

BRIAN BERRY

**CRITICISM
BITES**

dealing with, responding to, and learning from your critics



YouthMinistry.com/TOGETHER

Criticism Bites

Dealing With, Responding to, and Learning From Your Critics

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my friends and colleagues in ministry who daily work to love on students and families with one hand and respond to criticism and unhappy people with the other. You are phenomenal pastors who wrestle with discouragement as a casualty of your love.

To those of you who have a nagging voice in your head that never goes away and says that you should quit, that you're inadequate, or that your shortcomings are your only legacy, this book is for you. Read it carefully. I will humbly remind you, as I remind myself, that voice is not God's. I could specifically name some of you for whom this is your daily struggle, but that would be borderline cruel. So I'm just gonna encourage you to write your name in this blank if that's you. *Hi, my name is _____, and criticism has a way of destroying and discouraging me deeply.*

From the core of my being, I want to say that your life and ministry matter, and this book is for all of us.

To the mentors who have gently, and even at times firmly, corrected my life along the way, this book is in tribute of you. To name a few, I owe my wife Shannon, my mom and dad, Mark Teyler, Mark Wold, Ron Ritchie, Ed Noble, Mark Oestreicher, Tic Long, Scott Berglin, Gino Cunningham, Danny Bowers, and Mark Campbell a debt of gratitude. I am who I am today because you loved me enough to correct me along the way.



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FOREWORD

I don't think I have ever heard anyone say, "I love to be criticized," "Criticism is so awesome," or "Criticism is fuel for my soul!" Nope, I have never heard that because most of the time criticism hurts. It more than hurts, it bites! It can suck the life right out of us and cause us to want to quit whatever it is we are doing. But check this out: If you are in ministry or a leader of any kind, it is inevitable—and if you are in youth ministry it's close to being a constant companion. So you see, we don't have an option but to learn how to deal with it.

Brian states early in the book, *"Your capacity to respond to criticism in ways that honor God is not an optional skill; it is a mandatory tool for all leaders."*

He is 100 percent correct, but oh, if only it was as easy as that sounds. "Cool, I just need to add a new tool to my ministry tool belt and I am good to go."

Dealing with criticism is one of the most difficult challenges in life and yet one of the least adequately addressed.

Most of us are more than aware of our typical, unhelpful responses to being criticized such as ignoring, getting angry, attacking, pouting, justifying, and daydreaming of elaborate ways of getting revenge that will strike a blow but won't end up getting us in jail. We KNOW they get us nowhere, but we go there time and again.

Criticism is so multilayered. It's personal, it's professional, it's called for, it's uncalled for. We see it coming, we are blindsided by it. It is well-reasoned, ill-reasoned, and just flat-out wrong. It comes from both friend and foe. It hits our self-worth, our sense of calling, and our competence.

No wonder it can cut us to the quick and put us into a deep pit of despair. It is nothing to trifle with or attempt to face with simplistic responses.

Fortunately, Brian spares us the simplistic responses and provides four really helpful things.

1. He explores with insight why criticism can be so devastating to us. What is it about being criticized that can so quickly rob us of our joy, confidence, and self-worth? He gets inside us.
2. He provides a path, a way of being, a sense of understanding, a life strategy—whatever you want to call it—along with practical tools to not only survive criticism and to pick your way through its minefield, but to reach a place where you are not just better equipped to survive but actually grow from it in both your personal life and ministry.
3. He puts us on the spot. Brian provides questions for us to have to work through about ourselves. This is not an academic exercise but an opportunity for maturing. We are being disciplined in an area of our life we can't ignore. Brian calls us to look in the mirror.
4. He offers truth, real-life situations, and authenticity. This is a nonsense-free zone where Brian helps us face real issues in real life.

