



TAMING DRAGONS?

A pastoral response to
destructive people in the church

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Introduction

Dragons are mythical creatures that breathe fire and smoke, are covered with impenetrable scales, can do serious damage and often guard great treasure.

We are using these fantastic beasts as a metaphor for difficult people in a church¹ who can mount personal attacks on the leadership or the church generally, seem often to be impervious to counsel and may well obstruct the church moving forward in its vision.

What is a dragon?

A person is a dragon not because they have different ideas from the pastor but because of their **destructive actions and words with regard to the church** and its leadership.

It is a big mistake for pastors or leadership teams to treat everyone who doesn't see eye-to-eye with them as an enemy. Some Christians are not well taught, others may be immature or thoughtless. We need to love such folk. Also, church leaders are not infallible. It is only when a person is endangering the life of a church in a wilful and determined way that we should put them in the category of dragons.

And even then, we need to be slow to see them as enemies. Dragons can be very difficult customers and cause a pastor and a church a lot of pain and heartache. However, it is worth reminding ourselves from the start, that these folk are often (not always) true brothers and sisters in Christ. They may just be well-intentioned though forceful people who, from their own point of view at least, mean good for the church. They feel strongly though they see wrongly. And they are not necessarily beyond change. We have to remember that the church doesn't have the luxury of choosing its members. The Lord chooses them for us and we must work with those he has decided to send our way.

When it comes to trying to tame these dragons the words of the apostle Paul come immediately to mind: *The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance...*¹, 2 Timothy 2:24, 25. If those are the apostle's instructions concerning how to deal with false

¹ I am not the first person to use this metaphor. The book *Well-Intentioned Dragons*, by Marshall Shelley, published by Word Publishing in 1985 is one of a number which I think have taken up this picture.

Teachers, surely they must equally apply as we deal with wrong-headed and belligerent Christians.

How a dragon might benefit you

And though these people may wound us deeply and give us many a sleepless night, nevertheless the Lord can use them and their opposition for our good. The difficulties they cause can be used for our wisdom and sanctification.

With regard to wisdom, the great WWII general and later US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower reportedly would not make a tactical decision until he had talked it through with someone who strongly opposed it. He wanted any weaknesses in his thinking exposed before proceeding. That kind of exercise, even involving a destructive person, can also bring insight to humble leaders of a church.

Further, opposition and the 'friendly fire' which can hit us from people within the congregation, drives us to prayer. It leads us to lean on God more, which is the way to holiness. Our own frailty is exposed by a dragon. We may come to the end of our tether and so we see our need of God and his grace in a new way. A. W. Tozer wrote, 'It is doubtful that God can use any man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.' In our weakness God's strength is supplied as we call out to him. Once again, Paul has some striking words for us in this regard: *I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest upon me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong,*' 2 Corinthians 12.9, 10. These words are particularly applicable to us as pastors when we face dragons in our congregation.

Fighting and trying to tame a dragon can be terrifying and cause us to suffer in ministry like nothing else. However, it is not all bad. It is a route to Christ-like maturity in ministry. It is the stuff heroes are made of.

1: Where do dragons come from?

To think this through will help us in our understanding of how to handle these difficult people. There are two sets of origins. One is to do with the people themselves, but one is to do with the church and the way it operates. Let's start with the church.

The Church

What is your policy concerning membership of your church?

First, we need to pursue a church polity which seeks, as far as possible, only to allow real Christians to become members of the church. If you have a mixed membership, those who are not born again and do not have the Spirit, are likely to turn into dragons at some point. Because their hearts have not been changed, they simply won't receive a thorough-going Biblical ministry and could react strongly.

Second, we can oversell the church to new people who are considering us. There's a temptation, especially in smaller churches, to be so eager for growth that prospective members are more or less told what they want to hear about the church. We can make out the church to be what in fact it is not. But it's a mistake. Those new members are likely to turn into dragons when they find that at quite fundamental levels the church is not what they thought it was. Such folk are likely to do more harm than good. 'You don't have women preachers? We didn't know you believed that!' 'You believe in the doctrine of God's sovereign election! – You're Calvinists!' Apart from being in the wrong church, they will feel deceived.

