

## **Pastoral Abuse**

Written by Steve Marr  
Monday, 04 March 2002 17:00

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Pastor Walter slumped into the armchair in his study, feeling devastated. It seemed that every leader in the church wanted to take a piece out of him. One of the elders had layered on the guilt for a list of tasks that he believed the pastor had neglected, another had called him lazy because he had missed a committee meeting. And he was still reeling from the out-of-control anger he had absorbed during a phone call from a member of the congregation.

At one time or another, every pastor has borne the brunt of a personal attack. Many pastors read 1 Corinthians 13:4, "Love suffers long and is kind..." (NKJV), and mistakenly believe that they must tolerate long-term suffering or else become guilty of sin themselves by not enduring reproach. Many believe that their only recourse when they are assailed or treated badly is to stuff their feelings and turn the other cheek. Some pastors continue to put up with disparagement because they fail to distinguish abuse from the occasional suffering that accompanies a godly walk. However, allowing others to walk over you in the name of the Church is every bit as wrong as allowing a child to disregard his parents.

Mistreatment of pastors comes in many forms, but three of the more prevalent methods are severe temper tantrums, misuse of guilt, and abuse of spiritual authority.

### **Temper Tantrums**

Using anger to intimidate another person is always wrong, and just as a pastor must not allow his own anger to overwhelm his self-control, he must not permit other leaders or church

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members to impose their will inappropriately. The first time that wrath is unleashed in his direction, a pastor may wait, if possible, but then he must confront the offender privately to explain that displays of temper are unacceptable, unscriptural, and will not be tolerated. Furthermore, the pastor should make it clear that any future outbursts of inappropriate anger will be dealt with publicly. Then he must follow through gently, but firmly. By applying consistent discipline to improper behavior, the pastor establishes appropriate boundaries and reinforces biblical principles for handling conflict and confrontation.

### **Guilt Trips**

Pastors are constantly being pulled in every direction by the needs of the congregation. No one person could possibly be expected to meet every need. Not even Superman would take on such a burden. Nevertheless, if the pastor doesn't jump to their every beck and call, some people have a knack for laying on the guilt. The antidote to blame and faultfinding is to maintain a perspective that is centered on God and His guidance, rather than on all the needs in the body. Ask, "Father, what needs would you have me meet today, this week, this month?" Then allow the Lord to establish your priorities and endeavor to meet only those needs that He shows you.

When a pastor responds to pressure from the people rather than the leading of the Holy Spirit, two negative results inevitably occur. First, he begins to burn out as he runs hither and yonder trying to cover all the bases, and he also interferes with the Lord's plan to raise up someone else to meet the need. It's no wonder that one-third of all pastors leave the ministry every five years, and that many parishioners never grow to spiritual maturity by stepping up to the plate in Christian service. Consequently, the progress of ministry and the growth of the body is hindered.

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Lay leaders may misuse spiritual authority by quoting Scripture out of context, or resorting to church by-laws or a church manual to prove a point. When someone rises during a meeting and says, "Pastor, page 79, paragraph 4, section E says..." the intent is usually to be quarrelsome, not productive. These attacks must be stopped by refocusing attention on the spirit of the issue, not on some legalistic point.

### **Setting Appropriate Boundaries**

The Lord set boundaries in His ministry, and every pastor should follow His example. Jesus confronted the Pharisees (see Matthew 23:13 and Luke 16:14-17) and overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple for stealing from God's people. He confronted wrongdoing head on, and His response was crystal clear: Repent. As he told the woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:11 NKJV). True repentance requires a change of heart, a change of attitude and a change of behavior.

The challenge for pastor is to determine reasonable and appropriate boundaries, establish the limits, and then abide by them. Most pastors who fail to hold the line are either afraid to confront people in the church or they mistakenly believe that "rolling with the punches" is somehow more noble or spiritually mature.

Allowing parishioners to run roughshod over the pastor hurts the kingdom of God in several ways. First and foremost, it violates the scriptural mandate to respect and honor our leaders (see 1 Timothy 5:17). Also, shabby treatment of the pastor inevitably spreads to other members of the congregation and the community. Third, the entire body suffers when the pastor suffers, because defending himself from incessant attack saps his energy and draws his attention away from the work of the ministry. Finally, if the offenders are never brought to discipline, they will never grow into the fullness of life in Jesus Christ. We all need to be confronted lovingly but firmly about our sin. Failure to confront abuses in the church leads only to more egregious offenses. Our silence only sanctions greater sin.

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### **Establishing firm boundaries is a three-step process:**

1. Set the ground rules. Every pastor should clearly explain to the staff, church leaders and members what type of behavior is not acceptable and why. If he has allowed his boundaries to be violated in the past, it is time to politely but firmly establish that the rules have changed.
2. Act quickly and decisively when treated badly. When stung with a word, some pastors will use the word "ouch" to make their point. If possible, talk to the offending person privately, outlining the issue, clarifying the standard, and asking for a change in the future. If an apology is in order, ask for one. Contrition is a key part of repentance.
3. If the offense is repeated, don't back off. Follow up with the offender and explain the consequences that will apply if the inappropriate behavior happens again. For example, a person may be removed from leadership if he fails to control his temper, or he may be reproved publicly (see 1 Timothy 5:20).

The Reverend Jack Woodburn, director of Colonial Woods Christian Center in Port Huron Michigan and an expert in pastoral counseling, writes, "Pastors must be willing not to tolerate any sort of ungodliness. In the minds of [some] people, long-suffering [means] to live out turning the other cheek. They have actually spiritualized acceptance of abuse as though by doing so it will add another jewel to their crown. Nothing could be further from the truth. Therefore, when long-suffering becomes ungodly and a pastor allows it to continue, he is modeling a lifestyle that Jesus would never condone. It is destructive not only for the pastor, but for those watching and learning how to live."

Strong pastoral leadership in confronting spiritual abuse and offenses in the church will accomplish several beneficial results. The offenders will be compelled to grow up, the church will be spared long-term contention and discord, and other pastors will not suffer abuse. Furthermore, the pastor will be free to accomplish all that God desires for him in ministry.

A pastor's example in accepting godly suffering, but drawing the line appropriately, as Jesus did, will strengthen his ministry, the Church, and God's kingdom. On the other hand, if a congregation stands by and allows the pastor to absorb spiritual abuse-and refuses to repent and change when given the opportunity-God's final discipline may be to remove His chosen

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shepherd from their midst, sending him to another flock in another pasture.

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach

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