

Handling Criticism

By: Arnold Koelpin

Although a discussion of handling criticism is suitable for any group, it is a particularly fitting subject for teachers. Because of our profession, we are on the firing line; we stand in the forefront of public scrutiny. As professionals, we have been called to publicly profess our beliefs and values by word and deed and we feel bound to communicate them.ⁱ Our work, therefore, turns us into critics. In the classroom we must continually make judgments, on papers, on answers, on conduct. But our work, in turn, also makes us targets for criticism.

Being critics, we become super-sensitive to criticism. As one teacher commented, “Our egos are easily wounded.” In fact, the mere mention of the subject undoubtedly brings back memories to each of us, and we could all tell stories of how we had to handle criticism in and out of the classroom. In a humorous feature article of *The New York Times Educational Supplement*, a writer wonders out loud whether teachers are even criticizable. “Reproachable? Me? ... I’m a professional teacher. And that guarantees irreproachability, doesn’t it?” she says with a twinkle in her eye.ⁱⁱ

Because criticism of our work is such a sensitive area in our life, we are naturally alert to any practical advice that will help us deal with it. Our interest in the subject indicates a serious intent and an honorable goal. Simply stated:

- (a) we want to learn how to become more effective teachers and communicators;
- (b) we want to learn how to work together to foster God’s Kingdom—teachers with teachers, teachers with parents and children teachers with congregations;
- (c) we want to gain insights which will enable us to do the best job possible with our particular talents and abilities.

The results will color our daily life and conduct. It will have a tremendous impact on what today is one of the most pressing problems in the Christian ministry, our dedication to our calling.

The nature of criticism, however, makes handling this subject like handling a bristly porcupine. Criticism is a legal term and takes us into the courtroom. Taken from the Greek “*kritikos*,” to criticize means ‘to judge’ or ‘to make judgments.’ When someone criticizes us, he is in a sense taking us into court. And because judgments involve our person and our personality, we are ready to become the attorney for our own defense.

What is under challenge is our sense of right-ness or our sense of righteousness.ⁱⁱⁱ Criticism suggests there is a right way to conduct our work; it infers that there is a righteous way to conduct our life. The former is a functional judgment; the latter an ethical one.

This legal frame makes criticism the touchy issue that it is. Because of our fallen nature, we are in a broken relationship with God and with our neighbor. Sin has destroyed our sense of wholeness and of holiness. Having lost true trust and openness with God, we maintain, by nature, a fragile trust and openness with one another secured by reason and law. Newspaper accounts on family and extended families, on marriage or diplomacy, reveal how fragile these relationships are when ardent love quickly turns to passionate hate.

To criticize, therefore, is to walk on thin and dangerous ice. The Apostles James and Paul unearth the problem when they warn against unlovely judgments on someone else’s behavior. By criticizing another’s conduct, we set up ourselves as the ideal. But because we are sinful, we ourselves fall under the same judgment. “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else,” Paul says with sharp insight, “for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”^{iv} And so by criticizing, we leave ourselves open to counter judgment and to the charge that we think we are better than others. Therefore we constantly need to see ourselves as we really are and, as James says, to “speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.”^v

Is it wrong then to criticize? Is the best way to live together to shut our mouths and to stop criticizing? Are there then no standards according to which we may and can make judgments? Yes, there is a standard of judgment with regard to life-conduct, and yes, there are standards of judgment with regard to the work-conduct.

The rule according to which we can judge behavior is God's holy Law. It is perfect, it is good, it is outside us, it is the royal law of love, it is the way things should be. Through His Word, God judges. Let Him judge! In fact, if we are united with Him by faith, we are duty-bound to exercise judgment among our fellow Christians by using God's Law as a corrective after all, St. Paul reminds us, we are "going to judge angels."^{vi} Then, too, we can and should also exercise judgment on life-conduct in the world at large according to the rule of reason and law. This political use of law is commonly accepted as its first use: to keep order and peace on earth.

But we can and should also exercise judgment with regard to the conduct of work. Criticism of someone else's work requires wisdom and tact because we must make judgments according to reason. The same absolute norms that apply to God's Law do not apply in the rule of reason. Here criticism is made according to accepted norms. Here we judge according to shifting norms. Here we aim to have negotiated settlements. Handling criticism in this area is done with a great deal of human sensitivity, even as handling criticism according to God's Law must be done with all gentleness.^{vii}

Because life together in our world demands making judgments, the benefits of knowing how to handle criticism assume a greater importance than we often realize. The ways of dealing with criticism are not ends in themselves lest they become techniques to manipulate and maneuver people. Instead, knowing how to handle criticism is a means to achieve improvement in our work and gain unity among people. It is a precious process of growth by which we can learn from our mistakes, promote the welfare of our school and church, and unite the hearts, not of uptight people, but of upright people in doing God's work.