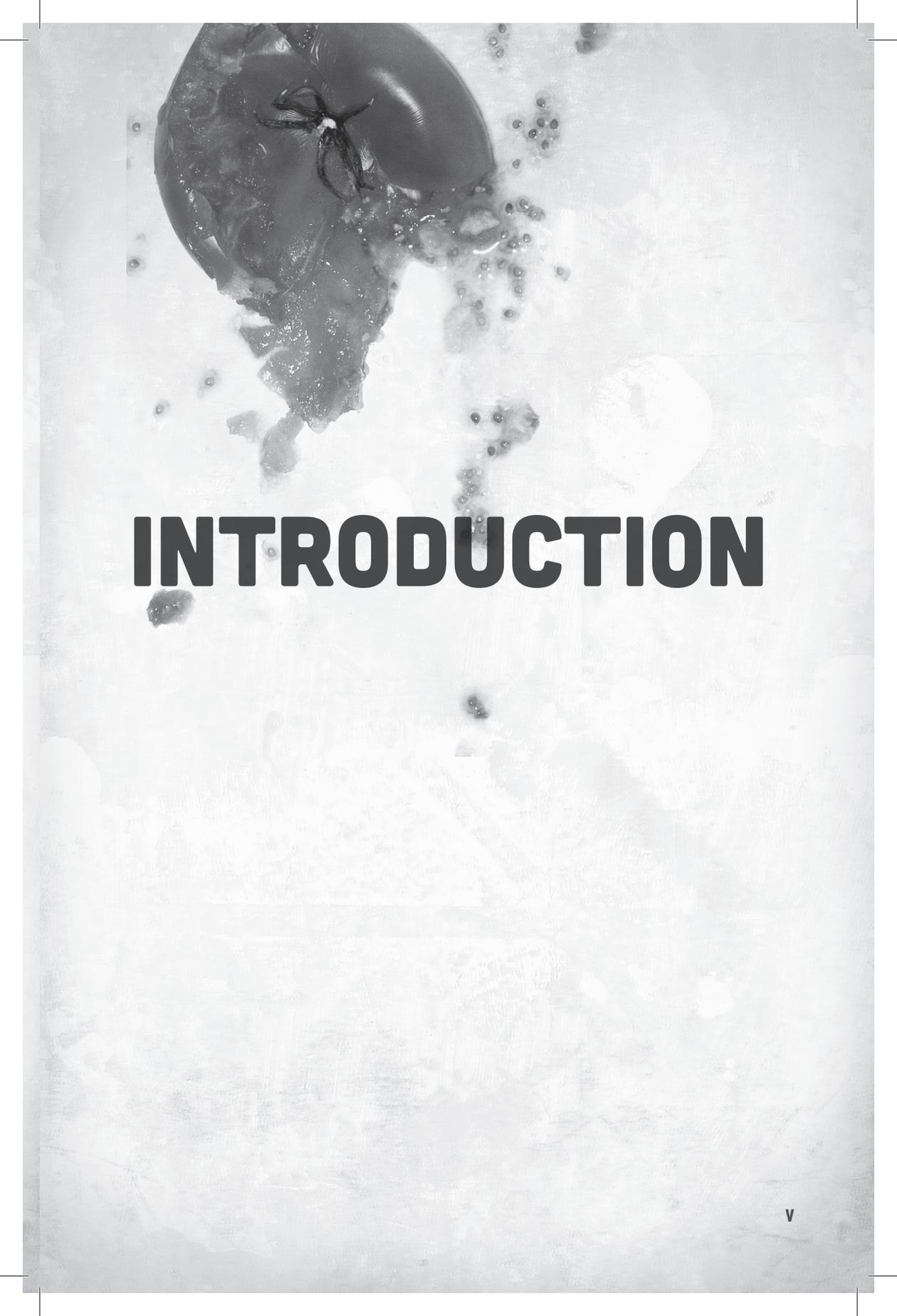
I have known Brian for years, and I have criticized Brian. I know that he lives the stuff he is writing about. I know the wisdom found in these pages can be life-giving. Those of you who are youth workers are called to be criticized; you can't avoid it. You must always take risk, take chances, try new things. You will make mistakes (and you should!). You are herding cats, but you are also changing a generation.

Change...risk...new...mistakes...teenagers...parents...pastors... church janitors...your world invites criticism, and you must learn how to invite it in as a friend and not run from it as an enemy. Brian will help you to do that. He knows your world. He is your friend.

Tic Long

With his 34 years of experience in training, equipping, and caring for youth workers at Youth Specialties, and his heart for youth workers everywhere, Tic is somewhat of a Yoda to the youth ministry community. He also currently serves as executive pastor at Journey Community Church in La Mesa, California.





