

Foreword by Dr. Troy Jones, founder of Recalibrate Network and author  
of *From Survival to Significance*

# When Words ~~Hurt~~

Helping Godly Leaders Respond Wisely to Criticism



Warren D. Bullock

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Published by Salubris Resources  
1445 N. Boonville Ave.  
Springfield, Missouri 65802  
[www.salubrisresources.com](http://www.salubrisresources.com)

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Cover design by Sheepish Design ([www.sheepishdesign.org](http://www.sheepishdesign.org))

Interior design by Tom Shumaker

Produced with the assistance of Livingstone, the Publishing Services Division of Barton-Veerman Company ([www.livingstonecorp.com](http://www.livingstonecorp.com)). Project staff includes: Bruce Barton, Ashley Taylor, and Tom Shumaker.

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ISBN: 978-1-68067-042-4

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 • 1 2 3 4 5



# CHAPTER

# 1

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## Every Leader's Challenge

*"A great door for effective work has opened to me,  
and there are many who oppose me."*

*1 Corinthians 16:9*

The choice to lead something . . . opens you up to a world of pain.  
—Ruth Haley Barton

**W**hen I was just a little guy, probably six or seven years of age, I loved to “play” church. The congregation consisted of my older sister, two cousins who lived down the street, and me. We actually played dual roles; we were the congregation and the leaders/pastors. So we would take turns at the various aspects of a church service. One would lead the songs that we all knew by heart. Then someone would lead in prayer. If the prayer was particularly inspiring, we would also pray for the sick—each other—even though we were all healthy. Finally one of us would preach. We never preached very long because our audience had a very short attention span. After the message we would give the altar call, and someone in the audience of three would raise their hand for prayer and come to the altar to accept Jesus as their Savior. Over time each of us was saved several times.

My oldest cousin was the best preacher. He had a way with words, “the gift of gab,” as we used to say. He could string out a Bible story with inventive and imaginative embellishments. Even though I was very young, once in a while they let me preach. I don’t remember now

what I said; it was probably a mishmash of everything I had heard my pastor-father say in the pulpit.

After our little church service was over, we would critique one another on how we could have done better, especially the preaching. Once after I had been the preacher, my sister and older cousin were quite direct in their criticism and it hurt my feelings. I had done my best, and it seemed like they didn't appreciate it very much. I struggled to stifle the tears that threatened to slide down my cheeks. So they tried to soften their not-too-subtle barbs by attributing my inadequacies to my young age. After all, they were two whole years older than I, and thus so much more experienced.

Isn't it interesting that when I page through my photo album of memories, the pictures about our playtime are fuzzy and distant, but the snapshot of peer criticism is as sharp and clear as if I had just taken it on my iPhone? I could have received ten compliments, but what clings to my memory are words that were less than complimentary.

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**When you're on the front lines of battle,  
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What makes criticism stick in our minds like verbal velcro? It reminds me of the burrs that used to stick to my pants when I played in a weed patch. Criticism is like that.

This childhood experience with my sister and cousins was perhaps my first lesson in leadership: *Leaders get criticized*. And guess what? Nothing has changed. Leaders still get criticized. It goes with the territory. When you're on the front lines of battle, you're going to get shot at. No leader is exempt. Some verbal arrows will find their mark. We will be wounded; it's inevitable. So we shouldn't be shocked when it happens.

**You Are a Leader**

If you're thinking, "That may be true, but it doesn't apply to me because I'm not a leader," think again. You're a leader if anyone is

following you. Do you have children, grandchildren, students, co-workers, friends, or associates? If so, someone is following you. You *are* a leader. Unfortunately that means you'll be criticized.

A classic definition of leadership states that leadership is influence. Each of us has some degree of influence. The apostle Paul reminds us that "none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone" (Rom. 14:7). Our sphere of influence is probably greater than we understand, which means we are leading those we influence. Consequently criticism is going to come our way. The question is, "How are we going to handle it?"

