



Dealing with Criticism - Lessons for Serving God

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly. So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

- Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), 26th President of the United States

Critics in the Bible

Throughout the Bible we find countless stories of people being criticized, mocked, and disparaged as they sought to obey God. Noah was laughed at by the men and women of his generation, Moses and Aaron were spoken against by "*the whole community*" (Exodus 16:2, Numbers 16:41, etc.). After being promised the kingdom by God, David spent many years being attacked by Saul and his followers. Many of David's Psalms tell of the poisoned lips and criticisms leveled against him as he sought to do what God had called him to do.

Nehemiah was one who found himself constantly being criticized and mocked as he served God. The attacks on Nehemiah intensified over time from his enemies being "*very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites*" (Neh. 2:10), to "*mocking and ridicule*" (2:19), to becoming "*angry and greatly incensed*" (4:1). When the task that God had called Nehemiah to do began to near completion the critics "*plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it*" (4:8).

When such poison goes unchecked it can even lead to threats of violence and temptations to compromise. Nehemiah 6:1-2 says, "*When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.' But they were scheming to harm me.*"

In Nehemiah's response we find a great example of the way a servant of God should act when subjected to unwarranted abuse and criticisms. First, Nehemiah discerned that the motives of this attempted meeting were impure. He knew his enemies wanted to harm him and he refused to be distracted from the task God had called him to do. Nehemiah "*sent messengers to them with this reply: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?' Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.*" (6:3-4).

One of the main reasons for Satan stirring up attacks against a servant of God is to cause him to lose focus, to tempt him to place his eyes on the battle instead of on the Lord of the Battle. If we are not careful we can waste much precious time defending ourselves against the words of those who often have no genuine interest in us or the work of God. Nehemiah had a work to do - to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. He refused to waver from the task and God protected him from those who wished to see him stopped.

A fifth time Sanballat and his colleagues sent a message to Nehemiah, trying to get him to stop. Nehemiah "*sent him this reply: 'Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.'*" (6:8). When a person refuses to pay attention to undue criticisms, slanders, or attacks, it usually infuriates those who wish to get their own way. Nehemiah said of his enemies, "*They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.'* But I prayed, '*Now strengthen my hands.*" (6:9).

If you love God and have been called according to His purpose, do not bow to intimidation! Fear and intimidation are the devil's tools to cripple us and take us away from His plans and purposes. Pay no attention to the critics, ask God to strengthen your hands, and stand firm in that which God has given you. Even when Nehemiah learned that his enemies were coming to kill him (6:10), he boldly replied, "*Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go! I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.*" (6:11,13).

It could be said that anyone seeking to obey God will be targeted for special criticism. Sadly, this often comes from other believers rather than from the world. The believer who refuses to give in to intimidation, however, will often look back later and see their stand as a decisive turning point in their ministry. We do not

usually see great results in God's kingdom unless there is great opposition first. The Apostle Paul certainly had his share of enemies, slanderers and mean-spirited critics, yet he indicated such attacks went hand in hand with his effective work for the Lord. Paul wrote, "*A great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me*" (1 Cor 16-9). This verse also reveals a remarkable truth. Regardless of what people throw at you as you seek to obey God, they can in no way close down the effectiveness of a servant of God. It is He alone who has the power to raise up or pull down. It is He alone who can open and close doors of opportunity. To the Church in Philadelphia the Risen Lord Jesus Christ said, "*These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name*" (Rev. 3:7-8).

Back to Jerusalem

Since the house churches in China received the renewal of God's call to carry the Gospel Back to Jerusalem, countless critics have emerged. They seem determined to mock the whole enterprise. While some China mission organizations continue to childishly rant and rave against the *vision* of Back to Jerusalem to send 100,000 missionaries out of China, the Church in South Korea—a country with a population only about 4% as large as China—missionary statesmen recently expressed their vision to have 100,000 Korean missionaries sent out by the year 2030. Speaking to *Christianity Today* (March 2006, p.34), the Korea World Mission Association says they “plan to send 100,000 full-time Korean missionaries by 2030. They hope to mobilize 50 percent of Korean churches to be involved in missions, recruit 1 of every 300 Korean Christians to become missionaries, adopt 200 unreached people groups every five years, and send 1 million tentmakers into difficult-access countries by 2020.”