INTRODUCTION

When I started my first full-time job as a youth pastor, I had an unquenchable enthusiasm to make a difference—plus a laptop computer, a shelf of commentaries, and a single-file drawer. My office fit in the trunk of my '65 Mustang, and like that car, I was ready to change the world at Mach speeds. While my youth pastor experience fit on a single sheet of paper, my dreams couldn't fit in the building. So what I lacked in wisdom, I simply made up for in zeal.

In an attempt to increase my wisdom and decrease my zealous cover-ups as a leader, I started going to seminars and leadership training events for pastors and communicators, including several events featuring author, pastor, and leadership guru John Maxwell. One common theme that I heard him talk about was how he did his research to prepare for his books and sermons. To put it simply, John had files. As he went about his daily life, he would cut and clip articles from magazines, newspapers, advertisements—pretty much anything he came across. Once a file got to a certain thickness, then he would write a book or talk.

I loved this idea, and because it was LONG before the days of the Internet, Evernote®, and the digital camera, I joined Maxwell in compiling my own extensive set of old-school hanging file folders. In them, I stored countless illustrative ideas, facts, articles, and even some books I cut up on a variety of subjects. Working with teenagers, I obviously had multiple categories under sexuality and dating, and I had topical folders on everything from addictions to zeal.

I had some odd interests that produced their own files for illustrations. This resulted in a file for the Olympics, one for the Navy SEALs, and one dedicated to people's strange addictions, such as a kid who collected trash or a man who set the world record for popping popcorn. You name it, I probably had a file on it. Before "Google®" was a company or a verb, my co-workers and high school students who were writing papers for school would "Brian search" a word and ask me for a file on some topic. I was vigilant at it, never throwing a magazine away until I had

skimmed and gleaned from it. My nemesis was the “to-file pile” that was a bin of stuff I had skimmed and tagged but had no time to file.

But in the beginning, there was one file I didn’t have and never had anyone ask me for. It was one I eventually labeled “Criticism,” and despite the low demand, it grew quite large—both with some criticism I received and articles I began to devour. It wasn’t that I had never received any criticism by the time I started ministry; it was just that I had no idea that managing it would be such a mission-critical part of my job.

Initially, I thought youth ministry was a phenomenal calling. I loved the influence my own youth pastor had on me in high school, and I couldn’t wait to put down my part-time summer construction hammer and graduate from college so I could get started. On the construction site I knew I needed gloves, safety glasses, steel-toed shoes, and occasionally a hard hat to keep the inevitable dropped tool or flying wood chip from sending me to the emergency room. But I had no idea that I needed a similar set of pastoral equipment to keep me from heading to the ministry triage wing. It didn’t take long before I discovered that youth ministry would involve a constant struggle between two extremes: Side 1—Please God and love on people vs. Side 2—Please people and love on God. I also quickly discovered that keeping Side 1 in the No. 1 slot is easier said than done. A LOT easier said than done.

I once heard a teaching by Andy Stanley at Willow Creek’s Global Leadership Summit in which he said, “Leaders have to know when something is a problem to solve and when it is actually a tension to manage.”¹ The issue of criticism is not something you solve. It’s something you manage. You will always have your critics. I will always have mine. The irony is that even in writing a book on criticism, this, too, will have its critics and, before it is published, will go through a series of critical reviews. Thus, as long as you and I are breathing, the ability to

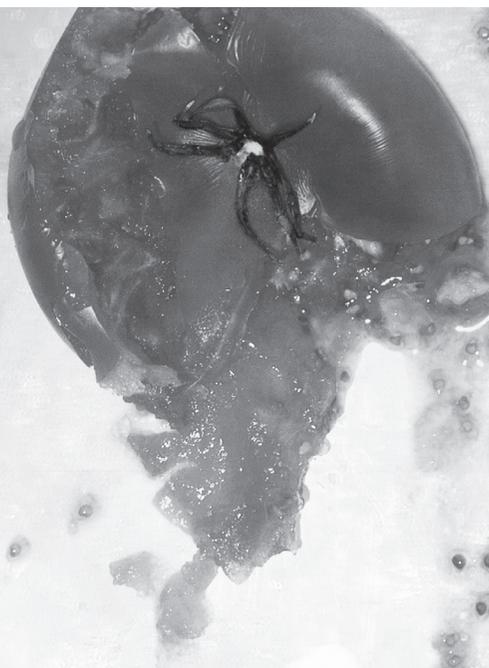
navigate, respond to, and even learn from our critics is a mandatory life skill. This book is not an attempt to solve the issue of criticism or even to get you to a place where you receive it less. The truth is, we cannot control what others criticize anyway. Instead, this book is designed to help us learn to think through and respond to our critics in healthy ways.

