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**6 WAYS PASTORS SHOULD HANDLE OPPOSITION**

**March 22, 2021 – Phil A. Newton**

Pastors need not think opposition strange or abnormal. It comes with the territory. Just read the Pauline and Johannine epistles to see opposition weaving its way into churches in the first century (e.g. [1 Cor. 1:10–17](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Cor.%201%3A10%E2%80%9317/); [2 Cor. 10–13](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20Cor.%2010%E2%80%9313/); [Gal. 1:6–2:14](https://www.esv.org/verses/Gal.%201%3A6%E2%80%932%3A14/); [Phil. 3:17–19](https://www.esv.org/verses/Phil.%203%3A17%E2%80%9319/); [2 John 7–11](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20John%207%E2%80%9311/); [3 John 9–10](https://www.esv.org/verses/3%20John%209%E2%80%9310/)). The same continues today.

Unknown to me, a disgruntled community member once sent letters making harsh accusations against three church members. The following Sunday my sermon, providentially, seemed to precisely address the content of the letters. After the morning worship, one of the recipients grumbled to others that I was the perpetrator.

Another Sunday, when I explained from [2 Timothy 4:1–5](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20Timothy%204%3A1%E2%80%935/) why I preach expositionally, a leading Sunday school teacher defiantly walked out in the middle of the sermon. He made his opposition known.

The question I faced in those and other situations is how to deal with opposition and continue in faithful pastoral ministry. These six considerations may prove helpful.

**1. Be a Man of Prayer**

Opposition is spiritual warfare. While coming in varied forms, opposition is a spiritual issue, since it involves the local church, its unity, witness, and faithfulness to the lordship of Christ.

Paul’s exhortation in [Ephesians 6:10–20](https://www.esv.org/verses/Ephesians%206%3A10%E2%80%9320/) appropriately calls for pastors and congregations to “be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might” and to be clothed in the armor of God (vv. 10–11). He urges Christians to exercise warfare with “all prayer and petition,” praying “at all times in the Spirit” (v. 18). As John Stott noted, prayer “is to pervade all our spiritual warfare.” Prayer for wisdom, discernment, power, humility, clarity, and grace should accompany any thought of confronting opposition.

**2. Walk in Humility**

The call to humility mirrors Jesus’s life ([Matt. 11:29](https://www.esv.org/verses/Matt.%2011%3A29/)). He knew when to confront and when to remain silent.

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With humility, the pastor recognizes the truth about himself and God and doesn’t confuse them. He understands that only God can change hearts. Humility knows that despite pastoral persuasiveness, someone else can persuade otherwise. He approaches addressing opposition with the deep consciousness that he must simply be a vessel the Lord might use, not the hero of sorting out a church conflict.

**3. Keep Your Heart Warm**

Few things can be worse than an angry, bitter pastor attempting to deal with a church member’s opposition. An impoverished spiritual walk leaves fractures in its wake. Before confronting opposition, a pastor needs to know he’s dealt with his sinful attitudes and bitter spirits, forgiving those in opposition ([Eph. 4:29–5:2](https://www.esv.org/verses/Eph.%204%3A29%E2%80%935%3A2/)) and walking carefully in the Lord’s will and the Spirit’s fullness ([Eph. 5:15–21](https://www.esv.org/verses/Eph.%205%3A15%E2%80%9321/)).

Check your heart before taking one step toward dealing with opposition. Sometimes, the biggest problem isn’t in somebody else.

**4. Discern Whether to Let It Go or Confront**

If someone makes a stinging or untrue remark, the pastor will need to decide if it’s (a) an instrument to humble him to trust the Lord more, (b) an unfortunate misunderstanding, (c) something unfair but not worth risking a relationship over, or (d) a matter that affects the church’s unity and gospel message.

**Sometimes, the biggest problem is not in somebody else.**

Often, the little nipping at the heels or nicks on the shins just don’t merit spending time trying to unravel who said what and why. Unless it affects the church’s unity, gospel testimony, corporate worship, polity regarding membership and leadership, or mission, then it may not rise to the need for confrontation.

But if the matter of opposition does rise to this point, the pastor should have at least one other elder (preferably non-staff) join him in the face-to-face talk. These men should pray through and discuss how they will handle the situation, with both holding each other accountable for humility, gentleness, and love accompanying their conversation and demeanor.

**5. Keep Preaching God’s Word**

Only in extreme circumstances should a pastor change his expositional series to publicly address opposition. He must give no room for accusations of misusing the pastoral office to attack someone else, in order to appear justified in the face of opposition. The regular ministry of the Word must remain the pastor’s priority.

The Holy Spirit works through the preaching of the Word to accomplish far more than a pastor will ever know, even in opposition.

**6. Leave the Matter in God’s Hands**

When the pastor has prayed, approached the situation with humility, prepared his heart before God, and discerned the best way to act or to remain silent, he must entrust the opposition and its dangling effects to the hands of God. The Lord has ample power to work in the situation that has caused so much angst.

Four considerations regarding opposition and God’s ultimate hand at work may offer the pastor encouragement to navigate such times: (1) The Lord may be pruning the pastor and/or the church; (2) the Lord may be teaching the pastor to rely on him; (3) the Lord may be exposing error and ungodliness in the church; (4) the Lord may be setting the stage for future changes in the church that will expand its gospel testimony and ministry.

Pastors and churches should expect opposition to arise from time to time due to its nature as a spiritual conflict. Ultimately, though, we must learn to trust the Lord with opposition, as well as learn the lessons he would teach us—shepherds and congregations alike—through relational challenges.

**This article was originally published on The Gospel Coalition website and is used with permission. The original can be found here:** <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/pastors-handle-opposition/>.