A small cohesive family is always better than a divided house, no matter how big. So, it is best to make clear that the church welcomes everyone, but it has a particular stance, a particular character, which may not appeal to everyone. Especially be up-front about your doctrinal basis. Instead of being over anxious to get people to sign up, it's wiser to say something like, 'This is the direction we're going. If you're going in the same direction, we would love to have you on board.' Otherwise, you might well be making enemies / dragons for the future.

The People

Dragons are usually made by the things that have happened to them in their past

lives. I am not shifting the blame for their behaviour from them, but often they have become the way they are through experiences of various kinds, to which they have reacted wrongly. A way of thinking has been planted in them which bears bad fruit in their lives.

It is right for a pastor to understand something of this when he is seeking to lovingly engage with them. Those impenetrable scales (and the insensitive heart?) will have grown for a reason. That flaming tongue (which can set the world ablaze, James 3.5, 6) caught fire somewhere.

Let's think of a few examples:

- Dragons may be people who have been hurt by another church leadership and are darn well making sure they are not going to get hurt again.
- Dragons may be people who have exercised some power in the church (perhaps visibly) but now feel their position threatened by the coming of a new pastor with fresh ideas and charisma.
- Dragons perhaps are people who at one time felt they had a call to ministry or the mission field, but for some reason it didn't happen and now they take out their resulting frustration on you! (Sadly, often a retired pastor who misses ministry and thinks he knows it all turns into a dragon.)
- Dragons are frequently successful business people who have simply got used to calling the shots and now have great difficulty not being in control in the church. ('A rich man is wise in his own eyes', Proverbs 28.11 ESV).
- Dragons can be needy old people, who don't feel safe in an unfamiliar, high-speed, changing, digital world and want to find security by bringing back the past. So, they dig their heels in – hard.
- Dragons may be people who have been repeatedly passed over for promotion at work, hate 'executives' and see you the pastor as a reincarnation of his boss – so he has a go at you!

And that last bullet point leads to a more general truth. It may be that people have trouble and pain in a completely different part of their lives – nothing to do with church – but just lash out at the pastor and the church to vent their frustration.

Many of these folk simply need a friend. There was a man in our own

congregation who was difficult. But once I started meeting with him for lunch now and then, he calmed down. He just needed to know that someone was listening to his point of view. Not all of the difficulties are solved as easily as that – but some are.

Sympathy for the dragon

The actions of a destructive dragon in the church understandably make us angry. But as we uncover where the dragon might have been created, we begin to take a more sympathetic and perhaps more loving (though firm) approach to them. It helps us to be more in line with Paul's exhortation to be gentle towards those who oppose us, 2 Timothy 2.25.

But there is also another more sobering reason why we need to be sympathetic towards these destructive people and try to turn them around by God's grace. Here is Paul's very serious warning concerning those who wreck or destroy local churches. *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple,* 1 Corinthians 3.16, 17.

2: What has stirred the dragon?

We have thought generally about where dragons come from, but what's brought them out of their cave? In all the best stories, dragons are often sleepy and lie low until they are roused. Something will have stirred this church dragon to anger and to action. What is it? What is the particular matter that has ignited the flames and caused the crisis? We need to know if we hope to help.

We will use a diagram to fix the main possibilities in our minds.

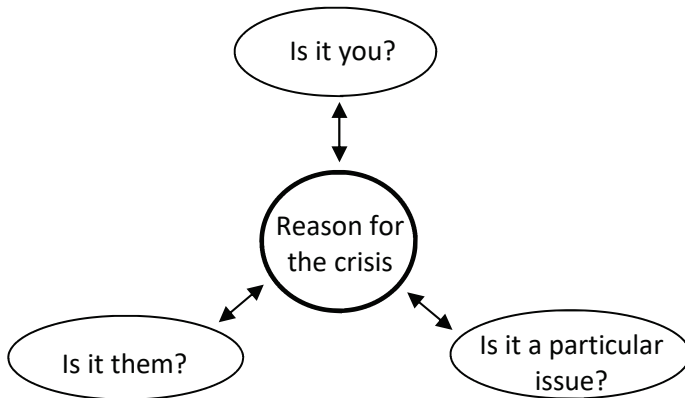


FIGURE 1

There are generally three possibilities for the cause of the crisis. We will unpack each one a little.

