

Criticism

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What is criticism anyhow? The dictionary will give some meaning akin to this: to make judgments as to the merits or faults of a thing, or maybe to find fault. Certainly, we understand a critic to be one who is qualified to make such judgments or point out such faults. Sometimes the word "critic" is used pejoratively to describe a continual fault-finder, one who judges severely or harshly.

Criticism is part of life. It's everywhere, both in its formal and pejorative senses. Teachers, qualified educators, criticize the work of their students. Parents, by right of who they are, criticize their children, hopefully for their good. Supervisors criticize their subordinates in the interest of more or better production. In the arts, media, and almost every other area of life, those qualified to do so criticize: music, movies, paintings, literary works, and a host of other kinds of artistic performances.

One of the purposes of the Bible is to criticize. It criticizes man's thoughts (Matt. 15:9; Col. 3:1-2). It criticizes his actions (Ezk. 18:20), and brings him under the condemnation of his own transgressions (Isa. 59:1-2). Positively ('scuse the word, please), it serves to identify pure religion (Jas. 1:27) and, in doing so, is critical of the institutional or poorly motivated variety. Preaching has as one of its purposes to criticize (II Tim. 4:1-2). The Bible points out man's weaknesses, identifies the pitfalls of life, continually calls him to greater service and spiritual maturity. Criticism is a vital part of that.

But not all criticism is approved, either by God or man. It does not stand alone— even by definition, certainly not by connotation. It must be properly administered. First, it must be administered by one who is qualified. Criticism of anything by a novice, or one only vaguely familiar with what he is criticizing, is not just out of order, it is ludicrous. Such criticism is easily identifiable and makes the "critic" look foolish indeed. Criticism that is poorly motivated and has slanderous or malevolent overtones often ends up destroying him who did it; and it certainly works no good for the once who is its object. Criticism has to be legitimate or it ends up not being criticism at all. It becomes loud, vitriolic complaining, little else. And criticism just for the sake of doing it is the plaything of a fool.

What is Bible criticism? Well, first of all, all biblically approved criticism is constructive or it is not biblical. Even when it is disciplinary it is intended for the good of the recipient, not just to vent displeasure or display disgust (I Cor. 5:4). That implies proper motivation. Criticism intended to inflict damage for damage's sake is not only ineffective, it is sinful. God hates those who "sow discord among the brethren" (Prov. 6:19). You had best not criticize another until you have first determined that you love him whom you criticize and that what you are doing is for his betterment. "Ye which are

spiritual, restore such a one, in the spirit of meekness" (Gal. 6:1); that is, with moderation. Even when you have made certain of a high motive for the rebuke, it is yet necessary that each consider "thyself, lest thou also be tempted."

Criticism is not a knee-jerk reaction, either. It is done only after careful thought and considerable prayer. "Ye that are spiritual, restore such a one" (Gal. 6:1) means that you are one who is spiritually inclined, one looking to "bear...one another's burdens." You have to load yourself up with his burden before you decide to slay him for his fault. Matthew 18 sets forth a process (a series of actions) before a person is delivered up to Satan. Even Jesus' rebukes of the Pharisees and their hypocrisy was reserved until He had tried most everything else to cause them to see the errors they fomented.

Certainly, we must be ready to answer those who question our hope. But even that issues out of a sanctified heart and must be done "with meekness and fear" (I Pet. 3:15-18). A quick answer very often represents an effort to "get even," and, in many cases, that is precisely what happens: you get right down in the mud where your opponent is.

Here are four suggestions about offering criticisms:

1. Examine your motive for the criticism. "Why am I doing this?" Is a good question to ask yourself. If there is any doubt, wait. (See I Jno. 4:19-21)
2. Make sure you have all the facts. Not what someone said someone said, but what he said. And that no matter how much confidence you may have in the one telling it. He may be wrong. In this age of communication there is little reason not to get the facts, and most likely the facts can come only from him who said it. (See Prov. 18:21)
3. Be careful how you say it. I have a little card on my desk. I wrote it several years ago. It has served me well. It says, "God, help me not to say more than need be said, and help me to say it softly." A seasoned tongue can accomplish great good with criticism; one not seasoned can produce great evil. (See Col. 4:6)
4. Pray diligently (out loud) for the one you are criticizing. It is just reasonable that you will be more gentle, less caustic and abrasive, after you have prayed for the one you plan to criticism against. (See Jas. 5:16)

Criticism is serious business.