
HOW TO CONFRONT AS A TRUE LEADER

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

His wife was ready to leave him. He was a Christian, but he often lost his temper, saying terrible, hateful things. His conduct was breaking his wife in two and creating rebellious children. When his wife threatened to walk out, he finally consented to talk with me. He was obviously uncomfortable speaking about his relationship with his wife and children.

“What I do in my home is nobody’s business,” he said.

“That isn’t true,” I responded. *“You may not like what I’m going to say, but I have to say it: you must find a way to change your behavior.”*

“You’re trying to turn me into an old mare,” he grouched. *“I’m a stallion, not a mare.”*

Transformation didn’t come easily for him. It took some time to convince him that his home life was not merely his business; that it affected the happiness of many others. Three years later, his relationship with his family had an incredible turnaround, and his children now demonstrate a genuine commitment to the Lord.

Why are such turnarounds so rare? Perhaps it is because they rarely occur without large doses of confrontation—a pastoral responsibility that is supremely difficult, scary, and often ineffective—because the response to it depends on the will of the one confronted.

One of the great challenges of leadership is learning to confront. As a pastor, I am to be *“...admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that I may present everyone complete in Christ”* (Colossians 1:28). As much as I’d like to, I can’t confine that task to the pulpit because my sermons cannot address each individual’s attitudes, behaviors, and choices. From the pulpit, I can’t say to one person, “I detect a bitterness in your soul. Do you think you truly have forgiven Ralph?”

People often need individualized help to apply Sunday's sermon to what they do Monday. Confronting will never be easy; here are some principles that have helped me approach this difficult but essential task:

AVOID AVOIDANCE

Often we think, "*If I just ignore the problem, it might go away.*" However, most problems that require confrontation do not go away. They are infections; if we ignore them, they get worse. Soon that nagging pain in one toe becomes blood poisoning.

Why, then, do we avoid problems that need our pastoral attention?

One reason is that we fear the consequences. We may cause misunderstanding; we may create conflict; and/or we may drive people away. While I was leading a Bible study at UCLA, a young man gave his life to Christ, and a few weeks later his live-in girlfriend made the same commitment. A couple of weeks after that, I learned they were still living together, but I didn't say anything. I knew it would be awkward.

Four months later, the young man figured out from his own Bible reading that he shouldn't be living with his girlfriend. He stopped me, looked me right in the eye, and said, "*Daniel, why didn't you tell me about this?*" I have never forgotten that. My fear of driving the young man away had caused me to fail in my role as a spiritual leader.

Another reason we may avoid confrontation is the prospect of being misinterpreted. Nobody wants to be known as a *holier-than-thou* meddler. People resistant to change can easily make us look like the bad guys. When confronted, some people have accused their pastors of abusing their authority. Yet there is a legitimate use of God-given spiritual authority, and we must bring it to bear upon each situation that demands it.

Some people's bondage is toxic to a congregation, and unless it is excised (or quarantined), it will do damage to other, unsuspecting members of our church. One lady who had left our church several years earlier, returned completely unchanged, despite the attempted counsel/input from two other pastors in the intervening years. She was completely lawless, and she believed that she heard God better than anyone around her. And yet, her life was a mess and she was always in crisis.

Her needs drew the attention and concern of unwary saints who would get dragged into her morass like into a black hole. She consumed untold amounts of care and time from others, and almost always distracted them from true ministry. I told her that unless she wanted to change that pattern (as demonstrated by a willingness to call her two former pastors to apologize), she would not be welcome in our church. Not surprisingly, she bolted shortly thereafter.

Poor thing? Hardly. But it was a great line she used to draw people in: “*I’m so confused, I don’t know what to do.*” She wasn’t confused, just determined to have things her way.

We must continue to confront—wisely, directly, humbly. Realizing that Christians who are never reproved, usually harbor some instability or unsoundness in their faith, has helped me—and seen in that light, correction is not a bad thing. Loving confrontation helps people grow in Christ, and ultimately it spares them much pain.