The marketplace today is full of how-to advice on every subject, also on this subject. Much of the advice is good and practical and usable. Some draws on salesmanship savvy that sweet-talks people into what we want and comes off as insincere. We, however, want to approach this subject with an openness that led the Apostle to write: "Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God."^{viii}

How then can we, as Christian teachers, handle criticism directed at us and our work? Let me suggest two ways in which this can be done:

1. By developing our understanding of people;
2. By working out a method to deal with criticism.

Understanding people

Handling criticism must begin with knowing people. And knowing people begins with understanding ourselves. Judgments on us and our work are bound to come our way and we need to respond. After all, harsh criticism hurts, unfair criticism cuts, and unspoken or behind-the-back criticism grinds. We all know that. Recently, an outsider to our Synod noted how in our circles we tend to cut one another down, even if it is in jest, rather than building one another up. That may be ego building for us, but cutting someone down is an immature act. It does not help us work together in God's kingdom.

But we are interested in how to handle criticism, because the way in which we respond to criticism tells us something about ourselves. Some of us may respond by withdrawing into ourselves and building up a shell of silence and hurt. Others of us may overreact by getting defensive and let loose verbal defenses that may eventually lead to an outburst of angry words. But "both silent and verbal counterattacks tend to destroy relationships."^{ix}

Recognizing such reactions in ourselves is the first step in coping with criticism. We want to avoid both extremes and deal with criticism positively and professionally. The Apostle James suggests three steps in dealing with criticism positively in Kingdom work: "Take note of this", he says—and we've got our pencils

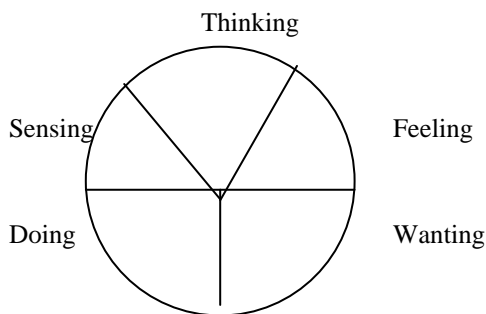
poised—“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”^x

Quick to listen

The first step in handling criticism is most important: we need to be “quick to listen.” Being quick to listen means developing a big ear. When a parent, pupil, principal or our peers speaks with us on a matter of concern, we need to cultivate the art of listening. That is not easy for us teachers because we are used to talking and not listening and we tend to dominate the conversation. We may even anticipate what is coming—“we’ve heard this before”—and so cut off conversation. The lines of communication are then closed.

To keep the lines of communication open, we need to let people talk. By listening intently, we let people know that we want to understand where they are coming from, how they are thinking and feeling. Our listening sets the stage for seeking solutions to the criticism that is raised. By showing confidence in what the critic is saying, we will stimulate them to do their best thinking. As they talk and put their feelings into words, they themselves may suggest solutions to the criticism that has been raised or even become apologetic for negative criticism. A few well-placed questions on our part may help them draw their own conclusions.

In the process of listening, we are able to develop what one writer calls an “awareness wheel.” He illustrates the wheel in this way:^{xi}



An awareness wheel is no magic wand in handling criticism. As I understand it, the wheel only serves as a model to keep us alert to the way people think, feel, and act. The wheel itself is a mere mental model of categories and helps us to recognize parents’, pupils’, or peers’ difficulties. Listen to the critics and get to know them. What do they feel? Are their feelings legitimate? What do they want? Have they made this clear?

Often the words used in criticism mask the real difficulty. In talking, critics may send physical or verbal signals that something is wrong which they are not revealing. Downcast eyes or fidgety hands may suggest reluctance to open up their true feelings. Flaring anger may be a cover for a weakness the critics perceive in themselves but do not want to acknowledge. Be aware of these signals, and add them to your awareness wheel.^{xii}

The irate other who burns the telephone lines with scorching words may be trying to come to terms with her own frustrations and will project them in criticism onto the teacher. One writer presented the problem in this way. “The school is the place where mothers experience their first public evaluation and scrutiny, where their child is compared with his agemates, and where teachers and other mothers voice approval or disapproval of the mother as reflected through the child.”^{xiii} The problem is complicated by the fact that, generally speaking, “the mother’s work is not valued by society.” No wonder she flares up!

The incident points out that one of the best ways for teachers to get to understand parents is through the children. Children are windows in the classroom; they give insight into the home. They are transparent and give perspectives on the family. By listening to the children, we can often measure where parental or pupil criticism is coming from and how it may be covering up the real problems.^{xiv}

We are all aware of the problem in many a modern home. Nationally, one out of five children come from one-parent homes, the result of illegitimacy, divorce, death and other misfortunes. Awareness of the divorce trauma helps us to understand feeling and actions of our pupils and their parents. Two parent homes experience other problems. In 1983, nationally, over 14 million children between the age of six and thirteen had

both parents working.^{xv} Alertness to the stress and pressures on parents and children helps to comprehend where the criticism is coming from. According to a recent radio report, a University of Michigan study showed that a working father spends only 8 minutes of “quality time” with a child each day, a working mother only about double that amount.

These figures are not introduced here as a jeremiad on the woes of modern society. The point is that to be aware is to be forewarned. We may handle criticism with understanding and sobriety where insight has been gained by listening, by awareness, by an ever-increasing awareness on our part.