Such bold and exciting statements from Korea make a mockery of the many China mission “experts” who have criticized and poked fun at the potential of 100,000 missionaries coming out of China in future years. Part of the criticism seems to come from some China mission organizations who are uncomfortable with the prospect of China being seen as a missionary-sending nation, and would prefer to keep portraying it as a country where missionaries should be sent to. Others have stated that there are still so many hundreds of millions of lost people in China that the Church should not be considering sending out missionaries while the needs inside their own country are so great. Using this same illogical argument, all missionaries from America, Europe and elsewhere should immediately return to their home nations and minister there until everyone has been reached with the Gospel.

The fact is that the Chinese Christians do not in any way plan to abandon reaching their own country! Their main focus continues to be on establishing God’s kingdom in every county, town, city and village throughout the whole nation, and among every ethnic

minority group. While they are busy doing this, surely the Chinese Church should also be allowed to obey Christ's command to preach the Gospel to the whole world? Or are they somehow a special case?

And yet still the critics and naysayers continue to air their opinions. In a recent issue of *China Source* (Spring 2006), the British author Tony Lambert even goes as far as saying "Irresponsible claims overseas of 100,000 Chinese evangelists poised to take the Islamic world by storm have tarnished the original vision." (p.14). This attack is even stranger when it is considered that a new mission initiative in the Philippines plans to send 200,000 Filipino missionaries out by 2010! Moreover, they are already well on the way to making this vision a reality. One wonders if these same China critics are now also willing to condemn the Korean and Philippine churches for declaring their bold visions? Will they also heap scorn on the Koreans and Filipinos for "naïve triumphalism" (Lambert, p.14)?

The good news is that Back to Jerusalem is a vision given by God to the Chinese Church nearly 70 years ago. What critics or supporters have to say about it in the end will bear no relevance on whether or not the Chinese Church obeys the call of God. The real work is not done in the offices of mission executives or on the pages of glossy magazines. The work is done by meek believers with a passion and fire in their hearts for Jesus. They are the ones sitting in tea-shops along the Silk Road, sharing their testimony with locals, and expressing Christ's love and compassion in a myriad of ways.

That is how the kingdom of God advances, and it is how Back to Jerusalem will be accomplished, and is being accomplished. In recent months many encouraging new initiatives have been started both inside and outside China, and an ever-increasing number of training centers are operational, equipping Chinese missionaries for the task ahead of them.

Do we have such a poor image of China, with a population 25 times that of South Korea and 15 times larger than the Philippines, that we can not imagine the possibility that its Church might be able to send out at least the same number of missionaries that its two Asian neighbours plan to?

Many of the house church leaders in China find the criticisms from some Western Christians amusing and strange at best. Last year a Christian reporter visited a house church leader in Central China and specifically asked him if he thought the vision to send 100,000 missionaries out of China was realistic. The leader paused and thought for a moment, before replying, "No, I don't believe this number is realistic." The reporter gleefully propped up, expecting a scoop, and asked the house church leader for more comment. "Well, after thinking about it," replied the leader, "I think 100,000 will not be enough. We should send 500,000!"

The professional critics often seem like people sitting in a comfortable high-rise apartment building, looking down at a bunch of construction workers as they work together to erect a new building. The critics sit in their apartment analyzing and criticizing the workers'

efforts, laughing and telling them they don't have the necessary qualifications to complete the job. It never occurs to them to come down and lend a hand. Let us

Let us end by quoting the wise words of British preacher Richard H. Froude, "The mists of criticism do hang around a mountain. Men who want no mists must be content with plains and desert. Mists come with mountains. Soon the mists evaporate, and the mountain will stand out in all its grandeur in the morning sunlight. Multitudes will stay in the valley, for there are few who aspire to reach the summit."

Let's put our petty criticisms and the promotion of our personal agendas aside. Instead, let's pray together for the vision of the Chinese Church, and let's humble ourselves and ask God to place a fire in our heart like He has in the Chinese believers. The world is perishing while we sit around playing our little games.