



WHEN SHEEP BITE

by Al Ells, M.C.

{ *“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty;
And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.”* }
Proverbs 16:32

“I’ve been in the pastorate for 30 years and have never had such hurt and pain as this,” said one pastor. “I didn’t realize how easily people you’ve helped can turn against you.”

Is this a common problem in the ministry? Surprisingly, the answer is an emphatic yes. It is a mystery of the ministry: Sometimes your flock acts more like wolves than sheep.

Every church has experienced times when members of the congregation or elder board have become offended with the pastor, according to surveys. These situations are rarely handled biblically. Instead, gossip spreads, rumors germinate, and indignation infiltrates the community. In the church, those spreading the gossip often euphemize their behavior as “calling the pastor to accountability” or “protecting the church’s best interests”.

All of this is familiar to you if you have been in ministry for a while. Ministering to others requires the ability to respond biblically to conflicts and offenses. You will never prevent offenses from occurring. You can, however, learn how to respond to them in ways that honor God and foster resolution.

Here are some tips to consider:

Most offenses with pastors stem from idolatry, not theology.

A “cult of personality” exists in many churches today, in which members of the congregation put the pastor on a pedestal and seek his approval, validation and special attention. When the busy and human pastor is unable or unwilling to do so, he topples from his lofty place and becomes an object of disdain. The higher the pedestal, the farther the fall. Work hard that you do not cultivate a special aura about yourself or your position. Constantly remind your congregation to realize that you have feet of clay and are only an earthen vessel like them. God is the treasure, not you (II Corinthians 4:7).

Stay calm and don’t react out of your emotions; it will make things worse.

Do not make the same mistake your sheep are making. Proverbs 16:32 says, “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.” Reacting out of your emotions rather than responding like Jesus is a sign that you are not “ruling your spirit”. Get advice and prayer from a trusted peer or counselor to help you deal with your hurt and anger so that you can respond like Jesus. This is not the time to point out your accusers’ faults, or how inappropriate their behavior has been.

Encourage the offended parties to share their offenses with you, and hear them out.

Seek to understand them instead of trying to be understood. Since they have an issue with you, they want to be heard; they don't want to hear you. Accusations are often fraught with exaggerations, misstatements and erroneous facts. Prepare yourself for that possibility, so that you can respond biblically. Look for the one or two nuggets of truth in their statements that the Lord wants you to see. Your goal is to hear what God is saying to you. This will help de-escalate the conflict and possibly reconcile the offense. Try to get them to agree to a process of discussion, prayer and reconciliation. Tell them you need time to think, pray and get counsel. Ask them to do likewise.

Take responsibility for what God has shown you, humble yourself before them, but do not grovel.

Your humility does not mean that they are right and you are wrong. It is your way of maintaining an attitude of reconciliation, being pleasing to the Lord and gaining more of His empowering favor in your life. As you know, God gives grace to the humble and resists the proud. Wanting to be right and needing to be heard are subtle forms of pride that emanate from our pain. Be like Jesus in I Peter 2:23, "When he was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously." Being humble does not mean you have to grovel and beg. It means a sincere and heartfelt apology where appropriate.

Do not expect them to change or be entirely satisfied, or for the problem to totally disappear.

True reconciliation comes about when both parties humble themselves before God at the foot of the cross, each seeing their own shortcomings, humbly making amends to the other and committing to repentance. This is a rare gift of God. Few people respond rightly before God and each other at the same time. Your Christ-likeness will sow seeds into their lives, but they may not be mature enough for true reconciliation. Give God time. He's not finished with them yet. Seek to do what you are supposed to do and trust God for the rest.

Let God and others—not you—correct your accusers.

This will be a hard step. You need to trust God to deal with your sheep at this stage since any attempt on your part is usually tainted by your own defensiveness and pain and will come across as self-serving. If you have a board of elders, they may choose to provide correction at the appropriate time. Don't be surprised if God moves the misfits on. He will frequently do this so they can continue to mature and hopefully learn how to better handle an offense in the future. If they leave, do not speak against them. Bless them, don't curse them (Matthew 5:44). They still belong to God.

Cry out to the Lord to prevent cynicism in your heart.

All relationships involve pain and conflict. Biting sheep are an occupational hazard overcome with liberal doses of healing and forgiveness. Press into the Lord for His special touch that heals the wound and gives right perspective. Talk it out and pray it through with a trusted friend. Share your heart and your tears with the Lord. Remember how loved you are by Him. He is able and willing to heal the violation of trust and loyalty that broke your heart (Luke 4:18). Judas and Peter betrayed the Lord, and those He came to save crucified Him. He knows what this wound is like. Admitting to the pain and facing God with your tears makes all the difference.

Keep an open-door policy and teach about how to resolve conflicts in the church.

Before a crisis brews, present a series on conflict resolution. Delineate a standard conflict resolution procedure for you and your leadership team. Also, teach your members what to do if they are offended with each other. If the timing is awkward or you believe that someone else may present the material more effectively than you, ask another minister or professional to do the teaching. An open-door policy wherein members are invited to air their views and feelings, can diffuse a major uprising. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.