

## Church Criticism

An editorial comment by Bill Eichner

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One need not look far to find criticism of God's beloved church. Some who have apostatized engage in throwing all kinds of "critical" rocks at its windows. Their agenda, making them easy to spot, is to destroy. Only rarely does one come upon the kind of criticism actually calculated to build up. Websites, books, and papers abound with the toxic kind.

But if someone disagrees, why not just develop their own denomination, and leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church alone?" This approach would not serve the Devil's plan very well; his *is* a program of destruction. But legitimate criticism can be helpful. How can we tell the right stuff from the negative?

Some, wishing only to unmask erroneous beliefs, have been labeled as being "critical." So. If you gained knowledge of an error being promoted, what would you do? Keep it to yourself? Tell only your best friends? Tell the Pastor? Write the person promoting the error? Might someone label you as a troublemaker? Perhaps. Don't worry; you'll be in good company.

And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim (1 Kings 18:17, 18).

Even Jesus was condemned for criticizing the rulers in Matthew 23-25. Their response was to plot His murder.

Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, And consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill Him (Matthew 26:3, 4).

Does the layman or the pastor have a responsibility to unmask error, or this to be left only to scholars and administrators? Is God the only one to separate the wheat from the tares? Is such unmasking always done directly, by a prophet or an audible voice from heaven?

His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber (Isaiah 56:10).

I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence (Isaiah 62:6).

Also I set watchmen over you, saying, Hearken to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not hearken . . . Hear, O earth: behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto My words, nor to My law, but rejected it (Jeremiah 6:17, 19).

People can and will be lost if we remain silent and unfaithful to our duties. The truths bequeathed to us are no trifling matters. True love delivers truth. Fair-minded persons should be able to see the difference between blatant misrepresentation and the legitimate way of calling attention to error. How does one do this?

First, Jesus had tears in His eyes while speaking against error. He was genuinely saddened that the delivery of such pointed warnings was necessary, and that often His healing balm was rejected. When we warn others, when we offer theological correctives, are we secretly glad to do this? Or have we prayed over these questions and sought God in private for a receptivity in their souls?

Secondly, are we ready to be steadfast? Do we understand that inspiration still places this personal responsibility upon us? Each of us would do well to heed the instructions given us in inspiration. If we have knowledge of error we are to reprove in love the person responsible.

If God abhors one sin above another, of which His people are guilty, it is doing nothing in case of an emergency. Indifference and neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as a grievous crime, and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God (*Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 281).

If a brother is teaching error, those who are in responsible positions ought to know it; and if he is teaching truth, they ought to take their stand at his side. We should all know what is being taught among us; for if it is truth, we need to know it. The Sabbath-school teacher needs to know it, and every Sabbath-school scholar ought to understand it . . . . But if it is according to this test, do not be so full of prejudice that you cannot acknowledge a point simply because it does not agree with your ideas (*Gospel Workers*, 1892 ed., p. 130).

Thirdly, we need to have mercy and recognize that some may have a mind-set problem. They are always critical of reform. Their maxim is, "Do not question the leadership." "God's anointed are off limits to laity." They find it easy to say, "let God do it." As others, they have their own prejudices. Perhaps they are just worn out, and that approach takes the least effort. The unseen may be feared, and so it is deferred, ignored. Can we find a gentle way to help these brothers and sisters? Perhaps we can find a way to help lift their burdens, to be kind to them, to be a means of helping reduce their stress from the cares of the world. Eventually, they may feel like they can take on new questions.

Fourthly, we should also uphold those who so tirelessly spread truth. They need our encouragement, for theirs is a difficult task. Let us pray for our church and for God's gifts to be manifest in her midst. They may present us with uncomfortable light sometimes. We need His grace to discern that light and to respond to what Heaven shines upon us.

Fifthly, to acquire an attitude of kindness and humility, is of primary importance before we speak. We need to pray for this, seek it. Our communication should be winning, even when the content is disturbing. When we ourselves have erred, we should admit it.

At the bottom line, let us be discerning and thoughtful so that our actions and words in any communication are Christlike. We need to understand the difference between destructive and instructive criticism. The first tears down, and is not of God. The second removes blight caused

by compromise with the world. There is no shortage of the first, and we are too often unreceptive to the latter. May God give us ears to hear and hearts to respond. You and I both know we need it. The church of the living God will be blessed.

**Biographical Note:** Bill Eichner is elder at the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Sandy, Oregon. He co-leads a mid-week study group and teaches Sabbath school. Bill serves as a certified nursing assistant at the Adventist hospital in Portland, Oregon. He lives with wife of 44 years, Peggy, and son Jeremy, a civilian engineer for the Army Corps of engineers.