Another useful way to cope with criticism is to understand people’s temperaments. All people are by nature sinful as St. Paul states, “There is no difference, for all have sinned.”^{xvi} But the make-up of people does differ. God dealt with Abraham as a man of action; with Isaac as a passive and retiring person; with Jacob as a cunning and crafty individual. Like the patriarchs of Israel, our critics, too, come in character types. Recognizing the characteristics will help to deal with their criticism in a positive and profitable manner.

Some critics are phlegmatic by nature. They are not easily aroused, seemingly apathetic and composed. Dealing with their criticism may seem like dealing with a block of wood; they remain inert and passive. They are slow on the uptake; they are not very facile when suggestions are offered. You can stand on your head to excite them, but it will seemingly do no good. We need not be frustrated when dealing with such people if only we recognize the temperament. Despite their seeming dispassionate expression and outward demeanor, we do best to listen to what they say and deal with their criticism seriously and forthrightly.

Other critics may be just the opposite. Hot-tempered and fiery by nature, they are easily enraged and become wrathful, spiteful, and irascible. They are particularly difficult to deal with emotionally. Their ill-humor may arouse them to violent animosity. They can be easily embittered for whatever cause and will show their bitterness in their criticism, often unveiling their vengeful attitudes with cunning and seething sophistication. Galen, the great physician, felt such folk were “pumped up,” not by adrenalin, but by an excess of bile.

Critics who are marked by a cheerful and optimistic spirit often have minds that are quickly aroused to excessive action. They tend to be hyper and come on strong. The exchange of words with such critics may seem more pleasant for us. But their hot-blooded, vibrant approach to life may be overwhelming and lead to undue haste. In dealing with such, we need to take care that we think through the solution to the criticism. We will be quick to listen, but slow to act.

Coping with this critic stands in direct contrast to critics with a brooding temperament. We can recognize such critics by their slow and gloomy disposition. As crepe-hangers, these persons tend to be pensive, dispirited and depressed, even to the point of hypochondria. Nothing ever seems to be right. That attitude fuels their criticism. The impressions you convey to them externally are often silently harbored. They never seem to forget or forgive. They cling to their grievances and let them prey on their mind and body. They are hard to deal with.

Now, getting to know people is a tall order and takes an understanding heart. We are all a combination of these temperaments; we are all on the continuum of temperament, but at different places. While we must avoid negative stereotyping, characterizations can be useful in seeking positive solutions. In dealing with human beings, a Lutheran pastoral theology book advises, teachers “ought to know that there are different types of persons: some cool and deliberate, others excitable; some callous, other sensitive, their feelings are easily hurt; some sentimental, others reflective; some moody, others resolute; some frequently out of sorts, others usually in good humor, some pessimistically, others optimistically inclined; some quick to speak and act, others slow to do so.”^{xvii} How different our listening will be when we understand the critics as people.

The lesson is that, in dealing with any one of these types, we need to take people the way they are. We need not try to make rubber ducks out of people, putting them in the same character mold. God’s varieties are the spice of life! But when critics come and challenge our sense of rightness, we can take them and ourselves under the cross, as St. Paul did with his critics in Corinth and there seek attitudes according to the mind of Christ. Repentance, a complete change of mind, a whole new attitude, is the common mold that Christians have. We are a new creation in Christ, each in his own personality.

Slow to speak

The big ear should be accompanied by a slow tongue; it is important that we also be “slow to speak.” Hasty reactions to criticism can prove disastrous. We need to think about our responses. In most cases, the response time can be immediate: we know how to answer and therefore can be assertive in what we say. But when the critic speaks in the heat of emotion or levels unjust criticism, we may recoil and be tempted to respond in kind. When our heart starts beating rapidly, guard the tongue. We do best in such cases to be slow to speak, to buy time. We do this for our own sake as well as for the critic’s. Jesus Himself chose to remain silent when wrongly criticized in a court of law.

Time and timing are important factors in our response to criticism. Buying time is not meant to be an artful dodge, but a skillful step in the process of resolving the criticism. If school policy is being challenged, we may ask for time to consult with others before speaking. If school activities are involved, we may need time to find out more information and to get the whole picture. If another person is under attack, we will put the discussion on hold and defer the criticism to the one being criticized. Buying time will help the matter “cool down.” it will help to put the criticism in perspective until you can deal with it further.

Picking the right time to respond is also a way to indicate our interest in resolving the criticism. We need to check schedules. Parents who both work outside the home, for example, are understandably tired when they come home. Let our consultation be at the critic’s convenience whenever possible.^{xviii} If, however, the critic presses for immediate response, we can buy time by rephrasing the criticism: “You mean....”, “If I understand you correctly . . .”, “I think I know where you’re coming from....” The give and take will give us an opportunity to ascertain the larger picture and to understand what is really in the critics’ craw. Then we can commend them for taking up the matter and ask ‘Have you looked at it this way?’ to help them understand the issue.