So if you've ever let your zeal outrun your wisdom...if you've ever wanted to quit a leadership role...if you've ever cried or lashed out in anger at the cutting remarks from someone who ripped into you for some mistake you made or just some unhappy bystander who "flipped you the bird"...if you've ever received a critical email that you read way too many times...if you've ever found yourself in a cycle of depression that sent you into your own personal dark night of the soul...if you've ever thought, "Is this really worth it?" then we share a kindred spirit. Criticism bites, and this book is for both of us.

To this end, I will make you a promise: As we travel this road together, I will not use "poetic license" to fabricate or make up stories. At times I will change names for my own integrity and to keep this book honest without being accusatory. This is simply the stuff I've bled, discovered, learned, and stumbled into as a husband, dad, and youth pastor.

In the pages that follow, we will examine why criticism hurts so much. We will look at our own hearts, consider why criticism cuts so deeply, and develop some processes by which we can respond to those who are not happy with us. We'll strive to discern when those critical words are truth from God that we should heed and when they are cuts from the enemy that we should flat out ignore. We will seek to examine, wrestle with, and respond to our critics with the same grace and truth that we hope others will give to us.

If that sounds like something you need, then welcome to the painful and necessary journey of doing life and leadership when criticism bites.



CHAPTER 1

THE DAY I QUIT

The seed of this book was planted in my life on Thursday, June 25, 1998. It was my fourth wedding anniversary, but oddly enough, it had nothing to do with my marriage. Our anniversary celebration was delayed due to the fact that it was the last night of a weeklong summer camp with our high school ministry at some conference grounds in Northern California—not exactly a romantic escape. I was running the camp with a friend of mine for our youth groups and several other churches. Shannon was there for moral support, while primarily being mom to our 11-month-old son, T.J.

To truly understand this day, you need to know that a couple of years earlier, we had a HUGE water fight on the last night of this very camp. It was epic. Seriously, I know that word is overused, but it was everything *epic* is meant to describe. Picture an infamous experience that no one who was there has ever forgotten. Epic.

Here's how it went down. The youth pastors had been taunted daily by a cabin of senior guys—with notes and hints and full-on harassment—into having a final-night water fight. Since we had no time to really deal with this and no interest in filling hundreds of water balloons at 2 a.m. ourselves, we decided to thwart their plan and raid their cabins of stuff they could attack us with. So on Thursday morning, while everyone was supposed to be in chapel, we raided “Birdland” where they were staying and grabbed trashcan after trashcan of water balloons that they had stashed away in the days before. (I know, great example we were setting. Now wipe that judgment off your face and don't act like you haven't got one of these stories. Ha!) Anyway, we figured we now had so many water balloons that we were sure we had them severely outgunned. There's no way they could refill that many water balloons again with only one afternoon of free time to make it happen.

Wrong. I told you: It was epic.

Later that night we loaded up the back of my full-size truck with six youth pastors, Stream Machine™ water guns, 50-gallon trashcans of water, and a literal truckload of all the water balloons we had stolen from them. The road into their camp was in the center of a ravine, and all the cabins were built on stilts on both sides of the ravine. Without warning, around 11 p.m., we drove my truck up this valley road for our surprise attack as I screamed, “You’re going down, suckas!” into the PA system I had installed on my truck, and we began our assault. But by about the time my mouth uttered the second syllable of “suckas,” the world began raining water balloons. Seriously—raining! Not only were the campers NOT in their beds or having cabin time, I think the guys from every cabin in the area knew we were coming and were in the bushes, on the roofs, in trees—pretty much everywhere, with thousands of water balloons within reach. I’m convinced some kid went to camp with just the clothes on his back, maybe a change of underwear, and an entire suitcase filled with empty water balloons!

We would never admit it then or in the years that followed, but the truth is, we got destroyed. All the youth pastors blamed me and said I didn’t drive far enough up the hill. But in my defense, I stopped because of the inability to see through the wall of balloons coming down on my windshield. I think the military got the “shock and awe” bomb concept from these students. It was so epic that my windshield was literally shattered by a water balloon the size of a basketball that made a direct hit off a cabin roof. It was crazy!