We don't all travel the same paths to places of leadership. Some paths are more like trails with twist and turns, underbrush and obstacles. They are arduous, challenging, and often undefined. Other paths seem more like freeways clogged with traffic; it takes a long time to get to our destination. Some paths to leadership may be slowed by traffic lights. They require stopping and starting, and take lots of energy. We may face detours along the way. Occasionally, we hit a dead end and have to turn around and find the path again. But, eventually, our place of leadership will come into view.

Here are some, but certainly not all, of the paths to leadership. By the time we finish reviewing them, I hope you are convinced that you are a leader.

### *Marriage*

When a couple is happily united in marriage, they both instantly become leaders. The husband leads some aspects of the home, and the wife leads others. Consequently, when one leads, whether husband or wife, the other follows. Hence the Bible encourages married couples to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21).

### *Parenthood*

Is there any more important leadership role than parenting? Dad and Mom are a child's greatest influencers. Parents give a child direc-

tion through systematic, intentional instruction and discipline. But parents are also models for handling life with all its hairpin turns and ups and downs.

Have you ever seen a toddler trying to walk with his little feet in Daddy's big shoes? How about little girls dressing up in Mommy's clothes and high heels? We laugh at their playful efforts to be grown up, but something deeper is going on. Could these little ones be saying, "I want to be just like my Daddy or my Mommy"? Probably so. And most parents have realized that their influence is still required even after the kids leave home.

### *Position*

When a postman is promoted to postmaster, that person assumes a leadership role with greater responsibilities because of the new position. The manager of a hardware store has more responsibility by virtue of his position than the stock boy does. A teacher is positioned for broad and lasting influence, both by what is taught and through the multiplication process inherent in teaching many different students.

Position doesn't make anyone a leader, but position is the recognition and affirmation of leadership. Some positions have more influence and power than others. The office of president of the United States is certainly far more influential than almost any other position in our country. Yet in the position *you* hold, there is leadership influence.

### *Education*

One doesn't need an education to be a leader, but it helps. My father insisted, even demanded, that I attend Bible college before entering his profession—vocational ministry. So I was the first in our immediate family to earn a bachelor's degree. That didn't mean I was smarter than my Dad, but it did mean I was better prepared to be a minister than he had been at my age, a fact that delighted him.

Education compresses knowledge into a tighter learning time-frame than life experience. When knowledge is gained only through life-lessons and self-instruction, it takes much longer. Also, when others know your educational background, this enhances your credibility and expands your potential for effective leadership.

*Credentials*

Getting professional credentials often follows education. When I go to the doctor's office, I want to see certificates and diplomas on the wall that validate my physician's education, areas of specialization, and expertise. When I'm under a doctor's care, he's the leader. He tells me what I need to do to achieve and maintain good health. His credentials remind me that he's the medical authority, not me.

*The Gift of Leadership*

Some people are natural leaders. When our son Jeff was eleven or twelve years old, I asked him to mow the lawn in the backyard. That was not a task he particularly enjoyed. In that he was much like his Dad! A few minutes later I looked out our patio window and was dismayed to see him sitting on the picnic table. Then I saw three or four of his neighborhood friends, and to my amazement they were taking turns doing the mowing. He had rounded them up and challenged them to see how fast they could make a circuit of the lawn with the mower. To increase the incentive he sat on the picnic table timing them. I don't know who won the mowing contest, but Jeff exhibited leadership even at that young age, though not in a way I would have anticipated. He was, and still is, a leader. By the way, I wouldn't recommend him or his crew to be your landscapers.

It would be fun at this point to debate whether leaders are born or developed. Good arguments can be marshaled on both sides of the issue. However the Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit endows some believers with the gift of leadership. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. . . . If it is leadership, let him govern diligently" (Rom.12:6-8). The Greek word for *leadership* means to guide with care.<sup>1</sup> There's little question that this is an active gift in the lives of many Christ-followers. The gift may find expression through position, may be enhanced through education, and validated by credentials, but the source of the gift is the Holy Spirit who gives the gifts "just as he determines" (1 Cor. 12:11).