We also need to make it a practice to give the critic credit for what seems important to them, even if the matter seems trivial to us. In so doing, we are getting to know people and we grow in the process. One analyst identified three main postures in handling criticism: non-assertive, aggressive, and assertive. Being non-assertive is flight from criticism. Aggression signals readiness for a fight. But assertiveness is the middle way between flight and fight. Assertiveness means giving an honest expression of one’s feelings and being clear about one’s goals: here is what we are trying to accomplish and why.^{xix}

Assertiveness is a special quality for principals to cultivate. The principal’s office puts him at the center of criticism. The battered principal often feels like a powerless pedagogue tossed about by criticism from students, parents, staff, school boards, and others. In that position the principal must walk the thin line between being non-assertive and aggressive.

One analyst states what this can mean: ‘The non-assertive principal may hide behind a rule-creating, rigid, unilateral relationship with staff for fear of appearing wishy-washy—and then actually become wishy-washy when challenged. At the other extreme, the aggressive principal can destroy the collegial, professional relationship that should exist between him and staff by relying excessively on his power to settle all disagreements.’

Instead, the principal should attempt “to steer the middle course. By being clear about his right to assert professional wants and needs necessary to run an effective school, and developing assertive skills to defend himself against manipulation, the principal can relate to his staff as professional equals.”^{xx} That is nicely put; it is also easier said than done. While we want to be sure about ourselves and our goals, we need to pray, like Solomon, for an understanding heart!

Being slow to speak may, at times, involve the need to have a witness, a third party or parties in consultation. If no settlement of the criticism is forthcoming “just between the two of you,” in Jesus’ words, we must suggest taking the matter a step further, to the proper person or committee. In every congregation there is an orderly procedure set up by constitution according to Matthew 18: for example, teacher to principal to school board to congregation, in an ever-widening circle.^{xxi}

The main purpose in this chain of judgment is to keep the matter as confined and confidential as possible and to solve the criticism at the lowest level of judgment. In this way we involve as few people as possible and as few tongues as possible. Others need not know; the matter is not “everybody’s” business. To go public with private criticism is a step that should be taken slowly. If haste makes waste, then, in handling criticism, haste can easily make a wasteland, a wasteland of relationships in the church. Our aim, however, is the opposite: to let the church be a flourishing oasis where believers work together to foster God’s kingdom. So we will take steps slowly and deliberately and use our best judgment in coping with criticism.

Slow to become angry

The third important step in handling criticism also counsels slowness: we need to be “slow to become angry.” Angry words are verbal power plays. Done in criticism, anger breaks down love and can destroy it. If, as St. Paul indicates, genuine love is kind and does not keep a record of wrongs,^{xxii} personal criticism can devastate love and human relationships, especially when criticism is unfair. How then can we cool our anger when we are faced with personal criticism?^{xxiii}

Criticism that is obviously unfair need not be dignified by a response. We may be hurt by it; our immediate response may be anger; we may want to defend ourselves. But we need to ignore and forget it. Where our conscience is clear and the criticism evidently unjust, our best response is a refusal to meet anger with anger. Nehemiah, the Temple-builder, cut his critics short by ignoring a meeting where public criticism was to be leveled at his work in rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls.^{xxiv}

Another way to handle unjust personal criticism is to screen it out of our consciousness. We need not let such criticism upset us. Intimidation only drains us emotionally. When we fret over every put-down, the winner in the end is the devil, who succeeds in taking joy out of our kingdom work. When Martin Luther was concerned about handling unjust criticism against him—and he had a host of critics! -- he confidently turned the matter over to “the wrath of God.”^{xxv} Rather than growing angry, therefore, we need to let God get angry over the false accusations of our critics and ultimately judge them. Our anger, St. James tells us, “does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”^{xxvi}

In his book on “Criticizing,” William Diehm recounts the Aesop fable of the old man and young boy who decided to take their donkey and supplies to the fair. In response to an inquiry why they did not ride the donkey, the old man put the boy on the donkey and the two continued on their way. When later another criticized that it was surely a sin for the boy to ride and the old man to walk, the father exchanged places with the boy and rode on. Further down the road, a woman criticized the good-for-nothing old man for riding while the young boy had to walk. The man was stung by the criticism and he put the boy on the donkey, too. Well, you can guess what happened next! As they rode along, the crowd jeered at the two of them for loading down the poor donkey—and, when they finally arrived at the fair, the two were carrying the donkey upside down with its feet strapped to a pole, to the amusement of all who saw them.^{xxvii}

Criticisms often load the donkey on our backs. Carrying the load of criticism, we lose sight of the blessings God provides in normal life. In application, Diehm gives this advice to slow down our reactions to criticism:

Destructive criticisms are like thieves—they can take away your self-confidence, your achievement, and your personality. One of the ways you can preserve these Precious commodities is by strongly tying them to your character with bonds of gratitude. If you are grateful for your achievements, someone who criticizes cannot steal them from you.

We tend to become the object of our attention. If we focus on what the critics say, we tend to become what they say we are. If we focus our attention on the good things we do, the good things tend to grow. One solid way of giving attention to anything is to be thankful for it.