1. Is it about them?

Here, let's begin by asking, 'Are they really dragons?' As we have said, we need to be careful of rushing to see people as dangerous enemies. So we ask, 'What is their intention?' They are full of criticisms. You, pastor, need to assess their criticisms. Is this person simply out to hurt you? Is this a power play to get themselves more of a position or even to get you out of the church? Is it that they see it as their mission? Is there an attitude which wants to hurt the church? These are the symptoms of a dragon.

The critical point in diagnosing where they are coming from is usually the spirit and volume of their anger. If they simply explode with invective, then it is likely to be a desire to hurt you or is driven by selfish ambition or envy. James 1.19, 20 tells us to be slow to become angry (like the Lord) and that *man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

On the other hand, if they are calm and measured in their criticism, even though what they are saying may be painful, then it is much more likely that they do genuinely have a good intention. James 3.13-18, which spells out the characteristics of earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, gives us the litmus test.

Earthly / devilish wisdom is characterized by:

- Bitterness
- Envy
- Selfish ambition
- Telling lies/denying the truth
- It results in disorder and evil practices.

Heavenly wisdom is characterized by being:

- Peace-loving
- Considerate
- Submissive
- Full of mercy and good fruit
- Impartial
- Sincere
- It results in peace and righteousness.

If they are bitter and devious and out to hurt others, that's the mark of a dragon and they require a robust and firm challenge. Ask them the question, 'Are you just out to hurt me?' and see their reaction. If they are of a different spirit it will show.

Having tried to discern their spirit, then we can ask:

(a) Is it to do with their job in the church?

Everyone in a church should be willing to get involved and do what they can to help. But that doesn't mean everyone is suited to all the jobs in a church. We must try to match people's gifts to jobs, Romans 12.6-8.

If someone is aggressively pushing for a more high-profile job in the church out of selfish ambition – then it is quite clear that they are functioning in earthly / devilish mode. They need to be resisted.

Or it might not be that kind of thing. If we are asking someone to do something in the church for which they are really not equipped / gifted – then obviously it might lead to frustration or embarrassment and therefore to trouble.

Or there may be a different scenario. Is it that they are really gifted and willing people – but because they are so good at what they do, we are asking them to

do too much? They are overloaded. Perhaps as good-hearted servants they don't like to say 'no'. But we have encouraged them to take on too much. They are embittered and they have exploded with anger. Humility and understanding and saying 'sorry' is required on your part as pastor. Talk it through with them.

(b) Is the underlying problem to do with their personal difficulties?

We have already mentioned this when we talked about where dragons come from. This needs discernment. But if it is to do with their own hurts then, though they may be saying painful things, you need to gently expose the actual problem. Gently question them. Try not to cause offence. But ask, 'Are you feeling insecure about the changes in the church?' or 'Are you doing this because you are frustrated at not being in charge?' Think about whether you need to show more compassion to them or how you can support them. Become their friend so you are alongside them rather than allowing them to be in a face-off with you. This may be the way a dragon is tamed.

(c) Is it that they are being used by other people?

It can be that others in the church want to cause trouble for the leaders, but don't want to be in the firing line themselves. So instead of breaking cover, they use an easily led soul to be their puppet. They are using a marionette. Dragons can be very sly, clever creatures! The person who is sounding off to the leadership may well have a minor cause for a grumble but the dragons have stirred her up and made a molehill into a mountain in her mind so that she comes to you breathing fire. Sometimes a strong-willed woman in the church will use her husband like this. Try to get to the bottom of things.

2. Is it about you?

Has this difficulty blown up because actually you are getting things wrong? You might need to ask a trusted friend or another elder about this to give you an objective view. It is not easy to see ourselves as others see us.

(a) How are you leading the church?

Are you unnecessarily forceful? Are you running a church as if you were the CEO of a business, strutting around? Or are you someone who listens to people and includes them? Are you open and caring towards others? Or actually are you a bit of a Diotrophes who loves to be first, 3 John v11? Do you really love Christ and his sheep (John 21.15-19) or are you simply an academic who loves Bible

study and preaching for their own sake? A pastor of a church in Leeds once gave good advice to pastors about their people. He said, 'Pastor - they won't care about how much you know until they know how much you care.' It's a memorable saying and it is spot on.

