



Should I tell the pastor?

In the course of family visitation, elders will sometimes hear criticism of their pastor's preaching. Should they tell the pastor? Here are some questions to ask to help you decide how to handle the criticism.

1. Who is making the criticism?

If it is a godly and faithful Christian, then you will pay much more attention to it than to someone who is not professing to be a Christian. If a particular Christian has an imbalanced theology or some particular "theological hobby horses," then this, too, should be taken into account when weighing the criticism's validity.

2. Have they ever said anything positive about the pastor?

If not, then the criticism may be motivated by personal enmity and malice. It would be unusual if a pastor had never said or done anything positive.

3. How many times have you heard this criticism?

A ruling elder should not pass on to the preacher every criticism he hears. If the criticism only comes from one source, then you are far less likely to pass it on than if you heard the same thing from a number of sources (1 Tim. 5:19).

4. Is the criticism fair and objective?

If not, then the elder should defend the pastor. He should not just sit there absorbing the criticisms like a sponge. That only encourages the critic to go on and on. And critics in the church get to know the elders that are "soft" and who will do their backhanded work by passing on their criticism. Some people's criticisms simply reflect their personal preferences for a particular type of preaching. That, too, must be weighed.

5. Does the criticism extend beyond one sermon?

Every pastor preaches an unsatisfying sermon from time to time. He probably knows it better than anyone. Maybe he did not have much time to prepare that week. Perhaps he never slept on Saturday night. Possibly someone in the back, row was sleeping or laughing. There are many different reasons for a pastor preaching a poor sermon now and again. It's terribly unfair for someone to ignore the vast majority of a preacher's sermons to focus on one here or one there that fell short of his usual standards.

6. Might there be a special reason for that sermon?

Sometimes a pastor may have a reason to preach on something, or a reason to preach in a particular way that he cannot explain publicly. Maybe he's preaching to a special problem that only he knows about. Perhaps he's trying to reach the children in the congregation. Possibly he's preaching in this style because he knows someone is bringing along a skeptical scientist to the service. Maybe a college student has asked him to answer a question raised by one of her lecturers. Sometimes even the pastor himself does not fully know the reason why a particular text, sermon, or preaching style has been laid upon him by the Lord for that time.

7. Has the critic spoken to the pastor?

It's amazing how much criticism would be reduced in churches if critics knew that elders will not take their criticisms seriously until they have tried speaking to the pastor themselves. "Have you

spoken to the pastor yourself?" would slow the vast majority of criticisms to a trickle. There may be special circumstances where this is not possible or wise, but if the criticism is serious enough for the pastor to hear, he should usually hear it from the critic first hand. And if the critic is not willing to do this, then it cannot be as serious to him as he makes out. Sadly, some critics are not only good at making the bullets, but at finding the elder most willing to fire them, too.

8. Is this the right time to speak to the pastor?

Let's assume then that the critic has spoken to the pastor, or that there are a number of legitimate concerns coming from different reputable sources. The elder now has to decide when to raise the subject. This is all-important if the aim really is to bring about necessary and beneficial change in the pastor's preaching. Here are some guidelines:

- a) Do it privately and not in front of other elders to begin with.
- b) Don't do it immediately after or before a service. And never do it on a Monday, when the pastor is often spent from Sunday's exertions.
- c) Find out how the pastor is doing – spiritually, mentally, physically, relationally, etc. Try to find out if he is already carrying large burdens or major worries. You don't want to be the straw that breaks the camel's back.
- d) Preface your remarks with any encouraging comments you have gathered in family visitation.

David P Murray

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