

ADMONISH ONE ANOTHER

No one has many kind words to say about critics. No one erects a statue to a critic. One critic, Kenneth Tynan, once said that critics are those who know the way but can't drive the car. We perhaps have been on the end of statements that begin, "I don't like to be critical but...". I can recall that the first question I was asked by an examining chaplain before I went into Moore College was about how I could handle criticism.

With all that in mind, it seems criticism is a pretty fearsome thing. Can do a lot of damage. Perhaps not to have any place in the Christian church. But this is not so. One of the many "one another" commands in the Bible is that we admonish one another (COLOSSIANS 3:16). Jesus himself did some admonishing. He urges us to be critically discerning of the teaching we receive (MATTHEW 7:15-20). He is on record as getting stuck into both hypocritical Pharisees and misguided disciples. So let's see how we can admonish one another without becoming nagging critics who poison church life.

Good to do this by focusing on MATTHEW 7:1-5. Here Jesus is warning against judging others. He warns against trying to get a bit of sawdust out of someone else's eye when we have a whopping four by two in our own eye. And yet, smuggled into this passage is his statement that we are indeed to seek to remove that bit of sawdust. In other words, some admonition, some criticism, is appropriate. Let's explore what might make it so.

First, this matter of judging. The word often has the connotation of condemning. I am not to pronounce condemnation on others. It is not up to me to make sweeping verdicts as if I know all the facts and can determine the innermost motives of someone's heart. So we may draw two conclusions. One is that any admonition is to be tentative, qualified. We don't know all the facts. Do we know what is behind that person's behaviour?

The American writer and speaker, Chuck Swindoll, told a story about this. He was speaking at a major conference and each day he noticed a man in the very front row who was constantly falling asleep as he spoke. This got to him. He resolved to address the individual concerned about their discourtesy. But before he could do so, the man's wife came to him. She apologised for her husband's inattention. She explained that he was in the last stages of cancer and his medication caused drowsiness. But it was his great wish that before he died he wanted to hear Swindoll speak. He loved his books but longed to hear him speak. That changed everything for Chuck Swindoll. He had been tempted to make a snap judgement about a man's discourtesy. Now he saw how wrong such a judgement would be.

Whenever we admonish, we do well to take time to grasp just what is going on. We resist the urge to make snap judgements, to react aggressively. Admonition and anger are not a good mix.

And then admonition is to be constructive, not condemnatory. When God admonishes me, he does it ensure I get back on track, that I live as he desires me to live. It is for my good. God isn't some bad tempered git who hits out at those who upset him. He corrects and rebukes because he only wants what is best for us. So we need to ask ourselves if this characterises our admonition of others.

We can offer further light on this by looking at MATTHEW 7:3-5. We summarise Jesus by saying that if we are to admonish others we must first do some self admonition. To deal with others' failings, we need also to be dealing with our own. Think what a delicate and challenging job it is to literally remove a speck from someone's eye. Think how dangerous and unwise it would be to try to do so without having clear vision yourself. So it is with trying to correct someone else without being well aware of your own failings and be at work on them. Not to say we have to be perfect, but we do have to be self aware and humble.

Without such humility, we become arrogant busybodies. And something more subtle may be going on as well. Something we can

call “projection”. This happens when I am reluctant to deal with my own problems and instead project them on to you. Preachers may do it: I feel guilty about not being passionate about evangelism so I try to make you feel guilty about it as well. Or you may find malicious gossip a problem in your life. Rather than deal with it, you tend to find the fault in others and insist they deal with it. Gives you a sense of self righteous satisfaction!

We can also run into another related problem. We may be unaware of our own frustrations and unhappiness and out of our own unresolved despondency can ooze a toxic overflow. We develop a critical spirit. Overcome by our own logs, we magnify the specks in others’ lives. We can so despise ourselves that we inevitably despise others. We can think so little of ourselves that we can’t find much good in others either. Such people wear very dark glasses, making the whole world dark. Any healthy church needs to watch for any who have critical spirits. Because misery and self deprecation are contagious. They need to be admonished.

We are to rebuke or correct in the right spirit and for good purposes. We can’t do this if we are entangled in our own wilderness of fear or confusion or unhappiness. We will confuse our own situation with the other person’s situation. We will get off on the wrong foot because we have a wrong heart. Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind in GALATIANS 6:1. He urges those who are spiritual to bring a straying Christian back on track. To be spiritual means to be led by and dominated by the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

Two more comments can be made about misguided admonition. One is that we are to keep a sense of proportion. Like forgiveness, keep it for the major issues. Don’t spend too much time admonishing someone who doesn’t get your cup of tea just right at morning tea. Keep it for occasions when you can see there are implications for the church as a whole.

Linked to this, we don’t admonish sundry strangers. Godly admonition seems to presume a relationship. We have a right to speak because their behaviour affects relationships. Admonition

best comes from someone who is already in a reasonably healthy relationship with the person to be admonished. It can certainly come from a leader of a congregation. Note that our ordination vows presume a clergy leader will admonish as part of pastoral care of a congregation.

Yet none of this need cause us to give up admonition as too hard. Because we go astray, we need to get back on track. Because we are in a body of Christ, we need others to get us back on track. Thinking we better not correct or rebuke because we might upset someone is a coward’s way out. It is ultimately unloving. I learn so much from my loving critics even if I am damaged by my not so loving critics. By not saying something, by not intervening, we may buy some peace and quiet but at what later cost?

We ask ourselves some questions. Are we self aware? Are we in some sort of relationship with the other person? Are we genuinely seeking their good? Is this a significant matter? Given satisfactory answers to these questions, we might find ourselves used by God to bring someone back on track. Maybe they will accept admonition, maybe they won’t. You can only warn, not control. Maybe they will be upset. But since when is “not upsetting” been the primary goal of Christian fellowship?

Ultimately, the goal of admonition is to help another follower of Jesus stay on track in following Jesus. Given this, it falls into the category of uncomfortable love. I am not helped by those who stay silent as they watch me drift into dangerous paths. Nor am I helped by those who want to lash out at me out of their own unhappiness or their desire to control me. I am helped by those who, out of a self critical and humble heart, speak the truth in love to me. Truth which recognises we are fellow travellers on the way. And we need all the help we can to complete the journey with joy and gladness.