*Pastors*

The word *pastor* is not mentioned frequently in Scripture, but *shepherd* is often used. They are one and the same; the word for shepherd is also the word for pastor. So the apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders, “Be shepherds of the church of God” (Acts 20:28). Of course one of the primary tasks of the shepherd is to lead the flock, just as our Good Shepherd leads us beside quiet waters. Sheep without a shepherd will be scattered and set upon by wolves. They will get hungry from lack of food without a shepherd to lead them to green pastures. Of all that a pastor is to be and do, he must be a leader of God’s flock.

*Calling*

Among the highest aspirations of the believer is the desire to live life completely in the will of God, fulfilling His holy purposes daily. We know that beyond the call to salvation, God has called each of us to a unique destiny that provides personal fulfillment, fosters kingdom extension, and brings glory to God. Whatever our calling in God’s will may be, we live with a sense that divine providence is guiding us.

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outside the circle of faith find fault and  
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us, we may be caught off guard.**

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When we follow the leadership of our great Shepherd, we experience the realization of our destiny.

So are you convinced now that you are a leader? I hope so, because that’s the good news. Now get ready for some bad news.

**Leaders Get Criticized**

Yes, as a leader you are going to get your share of criticism. We aren’t too shocked when those outside the circle of faith find fault

and gossip, but when supposedly good Christians aim their verbal weapons at us, we may be caught off guard. We assume that since all of us are on the same team, every team member will support the others. Unfortunately, we learn that our assumption is not true, and we can feel betrayed, sabotaged, and angry. “What is one to *do* with the people pains involved in leadership?”<sup>2</sup>

Having worked with hundreds of Christian leaders, I've discovered that many seem dismayed to learn that serving Jesus and fulfilling their calling is extremely hard, painful, and demanding. Yet we follow the One who said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The way of the cross requires us to affirm, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). We are challenged to “endure hardship . . . like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3).

So why do we seem so surprised when leadership is tough? Why does criticism throw us off our game? Why do we keep expecting bouquets instead of brickbats? We must accept what the late Edwin Friedman said: “Criticism of the leader (which is a form of sabotage) is so predictable that it should be viewed as part and parcel of the leadership process itself.”<sup>3</sup>

Confirmation of this principle can be readily observed in the lives of biblical leaders.

### *Joseph*

His brothers didn't just criticize him, “they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him” (Gen. 37:4). You can almost hear the contempt in their voices, “Here comes the dreamer. . . . Let's kill him” (Gen. 37:19–20). So much for family love and loyalty!

### *Moses*

Leading the children of Israel was like the proverbial “herding of cats.” They rarely were happy with Moses' leadership and were not shy about letting him know it. They grumbled, complained, griped, and moaned about their imagined misery, most of which they blamed on their leader.

*Samuel*

After a long and fruitful ministry, Samuel was rejected by Israel, who demanded a king instead. He was not criticized for what he had done, but for what he was never going to be—a king.

*David*

Despite his amazing victory over Goliath, David was pursued by King Saul who wanted to kill him. His own “band of brothers” wanted to stone him at Ziklag. Even his son Absalom undermined him, chased him from the city of David, slept with his concubines, and fought him for the kingship.

*Elijah*

King Ahab called Elijah names: “You troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17). Queen Jezebel assassinated many of the prophets of God, and threatened to do the same to Elijah. He was so intimidated he had suicidal thoughts, except he didn’t want to do the deed himself—he wanted God to do it for him!

*Paul*

Criticism seems to have been the least of Paul’s concerns. Listen to some of the mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges he noted in 2 Corinthians 1 and 4:

- Suffered hardships
- Hard-pressed
- Perplexed
- Persecuted
- Struck down
- Under great pressure
- Despaired even of life
- Felt the sentence of death

This litany of pain and adversity doesn't include the physical wounds he received. It's certain that in addition to all of these trials, he confronted criticism of his life and ministry.

So if people criticized these spiritual giants, if these whom we mark as great leaders had their detractors, why would we expect to be any different? Accept it. Leaders get criticized.

We should be encouraged by Paul's perception of ministry. "Since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1). He wasn't just talking about vocational ministry but about ministry that every Christian has. Such ministries are given to us as an act of God's mercy. That's good to remember when we are assailed by unkind and untrue words. God doesn't grant us these ministries because He is mad at us and wants to see us suffer. He is merciful to us.