If we give too much attention to a negative event, we make the negative event grow beyond its importance. A pimple can become a heart transplant if talked about enough. When people say false

words about us and we continually rehash what they say, using emotional energy in defensiveness and resistance, we make negative statements more important than they need be.^{xxviii}

Translated into a Christian context, the fable and Diehm's application point us to the source of our strength and actions. It comes from the Lord God, and thankfulness to Him will help us keep all criticism - particularly unjust criticism - in perspective and slow down our anger.

When criticism against us is justified, however, we still need the counsel of slowing our anger, but handling the criticism will differ. We need to slow down our response time by asking ourselves: is the criticism correct? And if it is, we should weigh its importance and our response.

Criticism that is on target hurts for the moment. King David knew the effect of a frontal criticism which minced no words on a moral issue: "You are the one!" Right then and there, Nathan took David into court—you remember, that is what criticism means. And David, as the attorney for his own defence—that is what handling criticism means—pleaded guilty. He admitted the truth of the criticism. But joy following his admission came only when he was pronounced not guilty in God's court; "The Lord has taken away your sin."^{xxix} A forthright admission of our wrongdoing, weakness, or misjudgment is the first step in reestablishing our credibility. Forgiveness reestablishes our joy.

It is true that most personal criticism is not on a moral level, but on a functional one. Under attack is our performance: "Your classroom is dirty. Your classes are dull." Such criticism is equally hard to handle just because it is so personal. We lose objectivity. In such cases, we need to bear two simple things in mind: Some things we can change, some things we can't. If we are able to make changes, let us make them. We can thank the critic for the criticism. Thanks for the suggestion will not only disarm the critic, but it will signal that we take the criticism seriously. Then we must work on the problem and be up-front with the critic at a later time: "That was a good suggestion; it has helped," or "We tried another way; it hasn't worked yet, but we're working on it."

If, on the other hand, there is something being criticized that we cannot change, like our personality, we must avoid becoming bitter. Bitterness, like jealousy, is "a green-ey'd monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on."^{xxx} We only hurt ourselves in the process, for "bitterness becomes an angry substitute for Justice."^{xxxi} A bitter person will have a hard time promoting God's kingdom; most often he or she will undermine it.

If our God-given limitations are under criticism, we should explain that we have tried. St. Paul's picture of the body with many parts is God's way of telling us about gifts and talents in church work. Even professionals have not been given all the talents. We need neither minimize nor over-evaluate what God has given us, but use our gifts to the best of our ability. To stand up effectively to criticism of our person and personality, we need to strive for three things:

1. keep a good conscience (1 Timothy 1:5);
2. hold our peace (1 Timothy 6:4-5);
3. pray (Philippians 4:6).

We may not be able to change certain things, but we can develop. A positive way to overcome our weaknesses is by developing a plan for improvement. Such a plan will begin with God's Word which assures us: God has created each of us as His own special person; God has loved us in Christ and wants us to love ourselves and to love one another; in all things God works for the good of those who love him. Cheered by this faith, we can ask others for assistance. We can strive to work on our shortcomings even if they are deeply engrained in our personality. We can set goals toward which we can work.

Another suggestion for helping us cope with personal criticism is by noting positive responses to our work. We can keep track of positive things others have said about us. While God is our refuge and strength in troubled times, he also works through his creatures. There is nothing wrong in keeping that little note which said: "Teacher, I love you." One teacher kept a file of complimentary letters, not out of pride or for publication,

but for reading when discouraged. The file folder said simply: “Thanks.” One letter read, “This is to thank you for your labor of love at . . . and beyond, and to let you know that it is ‘trickling down’ into new generations.” It is nice to call to mind such blessings when negative thoughts come our way.

In the long run, therefore, we need to view handling criticism as a challenge and a matter of growth. Through the adversity of criticism, we grow. Just like any test in life, criticism is a process by which we become stronger in our understanding and our ability to function and communicate. It helps us to work more effectively in God’s kingdom. We need to view criticism in that light, not as a “club to knock us down,” but “as a prod to drive us forward.”^{xxxii}

Like a runner in a race, a winner grows in ability to hurdle criticism even if the exercise makes the person weary. We learn why being “quick to listen” sharpens our ability to know ourselves and others. We find out how being “slow to speak” develops assertiveness on our part. We understand why being “slow to become angry” helps us to cope with criticism in a positive way and to see God’s hand in everything.

Then no matter what path our life may take, we can carry this experience with us as tried and tested servants of the Lord and can put the lessons to work wherever we go or in whatever we do. And we can work cheerfully and dynamically as the Lord gives us faith and ability.

Developing a method to deal with criticism

Advice on how to handle criticism, however, is easier to give than to put into practice. It often seems safer to ignore criticism than to meet it. As one teacher confessed, ‘I don’t want to cause hard feelings.’

That is a noble sentiment and in many cases is the way to go. But unanswered criticism can also lead to negative consequences for us and for the kingdom. Like a sore, it can fester. To aid us in developing professional responsibility and self confidence in coping with criticism, a book on home/school relationships advocates that we discuss the matter during in-service training.^{xxxiii} Such sessions would give us opportunity to share, in an organized way, the techniques we have learned.

