



4. Mismanaging Anger

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The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at jcraig@northernlightcc.com.

Case Study

Pastor Rich gulped down a piece of cake (it was his daughter's third birthday) and raced back to the church building for the monthly board meeting. As he pulled into the Pleasant Grove Community Church parking lot, he noticed his vision had become blurred, signaling the onset of a migraine headache. He knew crushing head pain and waves of nausea would soon roll over him, making it almost impossible to sit through the meeting. Groping for his prescription medicine in the glove box, he cursed under his breath, prayed for forgiveness, swallowed the pills, and prayed again for strength to survive the next few hours.

The church board consisted of twenty leaders elected annually by the congregation. Trivial matters usually dominated the agenda, and this evening was no exception. The first hour was spent discussing a proposal to repaint the front stairwell. Members debated the relative merits of oil and latex, color preferences, and the possible use of volunteers. Everyone added his/her two cents to the discussion, but no one volunteered to do the work.

Larry, chairman of the board, truncated the discussion in his characteristically intimidating, sarcastic tone. "Look, I'll donate the paint and labor and get it done this week. Maybe I can even get our *hard working pastor* here to help me!" Looking at Pastor Rich, whose face was flushed with embarrassment, Larry added "That is, if he can figure out which end of the brush to hold!" A proposal to buy a new coffee maker for the front office consumed the second hour and a half. Everyone expressed opinions about the size, features, and probable cost of an ideal unit. Larry closed that conversation, too. "Everyone knows how pastors like to sit around drinking coffee all day" he sneered. "Let's have our *Bible college-educated expert* make a recommendation and we'll consider it at the next meeting."

The board members always remained silent as the Chairman dealt his insulting, demeaning remarks. No one wanted to tangle with Larry, a vindictive man with a well-known mean streak. Besides, his willingness to make decisions, pay for supplies out of his own pocket, and do most of the work himself allowed others to escape responsibility. Secretly, though less obnoxious about it, most of the board members shared Larry's fundamental disrespect for ministers. Pastor Rich's apparent willingness to be bullied and humiliated only reinforced their views.

By 11:30, the meeting was over and it seemed everyone had left the building. Pastor Rich was locking the front door when he felt a large, hardened hand grasp his shoulder. Startled, he turned to find Larry looking somewhat sheepish and apologetic. "I need a minute of your time" the man blurted out. "My wife has this crazy notion she wants to leave me, and I need you to call her tomorrow and talk some sense into her head."



Shaken, exhausted, with his head ready to split, the pastor answered with venom. “You worked me over pretty good tonight, as usual, and now you want me to talk your wife into staying with you? I’m not your flunky. If you want someone to talk to her, do it yourself!” Leaving Larry standing dumbfounded at the front entrance, he walked quickly to his car and drove away.

The Problem

Potatoes can work without being irked, but pastors cannot. Our Lord became angry when he encountered hypocrisy, injustice, and legalism. Godly helpers experience similar rage. Unlike Jesus, they can let their anger get the best of them and impair their clinical judgment.

Pastors tend to deny anger. They keep smiling and claim to be fine—while they are cultivating ulcers, colitis, hypertension, and migraine headaches. They allow anger to build until it explodes in malicious language and actions. (In therapy, frustrated pastors often report having nightmares and fantasies in which they lose control and lash out from the pulpit—a terrifying prospect for those whose livelihoods depend on an ability to speak with composure and conviction.

Pastors also tend to believe they should handle things alone rather than getting supervisory feedback and counsel. They assume their struggle with fear and rage is uncommon. They worry their disclosure to a colleague or professional counselor indicates they are spiritually weak, and that word of this weakness may get back to church or denominational leaders.

Enraged pastors can explode in ways that are abusive and self-destructive. These eruptions can happen in counseling sessions, meetings, or even the pulpit on Sunday morning. I have a friend who told me his pastor took a telephone book into the pulpit on Easter, began ripping out handfuls of yellow pages and throwing them at the audience. With each toss, he screamed “We have several doors out of this sanctuary. If you think it is so much better somewhere else, then here are places you can go!” I worked with a bitter pastor who confessed he planned to read his resignation letter and “give them a piece of my mind” salted with profanity and name-calling. Stunts like these can feel righteous, but they usually backfire, provoking additional (and well-deserved!) criticism and further damaging the local Body of Christ.

Bitter pastors don’t always explode. Some implode. They become withdrawn and gun-shy, studiously avoiding conflict and placating those who seem most threatening. Imploding pastors can reveal their rage through passive-aggressive behavior, such as being chronically late to appointments, forgetting meetings, accidentally scheduling engagements that conflict with important church events, vacillating on decisions, dumping their responsibilities on assistants and support staff, and presenting shoddy sermons. The truth be told, “I feel God is calling me to a new ministry” often means “I am fed up with this church, but I am frightened to say so.”

Angry pastors can also become paranoid and accusatory toward junior staff members, micromanaging and nit picking until they drive them crazy and/or run them out of the church. This is the reason for much of the tension between senior ministers and associates. I know an assistant minister who skipped the Annual Women’s Group Bake Sale—an event to which he was not invited and technically had nothing to do with his ministry. Three days later, he was called into



the senior minister's office for an unscheduled and blistering "evaluation" of his job performance. Bewildered and embarrassed, the young man left his boss' office with a written reprimand and an expanded job description that included "attend all church events". He thought he missed a bake sale, but older minister, still smarting from years of unreasonable expectations and unwarranted criticism, felt the young man had directly threatened his tenure.