Paul seems to be saying, among other things, that inherent in ministry is the mercy necessary to deal with the barrage of criticism that is bound to come. So we don't lose heart. Mercy that brought us into our ministry is mercy enough to help us endure the verbal buffeting we will experience. The bad news that leaders get criticized becomes the good news that God's mercy is more than adequate to help us get through it.

### **Points to Ponder**

1. Think for a few moments about who you lead. Perhaps list the names of those who see you as a leader and thus follow your leadership, example, and direction. Call each of their names in prayer, or if it is a large following, say prayers for the whole group.
2. Is your ministry calling clear? Do the roles you now play fulfill or contradict that call? Could you be receiving criticism because your labors are not in keeping with your calling? Through the Word, the guidance of the Spirit, the counsel and confirmation of godly people you respect, seek to clarify what your calling and kingdom-destiny are.

WHEN WORDS HURT  
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3. If you are presently under attack by critics, in prayer ask God—
  - To give you deep inner peace despite the turmoil;
  - To help you maintain a Christ-like attitude toward your critics;
  - To guard your heart against resentment and anger;
  - To provide spiritual protection for family members who may be feeling the ripple effect of the criticism.
4. Memorize Psalm 19:14: “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”
5. In what ways has your ministry provided mercy in your life?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

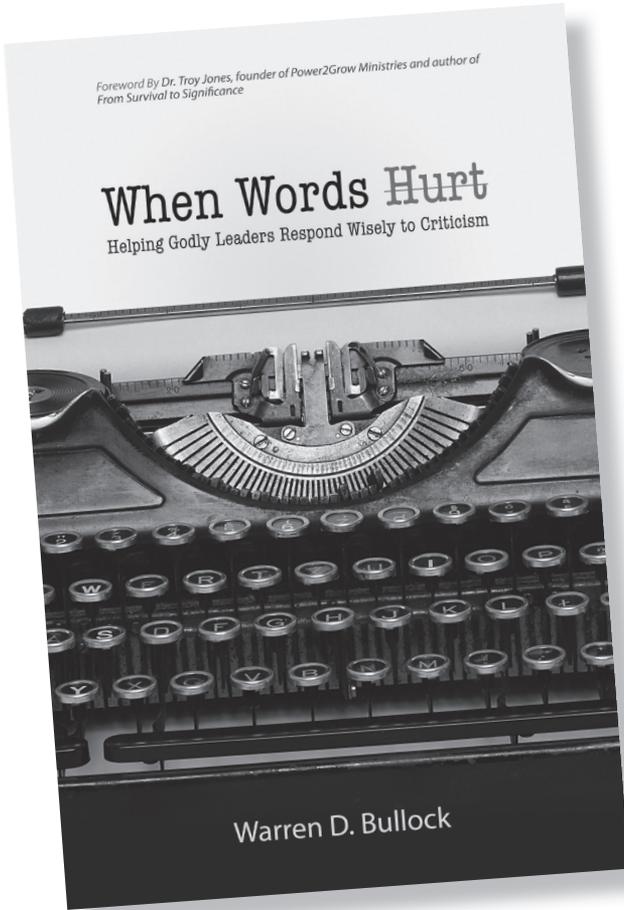
**W**arren Bullock has served as a lead pastor in Oregon and Washington for nearly twenty-five years. He has provided leadership to the Northwest Ministry Network of the Assemblies of God and currently serves as the executive presbyter (Northwest Region) for the General Council. Bullock holds a ThB from Northwest University, an MA from Seattle Pacific University, and a DMin from California Graduate School of Theology.

Dr. Bullock has had a long association with his alma mater, Northwest University in Kirkland, Washington. He has served there as an adjunct faculty member, Alumni Association President, dean of the College of Ministry, and continues to serve on the Board of Directors. In addition he has served as chair of the Board of Advisors for the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary and is on the Evangel University Board.