Let me put two items on the agenda of such a meeting. Both methods can be used in dealing with criticism in congregational life. The first method applies best to individual situations and can be used by an individual teacher in any relationship: criticism from pupils, from parents, from peers, from principals, from the school board or from congregation members.

The second method is best used in wider contexts. It gets at situations that are part of the entire school program. It will help to fix criticisms that are often not voiced or are said behind the back. It will help to break into the respectful silence that can pervade a congregation’s atmosphere.

Scanning individual criticism

Looking for ways of dealing with individual criticism undoubtedly comes closest to our experience. Here a method adapted from a book on *101 Parent/Pupil/Teacher Situations and How To Handle Them*.^{xxxiv} This method can serve as a model to make us more effective communicators. The method has much to recommend its use: it is simple and private; it is similar to keeping a diary. Let us call this method a “SCAN,” because it handles criticism by “SCAN-ning” criticism in this way:

Take an 8 x 10 ½ plain sheet of paper and divide it into three parts:^{xxxv}

1. Situation:
2. Course of Action:
3. Notes:

The method, as we can see, is designed to focus our attention on three things:

1. That we crystallize the criticism;
2. That we decide on a course of action; and

3. That we reflect on how we have handled it.

If we keep these three steps clearly in mind, we will eventually be able, with practice, to handle criticism without setting the matter on paper in diary fashion. At the outset, however, we can use the written method as a means of dealing with criticism. How then does the SCAN method work and what does it hope to accomplish?

1. The SITUATION. Focusing attention, first of all, on the situation means to assess the problem as objectively as possible and to crystallize it. This is most important. Even though a parent or peer aims a criticism at us, we want to establish the core of the criticism without getting upset. This is a mark of maturity and a sign of handling the problem in a professional way.

In the process of listening and responding, it is helpful to screen out the essentials from all that is being said. That is not always easy. Every criticism naturally involves people and personalities because people make judgments and people do things. The father that accuses us of picking on his child draws us into the situation emotionally. We are wounded; our person is under attack. When this happens, we need to look away from persons and to get at the situation instead. We can do this by isolating the problem in our mind and distinguishing it from the persons involved. Later we will crystallize our thoughts on paper and enter the assessment in our “diary.” We write:

SITUATION—Disciplining a child who won’t be quiet in class.

Mr B. told me his child thinks “you are too hard on her.”.....“You always look at her first ..”
The real problem is that Sue refuses to be quiet....etc.

We objectify the matter for good reason. In an article on “Dealing With Criticism,” Robert J. Martin shows how problem-centered criticism produces different results from people-centered criticism. Criticism directed to the person usually sends threatening messages and can produce “discouragement and frustration.” Problem-centered criticism, on the other hand, “focuses on solving problems, including behavior, without threatening an individual’s self-image. This kind of criticism attempts to identify specific situations....that can be changed.”^{xxxvi}

Martin even gives a number of hints to help us stay on target. For one, he says, we should rephrase sweeping criticism, eliminating such absolutes as “always” and “never.” For example, to the critic who says, “You always come late for class,” respond honestly, “I have been late several times recently.” For another, we should remove the verb “to be” from critical statements. For example, when someone accuses us, “You are irresponsible,” substitute, “I acted irresponsibly when I didn’t call.”^{xxxvii}

The latter suggestion is most helpful because it removes criticism from a frozen state (what is) to an active state (what can become) and opens the criticism to possible solutions. Getting the criticism in motion sets the stage for the second step.

2. The COURSE of ACTION. Once we have assessed and crystallized the criticism, we can try to turn it into constructive action. People most often criticize because they want “something done about it.” Nothing is more frustrating than to voice a criticism and to know it will get nowhere. Nothing is more satisfying for critics than to know they have accomplished something.

The course of action need not be of great consequence. The main thing is that wheels have been set in motion. The critic not only has had his day in court, but the matter will be carried further and hopefully reach a satisfactory conclusion. Out of a negative will come a positive. As one author observes, “Constructive criticism in which the difficulty or deficiency is introduced by some concrete suggestion for dealing with it is welcome.”^{xxxviii}

It is unfortunate but true, however, that many critics not only want “something done about it,” but want it done their way.” That is often the hidden agenda. In such cases, the critic must be made aware that there are other options. By having the critic consider a number of options in solving the problem, we will have opportunity to present the reasons for our way of doing things alongside their way.

Option-solving can be a beneficial way of weighing the critic’s solution together with our own and other possibilities. In the process, we have enlisted their cooperation. Together we are working in God’s kingdom. Together we can seek the best solution, even to a bad situation. And we, for our part, are exercising our professional leadership in doing so.

In laying out the options, we need to be as specific as possible. If a coach receives a complaint about Saturday practice in the basketball program, it may be that there is no equitable solution for all parents and pupils involved. The coach will listen to the critic’s solution, spell out the school’s policy and the reasons for it, and then discuss other options. If the matter is settled immediately by agreeing on a course of action, the case is closed. We will note this in our “diary.” If the case is not settled, other options are available: restudy by the faculty or board of education. We will assure the critic that we will get back to him. In our “diary,” we can work out a proposed course of action.