FOCUS ON PREVENTION

I try to address problems before they become crises. “*Minor*” behaviors and attitudes, left to themselves, can take people far *off the path*; they usually betray a deeper problem that will worsen as time passes.

A man in our church has a great heart for God and will probably pastor a church someday. He is sharp, energetic, and the sort of man everyone wants on the team. I gradually became concerned, however, that he was in danger of over-committing himself. He was taking on many church responsibilities before he had fully discovered his ideal place of ministry.

I could have let the situation unfold, but he might have become discouraged and burned out. So, I decided to talk with him before a major problem began. My goal was to free him.

“You have many gifts and tremendous enthusiasm,” I told him, “but you have to be careful. Other church workers will show you a ministry and try to involve you, but I sense that God hasn’t shown you your true calling yet. He hasn’t shown you the finished painting; He is simply showing you the possible composition of the colors. So now might not be the time for you to take on every ministry opportunity.”

It turns out that he had been feeling guilty about saying no, even though people were requesting more than he could give. He needed his pastor to help him set some boundaries, something crucial to the process of finding his place in ministry.

Attitudes usually betray problems before those problems get huge. When I detect pride, for instance, or a sense from someone that they know better than everyone, I’ll generally approach them with a question along these lines: “*You are aware, are you not, that most people would rather not spend too much time around you?*” That gets their attention—or confirms something they had not been able to figure out.

Realizing that most overt pride stems from fear or insecurity, I ask questions to try to uncover what pain drives them to appear so great. Leaving the pride stuck in their soul is a worse betrayal than choosing not to tell a friend when broccoli is stuck in their teeth.

RECEIVE PERMISSION

Just as Paul was given authority (insight) for building others and helping to complete them in Christ, so too, do pastors and spiritual leaders have a certain measure of extra wisdom for the people allotted to their charge. But that can never be presumed upon. It is essential that leaders gain a place in people's lives by loving/serving them to such a degree over time that those people want help from the leader.

That is why I typically ask permission before I share my impressions with someone. For example, I may ask, "*Do you want everything Jesus has in mind for you?*" Or, "*Would you like to know what I see in your life right now?*" This sets the stage. The person receives the correcting advice or admonition better since he or she has already agreed to hear it.

One couple had attended our church for six months when they came to see me. As we discussed a problem they were facing, I said, "I don't know how well you know me, and I'm a little hesitant to say too much for fear I might be misunderstood."

"No, please, go right ahead," both said. "Tell us anything you see."

I broached a few concerns, and then, approaching a subject that was very sensitive for the woman, I said, "I don't want to be misunderstood, so please let me say what I'm thinking, and if it doesn't come out right, I'll try again. OK?" When she nodded, I proceeded, "Perhaps part of what God is doing in your life is letting you know He accepts and loves you just as you are. Somewhere in your past, the little girl and the woman got mixed up. When you were little, somebody made you be a woman, and now that you are older, you feel like you have to be a little girl. No doubt God wants to sort that out for you."

She and her husband looked at each other, their eyes as big as saucers. During the preceding months, God had been conveying that identical message to them. Once again, confrontation was a vital moment of confirmation.

During a lengthy or especially difficult conversation, when I'm challenging someone with several thoughts, I will periodically repeat, "*Is it OK if I tell you this?*" Long-time members of our church know I usually request permission to confront people in just this way. Some occasionally take the initiative and say to me, "I want to tell you again, anything you see in my life, I want to hear it." That

always makes it easier, but people who say such things are rarely the ones who need much course-correction.

BUILD ON PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS

If we only tell people where they're wrong, they'll become discouraged and stop listening. Although I do not keep a calculator in my heart, I try to make it a regular practice to comment on people's good qualities. I try to be a perpetual encourager and love-shower. Little kindnesses and remarks from months earlier give me more of a platform in somebody's life today.

When it comes time to point out something awry in someone's life, I begin the talk with attempts to place things in context with what God is up to, and/or how they're being distracted from who they really are—and where they're doing well. At the very least, my initial focus in the conversation is on affirming them as unique, beloved creations of God.