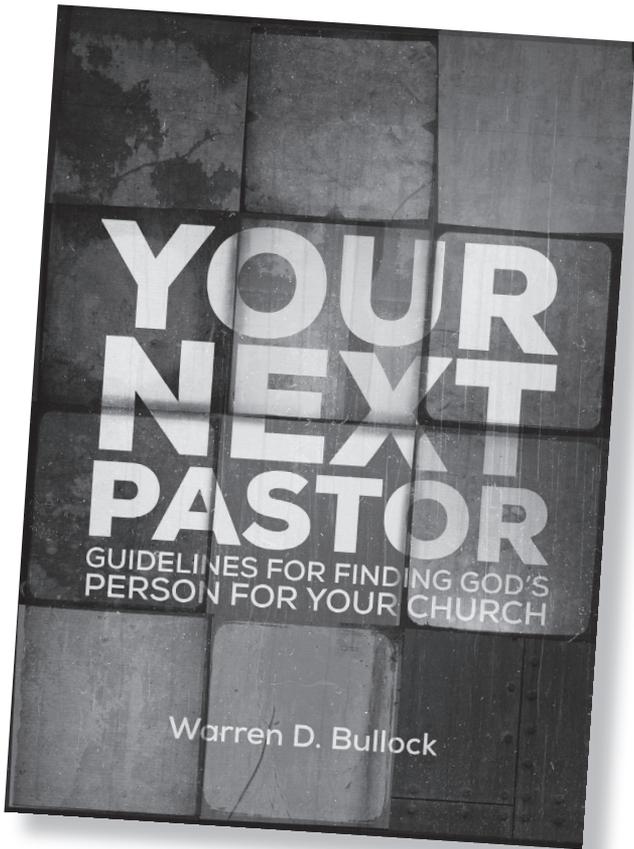
Bullock travels widely as a speaker and consultant. He's an unofficial mentor to dozens of young pastors. He has authored numerous articles and the books *When the Spirit Speaks* and *Your Next Pastor*.

Presently he serves as a teaching pastor at Peoples Church in Salem, Oregon. He and his wife, Judi, live in Keizer, Oregon. They have two children and five grandchildren.

# For More Information



For more information about these and other valuable resources visit [www.salubrisresources.com](http://www.salubrisresources.com)



Among the most difficult and often traumatic times in the life cycle of a congregation is the departure of a lead pastor and the arrival and settling in of a successor lead pastor. Getting all the elements right, and in the right order, for a good and healthy transition is a gift of great consequence for the departing pastor, the arriving pastor, and the surviving congregation. In *Your Next Pastor*, Dr. Bullock has detailed an ABC's book on how to get through a pastoral transition with clarity and directness.

# YOU CAN COUNT ON IT.

If you're a leader, you're going to get criticized. People will complain about what you do and what you don't do. Even your best efforts will fall short of the aspirations of eager critics. How will you react when someone shoots a verbal arrow at you? Will you withdraw? Respond in anger? Become discouraged and give up? No one would blame you if you did, but there are far better and more productive ways to respond to words that hurt.

Warren Bullock suggests that at the core of all biblical responses to criticism is grace. Not necessarily a soft grace, but grace wrapped in tough love.

- DOES NEGATIVE, ANONYMOUS CORRESPONDENCE HAVE ANY VALUE?
- WHEN SHOULD WE SPEAK AND WHEN SHOULD WE BE SILENT?
- WHY DO PEOPLE CRITICIZE?

Kent Ingle, President of Southeastern University:

"You will either respond to your critics by design or default. *When Words Hurt* will motivate you to find the best and highest design for handling the harsh and hurtful words that come your way."

Warren Bullock has served as a lead pastor in Oregon and Washington for nearly twenty-five years. He holds an MA from Seattle Pacific University and a DMin from California Graduate School of Theology. Bullock travels widely as a speaker and consultant and is the author of *When the Spirit Speaks* and *Your Next Pastor*. He and his wife, Judi, live in Keizer, OR. They have two children and five grandchildren.



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USD \$12.99

RELIGION / Christian Church / Leadership

ISBN 978-1680670424



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