Are you a leader who thinks that leadership is all about control rather than about nurturing and developing the gifts of others and growing them to maturity? Obviously there needs to be some control, but it should not be stifling. If you treat people like cogs in a machine, you will generate in them an incentive to break the machine – because people are not cogs.

Is there no space in your church for the leadership to listen? Is the lack of this what has goaded the dragon? The management of the Toyota car manufacturers in Japan, being concerned for continual improvement, painted a red box on the assembly line floor.² It was a safe zone, where you were free to say what you felt needed saying without any comeback. Employees, especially new employees, were encouraged to stand in the box and make at least three criticisms of what was going on in the factory. What the management learned from the red box was a key part of Toyota's success. Is there any mechanism like that in your church to listen to people for the good of the church?

(b) What's your personal kryptonite?

Do you understand yourself? For the uninitiated, kryptonite is a fictional material that appears in the Superman comic stories. It's a green, crystalline substance from Superman's home planet and emits a peculiar radiation which weakens Superman and makes him vulnerable. As fallen people, we all have our own species of kryptonite. So, you need to know what are things that trigger your own issues and insecurities.

Is this person, who is causing you such trouble in the church carrying your kryptonite and unconsciously tending to make you defensive and irritable so that you treat them unfairly?

For example, it might be that, being from a working-class background, you, pastor, are always suspicious of wealth or showiness. Therefore, you tend to keep them at arms' length, which gets to them. Or again, out of sinful pride, it might be that if someone else in the church is obviously gifted (even at preaching!) you see them as rivals and therefore feel you've got to somehow put them in their place to maintain your authority.

² See *Radical Candour: How to be a great boss without losing your humanity*, by Kim Scott, MacMillan publishers, 2017, page 35

You need to know yourself. Perhaps the way you are has inadvertently stirred the dragon. You may well need to say sorry and change.

(c) Are you looking after yourself?

Have you just let yourself become tired and jaded and that's brought your sharp edges to the fore and you've cut somebody?

Here's a simple list to stay okay:

- Aim to give enough time to sleep for 8 hours
- Exercise for 45 minutes a day
- Eat breakfast and dinner with your wife / family.
- Spend 30 minutes quietly with the Lord.

If you can't manage this (or your own version of something like that list) each day you will probably be an irritable man, on the edge of going crazy, giving off bad vibes and your very footfall may stir the dragon.

3. Is it about a particular issue?

Often it is a particular bone of contention which stirs the dragon out of his or her cave and into battle. We need to just cover the ground of some of possible issues that can do this.

But before we unpack this, it is worth noting that in dealing with issues, people's level of trust in you as pastor will be a crucial factor. A high level of trust in you as pastor will be helpful. If people trust you, they are more likely to listen to you before exploding and to cut the church some slack. Not only so, but trust in you will enable a smoother navigation through the problem once the storm has broken. A pastor must earn that trust by being seen to be both reliable and fair in all that he does, 1 Timothy 5.21.

(a) Is it a doctrinal matter?

If so, ask yourself, 'Is it of primary or secondary importance?' What is of first importance is spelled out for us in the opening of 1 Corinthians 15. These gospel issues include the doctrines of salvation, conversion, sin, Christ's person, atonement, Scripture, the resurrection (as historical fact) and therefore the reality of the world to come. The truth of the gospel is to be defended at all costs.

Other matters may be of importance but do not directly impinge on salvation and the heart of the gospel. Here we can afford to be more generous. However, if a dragon is propagating error concerning the primary truths of the gospel and Christian living (which flows from the gospel), then the pastor must be inflexible and get involved along the lines of 2 Timothy 2.24-26. Error over gospel issues is very serious. It kills churches and damns people. It must be stopped, see Titus 1.11-14. Matters of primary doctrine or Biblical morality may have to come to church discipline unless there is repentance, see Matthew 18.15-17. Paul warned those who persisted in preaching 'another gospel' that they would know the curse of God, Galatians 1.8,9.

(b) Is it a leadership matter?

Has a recent decision from the elders caused something to snap in the person and brought them into conflict with you and the church?

The New Testament encourages the leadership to bring big decisions concerning the church to a church meeting. The church is the body of Christ and the meeting of church members acts as the final authority (under Christ and his word) for the church. Making crucial decisions this way as a united membership is a protection against dragons because it means they cannot simply blame the pastor for the matter with which they disagree. They are at odds with the whole church.