When I talked with one man in our church, I affirmed that God had molded him as a true pioneer. I told him he was so resourceful that people gather around him, just as settlers gather around the first building that goes up in some frontier settlement. Because of that one cabin at the convergence of two rivers, a whole community develops around it.

"God made you a strong, resourceful person," I said to him. "The downside of that quality is that you can become a loner. In a sense, you're so competent that you are self-sufficient. Part of your gifting is to be a leader, but perhaps because you feel you don't need others, you remain on the periphery of fellowship in our church. You think the issue is: *Do I need them?* Could it be you haven't learned to consider: *Do others need me?*

That cut him to the quick, but my critique was based on his positive strengths. I've already seen a change in him; he's started meeting with other men in the church. But that situation reminded me: If we can't think of something good to say about people, we have no business correcting them. It may mean we don't love them.

Direct confrontation is always more effective when we start with what we know about the person we're confronting. If I can correct someone and at the same time tell him something true and positive about himself, he usually becomes excited about what I've discerned and can accept the pain of being corrected.

INSTILL HOPE

If we have a clear sense of the bright future Jesus Christ has for people, we'll have less trouble confronting them for their spiritual benefit. The Lord always corrects us in hope. As Jeremiah says,

“For I know the plans that I have for you...plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” ~Jeremiah 29:11

As God’s representatives, we ought to offer godly hope in all our dealings with people.

The Hebrew word for *hope* comes from the root word for *rope*, giving us the image of a cord attached far ahead in time that pulls us toward the future. God has a particular destiny in mind for each of his people, and the only way to arrive at that place is to hold on to this thing called *hope-in-the-plans-of-God*. Getting that future requires holding onto God’s ways. Since any spiritual confrontation is simply a tool to help people who have let go of that rope in some detail of their life, its whole purpose is to redirect them back to that hopeful place.

We recently sent a man to pioneer a new church. For quite some time I had known he would be the pastor of this new congregation, so with his future ministry in mind, I confronted him about several issues. First, I talked with him about his leadership. He had been insensitive to those working for him, loading them with numerous expectations, and distressing them with fears of failure—inappropriately out of character given such dedicated and energetic workers. So we needed a little chat.

“You’re supposed to give people hope,” I said. “How you treat your volunteers indicates how you will likely treat your congregation. If you don’t change, you may become the kind of pastor who is always telling people they need to be more committed, need to do this, need to do that. Your people will feel they can’t live up to your expectations, because that’s how your helpers feel right now.” I went on, though, to talk of what a great leader he would be if he addressed these issues with God’s help. I can’t leave people with just correction; I must leave them with hope.

WRAP TRUTH IN MERCY

One of the greatest personal transformations in my ministry began 25 years ago when I came across the biblical proverb, “*Let not kindness and truth leave you; bind them about your neck...*” (Proverbs 3:3). I saw that in my life I had been reversing the order, putting truth before mercy. Although I meant my confrontations to be helpful and good, I ended up hurting people more than helping them because I did not stay focused on mercy or kindness as the means and end goal of what I was doing. We’re not supposed to correct people because we’re disgusted that they’ve gotten off the track, but because we see the good things that will happen if they get back on it.

My wife and I ate dinner with a couple that wanted to start an orphanage in Africa. Although they didn’t yet know what country they were going to, or when, they had already started to raise money. I felt they were getting ahead of themselves. “If I were in business,” I said, “and you came to me and said you wanted to raise money for an orphanage, I would want to know such things as where it

would be located, who would be operating it, how many kids would be in it, and what organizational umbrella it would be under.” I told them they couldn’t do much in the long run if they didn’t take a few practical planning steps first.

On the way home, my wife said I had deflated the couple. She was right. What I had said was true, but I should have communicated more emphatically that I was on their side and thought they had a great dream. I had gotten carried away; my spirit wasn’t right. Later I apologized to the couple.

Fruitful confrontations require genuine humility and gentleness. Confronting others will never be easy or pleasant. But if we want to see people change, we will have to develop the courage and skills to do it as well as we can.