Why I Respond to Criticism by John Wimber

Leaders are to take attacks seriously because lies and slander against them and their ministries will hurt, confuse, and undermine the faith of those under their care.

Vineyard Position Paper #1 May 1992

Contents

- Introduction
- Prophetic Word
- Clear Teaching
- Pacifism
- Old Testament
- Jesus

- The Disciples
- Conclusions
- Related Questions
- Vineyard's Response
- Endnotes
- Copyright

Introduction

In the Summer 1988 issue of *Equipping the Saints* magazine I published an article entitled "Why I Don't Respond to Criticism," in which I reviewed my reasons for not responding to unjust criticism of my teaching and of the Vineyard. In this booklet I will describe why I recently changed my thinking about this important matter.

First, though, it's worth reviewing my reasons for not responding in the past. Because I minister to such a large number of Christians from diverse traditions, my writings and teachings are frequently scrutinized in the Christian media. Rarely a week goes by that I don't receive an article, book, or tape in which I am critiqued. The majority of these treatments are generous, fair, and helpful; for that I am grateful.

Occasionally, though, serious accusations are leveled against me. You may have read or heard one of these accusations, and wondered about my -- or the Vineyard's -- side of it. In the past I did not respond for two reasons, one based on something God said to me years ago, and one based on my (inadequate) understanding of Scripture.

Contents

Prophetic Word

In 1977 it was prophesied to me that I should not defend myself against my enemies. This word came as a great surprise, because at the time I knew of no personal enemies.

The warning came from a woman prophesying to me about a future worldwide ministry. She said that many of my peers would turn against me, but that I was not to defend myself. "God would raise up those to defend you," she said, "and the word of God would be your defense" (Matt. 10:18-20).

Later, during a time of prayer, I sensed the Lord saying, "Your brother and sister are never your enemies, even when they act like it. Learn to turn the other cheek. These were jarring words,

because my natural tendency was to jump into a good scrap. At that stage of my life, anxiety about being misunderstood was an overriding fear in my life. The Lord, knowing this, simply eliminated for me what could easily become a sinful response.

Obeying the prophetic word also made it possible for me to devote more time and energy to advancing the gospel rather than worrying about what other Christians thought of me.

Contents

Clear Teaching

I also didn't respond to unjust criticism in the past because of my understanding of Scripture. Passages like <u>Matthew 18:15-17</u>, <u>Galatians 6:1</u>, and <u>1 Timothy 5:1</u> provide clear teaching about how to relate to Christian leaders we suspect of wrongdoing like slander or bearing false witness.

These passages clearly teach that the proper procedure is first to speak directly to the person we suspect of sinning. This should be done in person or through a letter. Not in a book or magazine. Not over radio or television programs. The primary reason for personally approaching the leader is that we may be wrong; he or she might *not* be guilty!

Based on this teaching, in the past I have refused to enter a public forum of debate that, I believed, would bring further division and scandal to the gospel. (This line of thinking continues to be why I try to avoid criticizing other leaders with whom I have disagreements in public.) For reasons that I will discuss in this booklet, I now believe I had only a partially correct understanding of these passages and others like them.

Contents

Pacifism

Of course, I have also changed my thinking regarding the *application* of the prophetic word that I received in 1977. I still believe it was a word from God for me, but the *application* is different in my life today.

I still believe that brothers and sisters who attack me are "not my enemies," and that when I am personally attacked my first response should be to turn the other cheek. Over the years I have been learning the self-control and discipline that are needed to respond in a firm but loving manner.

But I now sense the Lord is saying that defending and clarifying my *message* in a loving and respectful way against unjust criticism is important for the well being of people who are confused by the attacks and who sincerely need answers to questions about my teaching. The frequency and intensity of the attacks have greatly increased in recent years, which has added to peoples' confusion and increased the need for responding.