With lesser decisions which have not come to a church meeting, again a united eldership on the decision has a similar effect. It is always good to move together as a leadership and never good to proceed when even a minority of the leaders are not in agreement. This leaves a church vulnerable to a dragon.

For any decision made there should be cogent and Biblical reasons. If a truculent dragon takes offence at a decision, the reasons for it need to be calmly and clearly spelt out. Reason with them.

Perhaps the most difficult situation arises when a member has to be disciplined by the church and one of their relatives turns into a dragon accusing the church of being too harsh. In such situations, gentleness, clarity and the need for the church to be impartial in being Biblically faithful to the Lord must be explained (perhaps more than once).

(c) Is it a practical matter?

These things are secondary and areas where we can afford to be flexible. Often, they are to do with managing change or different ideas in the church. It is here that teaching from Romans 14 and 15 on 'the weak and the strong' can be of immense help in preserving the unity of a church.

Changes, in particular, often stir emotional upset. That can be, *first*, because the new arrangements are ill thought out, or upset the routines of another aspect of the church – e.g., coffee served in the church hall immediately after the morning service might make things more difficult for Sunday School which has been meeting there during the service. Suddenly with the last hymn you may well have a dangerous coming together of hot coffee and children milling around in the same space. A Sunday School teacher may be fuming, but perhaps she has a point. More careful thinking is required.

But a *second* avenue of practical upset is to do with insecurities in the face of change – perhaps the introduction of a new Bible version, or more modern music. Teaching ministry which directs God’s people to find their security in Christ himself, rather than long established church routines, will help at this point.

Thirdly, where there is something like a building project over which there are bound to be different opinions, prayerfully look for the Lord’s guidance. Perhaps he will provide the exact money for one of the options via an anonymous gift day. Or if it is a new outreach project, try it for a limited time and see what the Lord does. If there is evidence of the Lord’s blessing on the pilot scheme carry on, if not cut it. Dragons will be honestly silenced like this. No one can argue with what the Lord himself does.

The pastor needs to be understanding and creative in response to practicalities.

(d) Is it a relational issue?

I am not now thinking of an issue between you and the dragon, but between two other people in the church, where perhaps the dragon is one of the parties or has taken sides in a dispute. Sometimes pastors take the line that they should leave relational issues alone, sweep them under the carpet and they will get better with time. That is almost never the case. Unless people make up fairly quickly then things are liable to get worse. And if left unattended, a dragon will make the most of a neglected situation like this.

A relational issue left unchallenged can sour the whole atmosphere of a church and grieve the Holy Spirit. The pastor needs to plead for mutual forgiveness for the good of the work of Christ, Philippians 4.2, 3.

3: The dragon-tamer's equipment

Truth, love and prayer are the tools we need. Note we are not first of all dragon-slayers, but hopefully dragon-tamers. Let's major on the need for truth and love in our conversation to begin with. The following diagram might help us.

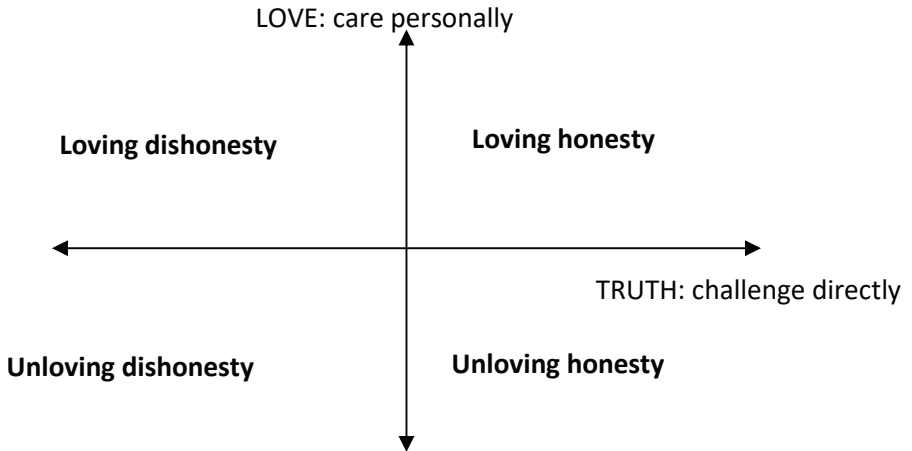


FIGURE 2

The axiomatic principle of Christian communication is found in Ephesians 4.15. We must speak the truth in love. This is the culture which pastors need to use themselves and foster in the church. Truth and love are always the best equipment.