Option-solving in many cases can lead to goal-solving. In our discussion, we need to set forth reasonable goals. In the case of Saturday basketball practice, one reasonable goal would be to involve as many pupils as possible. The clearer we lay out the goals of our action, the easier it will be for critics to understand. Often our critics do not have the whole picture and see the problem only from their particular corner. They cannot be faulted for that. And they will often respond positively when we explain the reasons and give the whole picture. We owe them that.

If our goals are not clear, we need to clarify them. Our critics may often give us new insights. In the end, the course of action we propose intends to bring the matter to some sort of conclusion. The solution may either be opened-ended and subject to review, or it may be close-ended and laid to rest.

3.NOTES. Not all action to allay criticism will be successful or necessarily prove to be the best course of action. For this reason we need to reflect on the outcome after the fact. We can do this simply by logging notes on the SCAN sheet. The notes will reveal what worked or what did not work under certain circumstances. They will serve as a self-evaluation of the action taken.

For example, to the criticism, “I don’t think you should have had the pre-schoolers come to school in their pajamas for a sleepy-time party,” we might have acted by polling the moms and dads on the question. The results might have proved disastrous because now one person’s problem has become “everybody’s” problem. The congregation is buzzing. Our notes in the “diary” may indicate: it would have been a wiser course of action to handle the criticism on an individual and private basis. The notes may also include suggestions given from others.

Later we can use the SCAN sheet as a basis for discussion in a faculty meeting, especially when a situation gets out of hand. The notes will assist us to formulate our thoughts on how we handled the issue. The practice of SCAN-ning can also aid us in handling future encounters. For some, the method will be used without logging the “diary” on paper. Because of experience, it is enough that they have developed a way to deal with criticism and continue to learn from their experience.

But whatever method of dealing with criticism is used, it must remain only a way to achieve a higher goal. After all is said and done, we are trying to foster the high goal of God’s call to faith: to work together in God’s kingdom “so that the body of Christ may be built up,” as St. Paul says.

With great precision, Paul explains our goal in this way: “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”^{xxxix} This maturity includes not merely doctrinal conviction, but also an ability to relate well to other people, using the perfectly balanced character of Christ as our model.

Our SCAN-sion, therefore, will operate with the good judgments drawn from God’s Word. This does not mean we have to get “religious” about every criticism; not every exchange needs to have a fitting Bible

passage attached to it. But behind all our dealings, the critics should come to know the Christian heart, even if our action represents a “tough love” that sets standards and goals, explains them, and enlists the critical help to work for them.

For those who are weak in understanding, we need to be patient and not crush them with the heavy hand of authority. Our efforts to achieve constructive solutions need to take us into the real world of sinful human beings. In this world, not every criticism will end in a perfect solution. But we will be able to grow and mature by working together in promoting God’s kingdom. And there is joy and satisfaction in such efforts.

Monitoring criticism of the school program

A second method of handling criticism relates to criticism of the school in general. It seeks to deal with situations such as an atmosphere of “unspoken” criticism of the school or some part of its program, criticism that rises publicly to which no immediate answers can be given, or the “conspiracy of silence” in a congregation that could undermine the effectiveness of the school program despite our best efforts. A frequent form of such criticism is the impersonal use of “the school” or the undesigned use of “they”: “the school doesn’t care” or “why don’t they?” One method to handle such criticism in wider contexts, when necessary, is some sort of self-study of the school.

Let me highlight two advantages of such a review as a method to handle criticism. For one, it makes “unspoken” criticism surface. For another, it keeps criticism as impersonal as possible. Certainly the lives of all connected to the school and its operation, especially our work as teachers, are under scrutiny. But a self-study should be conducted in such a way that we can assess the strengths and weaknesses of the school in a non-accusatory way. In the process, we can build on our strengths and, at the same time, make plans to shore up our weaknesses by setting goals for which to work.

Our purpose here is not to spell out the machinery for conducting such a review or who will carry it out. Materials to guide a school through the steps are available. They can be adapted even to smaller and less formal circumstances. Our interest is rather, if necessary, to strengthen the lines of communication between teacher and peer and principal and parent and pupil and congregation. Where the line of communication are clear and open and flowing, we have opportunity to turn criticism to constructive ends.

In a book on leadership in the church entitled “Competent To Lead,” Kenneth Gangel points out: “If communications breakdown also means a breakdown in human relations in the organization (and it does), then we must pay careful attention to the problems we might encounter in the communications process. Experts tell us that the loss in communication can be measured primarily in factors such as foggy detail, distortion of words, retention of emotional concepts, and an attachment to the facts of innate prejudice.”^{x1}

A self-study aims to correct communications breakdown by establishing communications and by seeking clarity with regard to the school program. It does this by carefully devising questionnaires and on pertinent topics, such as: the school’s philosophy and objectives, the educational program, financial resources, teaching conditions, teacher loads and assignments. It seeks a return from various sources: an individual teacher opinion inventory, a parent opinion inventory, a school board opinion inventory, etc. All of these instruments can be adapted to larger or smaller circumstances. It takes work, but it need not be burdensome. In a small school the review can be part of a self-study of the entire congregation or some less formal method of congregational review.