My reluctance to respond was also motivated by my commitment to personal pacifism; a theological value that I had embraced during my years in the Society of Friends (Quaker) Church. I now believe, however, that I confused personal passivity with the broader issue of the defense of: the gospel. As a result, I ignored clear passages of the Bible that taught leaders should defend the gospel against attack. For example, Paul wrote, "When we [Paul and Apollos] are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly" (1 Cor. 4:1-12).

I am now convinced that, according to Scripture, there are occasions that warrant -- even *require* -- a public response. What, then, are these occasions? And how are we to treat them when they arise?

Contents

Old Testament

In the Old Testament leaders viewed reproach brought on by slander and lies as a very serious matter. In response to false accusations they first appealed to God in prayer to remove the reproach. The Psalms are full of examples of this type of prayer. For example, consider David's prayer in reply to those who have maliciously slandered him:

Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me.

Take up shield and buckler; arise and come to my aid.

Brandish spear and javelin against those who pursue me.

Say to my soul, "I am your salvation."

(Psalms 35:1-3; also see Psalms 31; 69; 71:10ff; 79:4-12; 119:22, 39; 42; 89:50-51)

They also asked God to deal with their enemies because, in these cases, the opponents of the biblical writers were also *God's* enemies. Their concern was that slander and lies against God's servants would hinder the work of the kingdom. Under these circumstances our concern is to defend not so much the *messengers* as the *message* -- though one of the tactics of the enemy is to undermine the message by bringing the integrity of the messenger into question. False and serious accusations against leaders *must* be defended, or we run the risk of seeing the good news of the kingdom of God forfeited in the minds of people.

When Samuel presented the new inaugurated king Saul to the people, he made a point of establishing in public his past faithfulness to the covenant as leader of the nation. His purpose was to exonerate himself and to provide an example for Saul in his new responsibilities:

[Samuel said,] "Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the Lord and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right."

"You have not cheated or oppressed us," they [the people] replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."

Samuel said to them, "The Lord is witness against you, and also his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand."

Contents

Jesus

Jesus also vigorously replied to his critics, by both defending himself against their lies and accusing them of sin. In defending himself against the Pharisees, Jesus accused them of being children of the devil: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire" (John 8:44).

Later, when the Jews at Solomon's Colonnade asked him if he was the Messiah, Jesus claimed to be equal in nature to his Father. "I and the Father are one" (<u>John 10:30</u>). The Jews, accusing him of blasphemy ("you, a mere man, claim to be God"), picked up stones to stone him. But Jesus replied with an eloquent defense, rooting his claims in Scripture. They couldn't deal with his arguments, so they tried to seize him, but he escaped.

The Pharisees were at the receiving end of Jesus' most severe rebukes, because they, as the respected religious leaders and Bible experts of their day, were especially dangerous to the people of God. They were constantly questioning, challenging, and misrepresenting his message. Jesus' public ministry is marked by escalating hostility from the Pharisees, with his stern rebukes keeping pace with their false accusations and Scripture twisting.

A typical interaction is found in <u>Matthew 15</u>, where the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples -- and him -- of breaking the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they eat. Jesus responds quickly and devastatingly, first demonstrating the Pharisee's disobedience to Scripture, then calling them "hypocrites" whose hearts are distant from God and who teach rules taught by men. When his disciples later told him that he offended the Pharisees, Jesus was unaffected: "Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (<u>Matt.</u> 15:14).

Contents

The Disciples

It could be argued that only Jesus should defend himself, because, after all, he is God. But this argument breaks down when we see that Jesus prepared the disciples to defend the gospel against attack.

He even promised them that, when they were falsely accused and imprisoned, the Holy Spirit would provide them with words for their defense (<u>Luke 12:11-12</u>; <u>21:12-15</u>). His promise was fulfilled in texts like <u>Acts 4:8-31</u>, where Peter preached to the Sanhedrin, and <u>Acts 7</u>, where Stephen preached to the Sanhedrin before being stoned. And the promise of the Holy Spirit remains in effect today.

Like Jesus, the apostles defended their message and character against false criticism and accusations. The basis for responding to their critics is set forth in specific texts. *First, they replied to protect the unity of the body of Christ*. For example, in Romans 16:17-18 they urged the believers to "watch out" and "keep away" from "those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (also see Tit. 1:9-16; 3:10-11).