If you don't love – have personal care for people – they feel as if you are not treating them as human beings. You are treating them the way most of them get treated at work – 'professionally' – which means 'keep your emotions out of this'. That means you are treating them as less than human. God made us all with emotions.

If you don't tell people the truth – then you are dealing with them sinfully. God is the God of truth. It is Satan who is the father of lies. It is bound to end in trouble. So there needs to be such love in the church that you can honestly challenge people about whatever the problem is – while at the same time they know you still love them, you are still for them, you are still on their side.

(However, it should be said that it is best if what needs to be done is, as much as possible, out of the public eye – exposing a dragon to others will not help them to climb down. But many churches confuse this legitimate secrecy with hiding

the truth from those we are dealing with. This is wrong. Beware of being less than caring and don't be tempted to be 'economical with the truth' or to put a certain 'spin' on things which is actually misleading).

So remember, in taming a dragon you are not there to silence all complaints. There is room to disagree in love. Nor are you there simply to be a doormat (do the 'easy thing' and just give in to their demands). Pastor, you are there to speak the truth in love in order to protect the doctrine, life and unity of the church to the glory of God.

The diagram on the previous page, Figure 2, spells out our aim. It is Loving honesty. It also highlights what results when we deviate from that.

- Loving dishonesty – there is love and care but no truth. You are so concerned to make it easy for the person that you go pussy foot and end up making it worse. It is ruinous empathy. There's a Russian story about a man who has to amputate his dog's tail (which was infected) but the owner loves him so much, he tries to do things slowly. So, he foolishly decides to cut off an inch a day! His desire to save the dog suffering too much actually leads to him suffering more.
- Unloving dishonesty – here you are so concerned not to offend that you don't tell the truth. It is manipulative. Your concern is not for them, but for you to avoid conflict. It's about you not them. So there's no care either. You sugar coat and tell half the truth in order to make it easy for yourself. But later the full truth comes out and they know you have lied to them. The outcome is far worse. You have lost their trust.
- Unloving honesty – here you tell the truth (what a mess they've made of something) but you do so in a vicious, un-Christ-like way. Your words are brutal. You want to exact revenge. Perhaps you even do it in front of other people in order to embarrass or humiliate the difficult person. There's truth, but no love. It's going to pour petrol on to the flames. It may even provoke the dragon to hit back and everything escalates. If you are being obnoxiously aggressive you are acting in unrighteous anger and the Lord is not with you. And it won't help your own reputation. You might think it will but it won't. An old piece of advice says, 'Never get into a spitting fight with a skunk. Even if you win you come out smelling bad.'

Loving honesty

This is what we should be aiming for. This is the way of Christ and a good conscience. This is the way of things God is happy to use. He is the God of truth and love.

In God's goodness, what you are hoping is that the dragon will change. This will not be brought about by merely identifying the problem and moralistically telling them to stop it and shape up. It will happen as their unhelpful behaviour is challenged in the context of exposing the roots of it and leading them afresh to the cross of Christ, where sins are forgiven and the love of God in Christ touches hearts. The cross is about the truth concerning the scale and horror of our sin in the context of the unstoppable love of God. That honesty and love of the cross must be reflected in the way we seek to deal with the dragon.

And it turns out that when people see you consistently acting in truth and love, when they know they can trust you and believe you care about them, then often 5 good things tend to follow:

- they accept and act on your criticism or praise
- they tell you what they think you are doing well and not so well in love (which is good)
- they engage in the same loving honest behaviour with others, spreading the love and truth culture
- they have new enthusiasm for the church and their role in the church
- they focus on making the church the best it can be

In order to engender that culture / spirit of loving honesty, it is helpful if the pastor (as appropriate) is honest about himself and shares something of his own vulnerabilities with folk – showing he too is human and values truth and love.

There are two other essential helps as you try to tame the dragon.

First, prayer.

