This is one of Satan's key tactics against God's people. Gerald Bilkes writes, "Rather than issuing an all-out assault on us, which we might more easily recognize, Satan tries to intimidate us psychologically and spiritually. This effective weapon is often successful in immobilizing believers."²⁰

The irony of the text is that this devastating criticism was provoked by the budding success of the wall's reconstruction (see Neh. 4:1). "The first thing we should know," advises James Boice, "if we are trying to do something worthwhile and are being opposed, is that it is because we are achieving something."²¹ Satan rarely attacks our spiritual failures—he does not need to.

A few weeks before working on this chapter, I received an anonymous email in which the author signed his name "Theophilus" (Greek, "He who loves God"). The letter was one of the most scathing I have ever received in my life. It was so bad that I don't want to tell you what it said, in case you would think part or all of it might be true! In fact, I told my wife that I didn't even dare read it to her. I thought I knew who it was from, but it can be tormenting not to know for sure. I tried to pray about it without much success, so I called a very close friend who knows me better than anyone else in the world besides my wife. When I read the letter to him, he said to me, "This is straight from the bottom of hell. There is no truth in it. It doesn't sound like you whatsoever. Throw it away immediately, and get back to work right away. Don't let any Saballat or Tobiah keep you from doing

20. Gerald M. Bilkes, *Memoirs of the Way Home: Ezra and Nehemiah as a Call to Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 107.

21. Boice, *Nehemiah*, 72.

the Lord's work." I followed my friend's advice to throw it away, praying for forgiveness if any part of this letter (God forbid!) was true. Then I went straight back to work.

Notice that Nehemiah does the same thing. The text does not record any direct response from Nehemiah. He had answered them already by his diligence in performing the necessary leadership tasks in this great building project. He may have felt it a waste of words to reply to such mean-spirited criticism. However, he lifted his voice to God: "Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: and cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders" (Neh. 4:4–5). Nehemiah prayed for the covenant-keeping God to vindicate His people and punish the wicked who opposed them. Then he got back to work: "So built we the wall . . . for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6).

There are situations when it is a waste of time to defend yourself before men. The best defense is to appeal to God and keep on working. If people have sincere and significant questions about a project, then by all means answer them honestly and courteously, but if they are only out to slander and obstruct, don't let them slow you down. Don't be distracted. Keep your eyes on the Lord and your hands busy in His work.

On top of his verbal abuse, Sanballat repeatedly attempted to lure Nehemiah away from the worksite in order to do him harm, but Nehemiah wisely replied that he was too busy to come down (see Neh. 6:1–4). Finally, Sanballat sent Nehemiah an open letter accusing him of stirring up the Jews to rebel against the Persian empire and set himself up as their king (see Neh. 6:5–7). This is a typical move by hostile, destructive critics (as opposed to constructive critics): if their criticisms of the project fail to impede it, then they shift to personal attacks on its leader, in this case

with dangerous political implications. These were charges based on unnamed sources and altogether false.

How did Nehemiah respond? He denied the charges (see v. 8), but recognized that the accusations had stirred up fear, and so gave himself to more prayer: “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” (v. 9). When personal attacks lead to debilitating anxiety, it is wise to pray for more grace to persevere in boldness and faithfulness. What resources we find through prayer!

The result was that the wall was finished in just fifty-two days, the enemies of Israel were discouraged and defeated, and God was publicly glorified as the One who had made it all happen (see vv. 15–16). What followed was nothing less than biblical reformation, covenant renewal, and the restoration of true worship among the people of God.

In the midst of fierce criticism, it strengthens us to remember that if we do not grow weary in well-doing, we will reap a harvest in due time (see Gal. 6:9). We might feel we are hacking our way through a forest of thorns one step at a time, but by our weary arm and many wounds we are blazing a trail for others to follow. Who knows how God might use that trail in the future? He can “do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). Christ is not idle, but works in and through His servants even to the end of the age (see Matt. 28:20). Persevere in the work, hope in the Lord, and—like Moses, David, and Nehemiah—you will find that God remembers you for good.