Second, they replied in order to keep the gospel message and "the hope within you" from being distorted and misunderstood. "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted," Paul wrote to the Galatians, "let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:9). "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have," Peter wrote. "But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

Therefore, the apostles defended their message (the gospel), character, and ministry against false criticism (Gal. 1:8-9; 1 Cor. 4:9-21; 9:1-27; 2 Cor. 11:1 - 12:10). They mentioned their opponents in general (for example, the "Jewish opposition" in 1 Thess. 2:14-16), and even specifically by name (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:15; 2:16-18; 4:14; 3 John 9-11).

When public criticism is true, it should be publicly acknowledged with repentance. Paul writes,

"Those [elders] who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (<u>1 Tim. 5:20</u>). Paul publicly rebuked Peter and Barnabas in <u>Galatians 2:11-21</u> for separating themselves from Gentiles out of fear for the "circumcision group" -- Judaizers who believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation. In <u>2 Timothy 4:10</u> Paul exposed Demas as one who loves the world and deserted him.

Contents

Conclusions

So, then, what conclusions can be drawn from the biblical evidence regarding defense against serious and false accusations against leaders?

First, it is clear that leaders are to defend their ministries and personal integrity when they are falsely accused. Jesus did it. He told the disciples that they should expect attack and, when it came, how to defend the gospel and their integrity. The apostles did it, and they in structed other leaders -- including us -- in how to do it.

Second, leaders are to take attacks seriously because lies and slander against them and their ministries will hurt, confuse, and undermine the faith of those under their care. Further, false at tacks create barriers to others coming to the Lord through their ministry.

Finally, leaders must publicly ac knowledge the truth of accurate criticism and repent in the appropriate, biblical manner. This too is done for the sake of the body, so members are not led astray by false or misleading teaching.

Frequently, appropriate criticism of leaders is brought in an *in*appropriate manner. For example, in Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus offers a concise pattern for how to bring correction against someone who sins. First, Jesus says, go to him in private and show him his fault. For leaders this initial step can be done through a personal conversation, a phone call, or a letter. But not through a magazine article, a book, a radio talk show, in a preaching, or a conference. No Christian leader should ever learn of serious charges brought against him through the Christian or secular media. These forums are appropriate only *after* his wrongdoing has been proved and presented to him, he has been allowed to defend himself, and he has refused to repent.

This process is exhausting to the one bringing the charges, which probably explains why it is rarely followed today. Perhaps this helps explain why the body of Christ is so severely fragmented.

Of course, this process also works in reverse: When a leader is falsely accused in public, he should approach his accuser first *in private* and in the spirit of love, unity, and forgiveness in order to clarify the issues and be reconciled. If the accuser refuses to respond to a reasonable response, the leader may then go public with his defense.

(A detailed description of how to handle public repentance and treat fallen leaders is beyond the scope of this article. I have written on these topics in the Summer 1988 and Fall 1990 issues of *Equipping the Saints* magazine.)

Contents

Related Questions

Leaders' response to criticism and controversy raise a number of related questions. For example,

is there a danger that well-known leaders may spend too much time answering criticism? I admit that this has always been a primary motive for my limited responses in the past. I was focused on the positive and more rewarding work of advancing the gospel. But now I realize that my lack of response is hindering my ministry, so I am responding to attacks.

Still, I and my staff are cautious about devoting *too* much of our time to controversy. When we find ourselves expending too much energy and time, we return to the more fruitful tasks of preaching the gospel, caring for the homeless, and praying for the sick.

How, then, do we know **when to respond and when to be silent?** First, following Jesus' promise in <u>Luke 12:11-12</u>, leaders must rely on the leading of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says he will teach us what to say -- and when to be silent. There are, however, dear biblical criteria that must be met before speaking out publicly. In general, a public response is appropriate when false criticism is:

- Believed by a significant number of Christians;
- · Seriously misrepresenting our views and practices; and
- Hindering significantly the work of God.