Volunteer caregivers can have the same feelings and tendencies. Provoked by criticism or pressed to take sides on some issue, they may respond with outright anger. More often, though, they react passively by cutting back on their involvement while saying "I need to spend more time with my family."

The Solution

Anger is not a primary emotion. Fear is. God has designed us to react to threats in two ways—to fight and to flee. Sometimes it is better to stand one's ground and meet the conflict head-on. At other times, it is best to run. Sadly, most pastors sit and stew, rehearsing in their heads what they should have said, or what they will say the next time. Hearts race and blood pressure skyrockets, but little is reconciled. Aggressive members provoke, passive pastors doodle, and both dream of retribution.

The dream becomes a nightmare when one of the protagonists approaches the pastor for counseling. Most pastors have had the experience of their thorn-in-the-side contacting them and asking for help with a marriage or family problem. When a pastor feels anger toward a counselee, it is important to work through the following process:

1. Recognition: *I am feeling anger toward this person.*
2. Confession: *Something about this person frightens me.*
3. Discernment: *Part of my fear is rational. Something about this counselee poses a real threat to someone or something I cherish. I must identify this threat and address it directly. Part of my fear is irrational. I am imagining terrible outcomes that probably won't occur. I need to bottle my feelings for now and talk to a colleague about it right away.*
4. Action: *I will address the rational threat with my counselee. I will address the irrational threat with my supervisor/colleague.*

In the case example, Pastor Rich feared the chairman's ability to cause him and his family great pain. This is a rational fear. Many good pastors have been sent packing by the likes of Larry. Instead of doodling and acting as if he is not sensing the insults, Pastor Rich could have said to himself "This person is willfully, intentionally provoking me. I am angry."

Irrationally, Pastor Rich also feared Larry could destroy his life. While the chairman certainly could cause significant pain and disruption, the pastor needed to remember that Larry is not God and therefore has no ultimate power over him. Rather than imagining himself a lifeless, miserable, unemployable failure, Pastor Rich needs to contact a colleague or friend who can remind him of his competence and encourage him to see the problem objectively. Freed from the irrational fear, he would be able to apply a therapeutic approach. For example, he might say



Larry, I know you have come to me for help. But I know, too, that you and I see things very differently. At times, I feel very threatened by you, and I worry about losing my job and the pain that would cause my family. I can't be an effective counselor unless I can level with you. Will you let me tell you the truth about you?

By confessing a rational fear, Pastor Rich would begin to clear the air. Since Larry likes to think of himself as an honest, straightforward man, he is likely to answer, "Sure. Don't pull any punches." The pastor can follow up by asking him to come to the office at a reasonable hour and discuss ways to communicate effectively with his wife. Of course, Larry may balk at this suggestion, preferring to stand in the parking lot badgering the pastor until he agrees to contact his wife. Pastor Rich could then press Larry to demonstrate he is a man of his word by saying:

Larry, I told you I could help you if you let me tell you the truth about you, and you agreed. You said "Don't pull any punches." You are a hardworking man, but in this case, you are asking another man to do your work. Is that fair?

Pastoral Teaching Tip

Effective anger management requires effective prayer—communication with God characterized by honesty, insight, and follow-through. "I am" (or in the case of public prayer, "We are") is the first step. Effective prayer always begins with *self-judgment*—an honest-to-God evaluation of what is going on deep inside. God already knows, so the purpose of prayer cannot be to inform Him. Rather, it is to remind ourselves routinely, systematically of our absolute dependence on God.

This is born out in the Lord's Prayer, the model Jesus gave his disciples when they asked for instruction in how to pray (Matthew 6:9). In the first section of the prayer, Jesus teaches them to evaluate themselves honestly, to begin by recognizing and admitting God is *above* them in every area of life. Each follower of Christ is called to think of God in *transcendent* terms, e.g. "God is the Father, not me. His name is holy, not mine. His kingdom will come, not mine. His will will be done on earth, not mine."

"I need" is the second step in the model, and it rests squarely on the first. Honest, self-evaluating people are able to assess their legitimate needs. Essentially, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask themselves the clarifying question, "Since I am not God, what do I *really* need? The answer is simple: daily bread and forgiveness, both of which are gifts from a loving, benevolent God.

"I will" is the third step, a call to consistent action and follow-through. It, too, is based on the first two steps. The logical question is "Since I am not God, and given my need for daily bread and forgiveness, what will I do?" No one needs to be a rocket scientist to answer this. Christ is calling the prayer to *forgive* and to *follow* as God leads away from temptation and evil.

For example, a Christian motorist who is nearly involved in a head-on accident with an apparently drunk driver might use the model in this way:

Dear Father in Heaven, I am full of rage, and I want to chase that guy down and beat him within an inch of his life. I am frightened. I need to calm down, recover my self-control and



composure, and thank You for watching over me. I will breathe deeply, concentrate on driving safely, and report the apparently drunk driver to the appropriate authorities.