The outcome of the survey will help to establish the areas of strengths and weaknesses in the school program. Although a self-study is not a panacea for all problems, it is one method to help the congregation understand its ability to cope with matters that have been criticized. It will help to establish priorities in long-range planning for the school’s future. It will assist in building on the school’s strengths and working to correct its weaknesses as time, ability, and opportunity permit.

One of the chief products of such a review, no matter how small the study may be, is to assist congregations in gaining a new appreciation for the value of Christian education. Our attention cannot help but be focused on the common evangelical faith which binds us together as a people. The Gospel is the strength of

our strengths and the burden of our weaknesses. It is the core of our philosophy of education. By clarifying the objectives of the school as an agency of the Christian church, we will be using criticism in a constructive way to build God's kingdom.

And kingdom building is, after all, the purpose of working together in the church. May the Lord of the church bless all efforts to let His kingdom come!

ⁱ A professional, in former times, was one who professed his faith and took a public oath to carry out his office in word and deed. The individual, therefore, felt a responsibility to uphold his beliefs in what he said and did. Today the term "professional" has been so flattened in popular use that it has been rendered almost meaningless. Allan Bloom's current best-seller *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, inc, 1987) explains how this devaluation of terms has occurred in American life.

ⁱⁱ Hilary Moriarty, "You can't be serious, ma'am", in the *Times Educational Supplement* (September 12, 1986) p. 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ The word that stands at the forefront of Jewish legal terminology in interpreting the Torah is "zadeek", or righteousness. See Isadore Epstein, *Judaism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959) p. 26ff. How important this legal term is in the New Testament where Jesus Christ is our righteousness!

^{iv} Romans 2:1

^v James 2:12

^{vi} 1 Corinthians 6:3

^{vii} Galatians 6:1

^{viii} 2 Corinthians 1:12

^{ix} William J. Diehm, *Criticizing* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) p. 82.

^x James 1: 19. James' letter is aimed at all professing Christians who claim to be teachers.

^{xi} Sherod Miller/Nunnally/Wackmann, *Alive and Aware*, (Minneapolis: Interpersonal Communication Programs, The Carriage House 1975) p. 31.

^{xii} Miller, p. 39ff, mentions various physical reactions.

^{xiii} Sara L. Lightfoot, *Worlds Apart* (New York: Harper, Basic Books, Inc., 1978) p. 62.

^{xiv} Lightfoot, p. 3.

^{xv} Pauline Rhiner, "Pressures on Today's Children", *The Education Digest*, (October 1983) p. 42.

^{xvi} Romans 3: 22.

^{xvii} John HC Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945) p. 191ff. Fritz' work, based on CFW Walther's pastoral theology, elaborates on various temperaments.

^{xviii} Ira J. Gordon/William F. Breivogel, *Building Effective Home-School Relationships* (Boston: Allyn Bacon, Inc., 1976) p. 37.

^{xix} Found in a discussion of Charles Wolfgang, "Standing Up For Yourself", in *Principal* (January, 1984) pp. 18-23.

^{xx} Wolfgang, p. 23.

^{xxi} Congregational polity in the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod is based on Jesus' words in Matthew 18: 15-17.

^{xxii} 1 Corinthians 13:4f.

^{xxiii} Many thoughts in this section are drawn from Diehm, pp. 82-99.

^{xxiv} Nehemiah 6:2f.

^{xxv} Found in the "Preface to the Smalcald Articles", in T.G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) p. 289.

^{xxvi} James 1: 20.

^{xxvii} Diehm, p. 108f.

^{xxviii} Diehm, p. 107.

^{xxix} 2 Samuel 12: 1-13.

^{xxx} The quotation is from Shakespeare's *Othello*, act II, scene III, line 165.

^{xxxi} Diehm, p. 31.

^{xxxii} Diehm, p. 88.

^{xxxiii} Gordon/Breivogel, p. 128.

^{xxxiv} The method here proposed is an adaptation of the material in P. Susan Mamchak/Steven R. Mamchak, *101 Parent/Pupil/Teacher Situations and How To Handle Them* (New York: Parker Publishing Company, Inc. 1980.)

^{xxxv} See the attached illustration of the SCAN method by Dr. David O. Wendler of Dr. Martin Luther College for this presentation.

^{xxxvi} Robert J. Martin, "Dealing With Criticism", in *Learning, The Magazine for Creative Teaching*, March, 1979, p. 92.

^{xxxvii} Martin, p. 93.

^{xxxviii} Virginia Ballard/Ruth Strang, *Parent-Teacher Conferences* (New York: McGraw Hill Company, Inc., 1964), p. 56.

^{xxxix} Ephesians 4: 12f.

^{x1} Kenneth O. Gangel, *Competent to Lead*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974) p. 110f.