This was exactly the situation we were facing recently in Australia. Several men published a slanderous report about me and the Vineyard ministry that contained serious and false accusations. It was widely disseminated, and significantly hindered the work of the ministry. After much prayer and consultation with other Christian leaders, we sensed the Holy Spirit leading to respond. 1

This raises yet another question: **How should leaders respond to false accusations?** As I said above, our response must be according to Scripture: Go to the individual (or group) in private first (Matt. 18:15-17) in a spirit of humility and gentleness (Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). If the individual (or group) fails to listen or respond, then his sin may be exposed to the church.

In the situation that I describe above (in Australia), we were led to publish a paper that refuted, point by point, the false accusations that they had published about us. The accusers simply refused to listen when we approached them about their accusations, so for the sake of the gospel and the people we were forced to "go public."

Some might ask, **Isn't responding to false accusations inconsistent with loving your enemies?** For example, in the Australian controversy the people who accused us were exposed as misrepresenting our teaching and as causing division in the body. This was, in a sense, hurtful to them. After all, bearing false witness against a brother is serious sin, and making it known is humiliating.

But, as I have written above, their actions had created a much greater disservice to the body of Christ. The only loving thing to do was bring public correction. This is what Jesus did with the Pharisees and even with Peter (see Matt. 16:23), and it is what Paul did when he publicly rebuked Peter and Barnabas (Gal. 2.11-12).

Finally, doesn't leaders' response to criticism further divide the body of Christ? Yes, if we reply in the wrong spirit and misrepresent our critics' views and practices. But if we follow the Scriptures in humility and gentleness, under the Holy Spirit's leading, then we will be used to protect the unity of the body.

1 7	٦n	tΔ	nts	
\mathbf{c}	JII	L	HO	

Vineyard's Response

The Vineyard is a fast-growing and diverse movement with many young leaders, which creates many opportunities for mistakes and misunderstandings. We regularly receive questions about our beliefs and practices, if for no other reason than our rate of growth. Most of the queries are sincere, simply desiring to learn more about us or to learn our side to a bad report.

If you are one of these people, we want to hear from you and, to the best of our ability, answer your questions. I'm not promising that you'll agree with us (fine Christians often differ on significant issues), but we will be candid and straight forward.

If you have a concern, I encourage you to first approach a local Vineyard pastor and chat with him. Of course, local pastors cannot speak for the movement as a whole, so if you need more information you may write the national director of VineyardUSA (Association of Vineyard Churches), the umbrella organization of the Vineyard church movement, at 5340 E. La Palma Ave., Anaheim, CA 92807.

We publish position papers, newsletters, and books on a variety of key and/or controversial topics. We also publish responses to legitimate, constructive criticism. I do not believe that I have a corner on the truth; I willingly submit to the correcting authority of Scripture, knowing that in all things it brings life (Prov. 12:1; 13:18).

Finally, we publish booklets in response to serious criticism against us. These booklets hope to clear up any misunderstanding created by reports that misrepresent and undermine the ministry of the Vineyard. The Bible tells me that I can no longer sit by idly when significant numbers of Christians are hurt through slanderous reports of my ministry and the Vineyard.

Contents			

Endnotes

1. A copy of this document may be obtained by writing AVC and asking for the "Vineyard Position Paper #2," *The Vineyard's Response to the Briefing.* (May 1992)

\sim			
1.0	٦n	ıtΔ	nts
\sim	JU	ιс	HE

Copyright

© 1992 VineyardUSA, All Rights Reserved. A single copy of this document is free. Copyright permission to make up to 100 copies of this document for free distribution is granted to Christian churches at no charge. The reprint must include the article in its entirety with the words "Copyright VineyardUSA, Used by Permission, All Rights Reserved. Web - www.vineyardusa.org" Please inform us of reprints by sending e-mail to info@vineyardusa.org or dropping a note to VineyardUSA 5340 E. La Palma Ave., Anaheim, CA 92807

<u>Contents</u>