We can accomplish nothing of any good without the Lord. So, prayer is essential. The prophet Samuel had to face the dragon of Israel wanting a king towards the end of his ministry. His own sons had not turned out well, 1 Samuel 8.3. Israel had pushed through having a king, which was a snub to Samuel himself, 1 Samuel 8.7. But it had also deeply displeased God. Samuel had 'lost at the church meeting.' Yet he has not only prayed for them through all this, but promises to pray on for them, 1 Samuel 12.22, 23.

Second, unity.

If the dragon finds that wherever he or she goes around the different members of the eldership he/she is getting the same answer, then it might just dawn on them that what they are doing is wrong and that they should think again.

In all of this, pastor, try to be kind and gentle in your firmness, 2 Timothy 2.24,25. Remember that more than likely, beneath those hard scales the dragon is probably some kind of wounded sheep.

4: When to confront a dragon

Confrontations usually come about when something has happened that makes you think, 'This time he's gone too far.' There's a trigger that makes you feel you must act. That's fair enough. But it's always best to step back and take a moment before girding on your sword and jumping onto your charger for the fight.

If we respond too quickly

There is a danger that we jump into a situation when our own emotions are running very high. We are angry. It might be a right anger. But with that kind of passion it will be hard to be gentle and we may say something that will stir up the problem even more. We could end up being obnoxiously aggressive. Also, it's good to take a little time to be sure of the facts. Proverbs 18.13 warns us against the fool's mistake of answering (or acting) before listening. God is slow to anger. I'm not taking this as a rule, but it is interesting to note that the prophet Nathan must have waited nearly a year before confronting David about the adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, because it is after the baby has been born that he rebukes the king, 2 Samuel 11.27, 2 Samuel 12.1, 15. But on the other hand...

If we respond too slowly

We discourage and mislead the church. 'Our elders are just letting him / her get away with it as if sin doesn't matter', they might say. Also, if we don't challenge fairly quickly then we might well allow a bad situation to become normalized or to get worse. And when we do speak to the dragon, the response might well be, 'Well why didn't you say anything before this!' Also, as time slips by, we ourselves might be tempted to just leave the situation to avoid confrontation – tell ourselves, 'time will heal' – while the Lord is actually wanting us to do something. For example, there might be a deacon and his wife who haven't been to the prayer meeting for six months or more. 'Well it's just them. I will leave it.' They will conclude you are okay with the *status quo*.

Give time to talk through the situation with elders if possible

This will give the opportunity to get another perspective on the situation and again collect facts. Sometimes other leaders have not had a chance to tell you what they know and you don't. Don't assume sin before you are sure. Together, think and pray things through using the Scriptures as your guide. Be confident that the word of God is able to equip you thoroughly for every situation, 2 Timothy 3.16, 17.

Also, remember, if the dragon is making accusations against someone – especially you or another elder – it has to be well substantiated. Normally there needs to be two or three different sources, 1 Timothy 5.19.

Again, this gives time for you to calm down. As we have tried to emphasize, it is best if the elders as a whole can come to a united approach to the whole situation. You can pray.

Also, in many situations it is best if one of the elders or some other trusted person in the fellowship goes with you to meet the dragon. Dragons can twist words. It is good to have witnesses. It may be necessary to take notes so there is a record – independently verified – of what was said.³

Give time to prepare yourself spiritually

Though we are trying to be dragon-tamers rather than dragon slayers, nevertheless as we confront the destructive person, we are likely to be fighting a battle. It is likely to be both painful and draining. We need to be ready for this. As we go to confront others, we need to remember the Lord's warning concerning hypocrisy: *Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?* Matthew 7.3-5. Before embarking on confrontation, a time of personal humbling and repentance is in order.

Also remember Paul's advice about addressing other people's sins: *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ,* Galatians 6.1-5.

You may be tempted to shy away and simply avoid the situation. But take courage from the fact that you are about the Lord's business, seeking the good of his bride, the church. It may seem a daunting task, but bear in mind also, as a church leader, that one day you must give an account to the Lord as to how you have looked after his church, Mark 13.34-37. Even if you fail, nevertheless it is best to have tried. The Lord will say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

³ The trickiest situation is where someone is making an allegation of spiritual or sexual abuse. It is unlikely that you will be able to produce 2 or 3 witnesses. These terrible things tend to happen in secret. Here the person accused person (you? another elder?) must report to the Safeguarding Officer appointed by the church who must work in cooperation with the other elders. Submit to the process. The secular authorities may need to be involved. This cannot be handled on your own privately. That is a big mistake. Though if possible it should be handled discretely. Not all allegations are true.

We need to be brave. Our timidity will be overcome as we are prayerfully and Biblically sure of our ground. We will be emboldened if we know from God's word why this dragon needs confronting. It is most helpful, in dealing with conflict in a church, to be prayerfully and biblically sure of what we are wanting to do – to have thought through carefully from the Scriptures the reasons for what we are wanting to do and the way in which it needs to be done. This will give you a calmness and a humble determination. You are taking action not for yourself but for the Lord and his church.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of not shying away from necessary confrontations. Along with gentleness, firmness and honesty, pray for courage. And be kind and gracious. More people are changed, more dragons tamed, by caring attention, than by aggression or cold neglect.

5: After the battle

What are the possible outcomes of all this? Here are the main three.

1. No resolution

Sadly, this is often the case. The dragon frequently ends up leaving the church. This is not great. But you (and the church) have to come to terms with that. You should not aim at this outcome. 'O Lord, just get rid of them!' is not the best prayer. You would not want the Lord to treat you like that. That is not grace. The Lord's will is for his people to work things out. We should make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Ephesians 4.3. But if, after honest and prayerful efforts, the result is that they leave the church – don't beat yourself up. Romans 12.18 tells us we can only do so much. It is not all down to you. Be able to look at yourself in the mirror and say with a good conscience, 'I've tried my best.' And then move on. You have others in the flock to look after. Don't let the dragon, even after they have left the scene of the battle, continue to consume all your time and energy to the neglect of others.

2. The dragon was right

That can be the case sometimes. They had a point. At this juncture you need to be humble. Don't be a proud cleric like the Pharisees who came under the castigation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Pride in a pastor is enormously destructive. In fact, it was pride that turned angels into devils, 1 Timothy 3.6. Pride is a trap and that's why Paul counsels against appointing new converts to leadership too quickly.

Also, do not let your authority as a leader get tangled up with the idea of always having to be right. You won't always be right. And it doesn't do the church any harm to see that you get things wrong now and then. You and they believe in a gospel of grace and forgiveness, not of personal merit. We are under grace not law.

Sometimes a church leader has to catch up with his people who have seen things more clearly or more quickly than he has. A leader who takes no cues from his people is a dictator. The pastor is not a dictator arrogantly above criticism. The pastor (and the elders) is more like a president than a king. He leads, but with the consent of the governed under God's word.

3. Reconciliation

If you have been right and the dragon now acknowledges that – don't rub it in. God has been gracious to you in Christ. Be gracious to this offender just as God has been to you.

If you've simply agreed to differ with an understanding that the matter is now dropped and won't be raised again – that's fine. We do allow different opinions in a church. However, knowing you've agreed to differ will also mean being wise (though loving) concerning that person in the future. If you know they have a sensitive area, it's not good to inflame them again unless you really have to. Learn the great Christian craft of forgiveness. There may have been some very hurtful things said but you have to bring your hurts to the Lord and forgive. The crucial help to forgiveness is the gospel. The dragon has been wrong, but justice has been satisfied because Christ died for his or her sins (as well as yours). Furthermore, to continue to be an accuser is to have the attitude of the devil – the great accuser, whereas to have an attitude of forgiveness is to be like God, Ephesians 4.32, 5.1. Forgiveness is a real step to becoming more like our Father in heaven.

While we must be at one on the central matters of the gospel, the unity of Christ's church runs deeper than everyone having to agree about every single thing. The unity of the Spirit crosses all kinds of cultures, attitudes and divides. A church proclaims the truth of the gospel for all by being more than the old adage 'birds of a feather flocking together.' We are not all the same, but we all belong to Jesus.

It is also good after such a dragon battle to try, in preaching, to bring the church back to the centrality of the gospel. No matter what the outcome has been, the Christians under your care will need to see Jesus again. After weeks or perhaps months when there has been acrimony and people's attention has been taken up with accusations, counter-claims and church politics, it is wise to get the church back into the fresh air of the love and grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is able to bring healing to a church and restore its joy.