Well, as you can imagine, a water fight like this was the talk of the camp the next morning. In fact, it was all people talked about heading into the next several years of camp. But by 1998, it was a “tradition” we were trying to avoid. The first year was literally unrepeatable, and every year after felt less “epic” and more like “work.” Through the years, the girls all wanted to join in, and it morphed from youth pastor vs. students into guys vs. girls. Along the way, a variety of things had been broken

in cabins, and there was even water damage we had to pay for. The last night of spiritual experiences was being commandeered by water-fight anticipation. The truth is that the youth pastors really wanted it to go away, but it had become like an unwritten expectation in the camp brochure that was still convincing some students to come to our camp in the first place.

Now, back to June 25, 1998. After dinner on that night, I gathered my counselors to discuss what I thought was a solid compromise. I said something like this: “In order to not spoil the fun and in an attempt to not have an epic water fight near a cabin where I will inevitably have to pay for water damage, here’s my new plan. At exactly midnight, all the girls will leave their cabin area to ‘secretly’ head up to ambush the guys. The guys will do the same, leaving their area to go ambush the girls on a pre-chosen route. As long as we all leave at the right time and take the specified route, they will inevitably ‘accidentally’ run into one another in the parking lot and have a water fight there. Everyone will get to have their fun, they’ll be surprised, and it will be in a safer location.”

Everyone thought this was a good idea and agreed to go along—everyone except one of my key volunteers, if not my most key volunteer at the time. I’ll call him “John.” We were friends. But he was 15 years older than I was, very passionate about his convictions, and in this case it turns out that he was very upset by what I had asked him to do. In his view, I had asked him to lie to his students, something he vowed never to do based on biblical conviction and passion for integrity. In my view, I had asked him to do something akin to not telling them about a surprise party. It was a water fight. But we were at an impasse, and in his mind, it was on the level of asking him to compromise his character. John said, “I don’t lie to my small group of guys, and I won’t lie to them now.” Later he told his cabin group that I had asked him to lie to them, and that night, the history of the water fight died in a firestorm of anger and confusion.

By the time the next morning rolled around, John refused to speak to me. He was going around to the other youth pastors and asking them to correct me in my sin as one of their peers. He was beyond upset, and the 125 or so students I had brought with me were on the fast track toward massive division. I know it sounds trivial and overdramatic, but the whole thing had me in a spiritual, emotional, and mental tailspin. I cried. I yelled at God. I was numb. I could not believe this was happening and had no idea where to turn. It was all I could do to load the buses, get everyone home, and try to keep from losing it in front of my students, who could clearly see that something was not right and knew that it was something between the two people with the most “power and influence” in our youth group.

(SIDE NOTE: If this whole response feels a bit overstated and out of the blue to you, then you understand how I felt—but you’re also missing one more piece of backstory. While John and I were good friends, our friendship had been tested by fire before. We shared a passion for Jesus and were both big-voice personalities, but beyond that, our cultural experiences and convictions varied quite a bit. He and I’d had run-ins before over how we did ministry, what we should say to students, and even the role my wife should or shouldn’t play in ministry. One such run-in had occurred just a few months before this camp on a Mexico mission trip when John had a disagreement with a student, who in turn cussed at him during their angry altercation. As a result, John threatened to leave our group in Mexico if I didn’t do something about it. He said he was prepared to take his wife and go home on the moral grounds of never allowing a teenager to show disrespect for an elder. This felt like a form of blackmail, threatening to leave me stranded with students in a foreign country if I didn’t side with him. When we returned to the U.S., we had meetings and mediation with our senior pastor for months to bring restoration to our relationship and to John’s relationship with the student in question. It felt like we were just getting to the point where this thing was beginning to heal by the time summer camp rolled around. But

clearly, it was still bleeding below the surface, and now the wound was gushing from a pulmonary artery of my soul.)

With all that in mind, when I got home I wanted to crawl into a hole and die (or at least hide for a few months), but I couldn't. My senior pastor was on vacation, and I was set to preach in less than 48 hours. I had a message to finalize, and I had to get my head straight before I stood up in front of the entire church. So Saturday morning I dragged myself to my office and sat down at my desk. I don't even remember what I taught on that Sunday, but I do know what happened in my office that day. As I sat there with my mind and soul spinning, I looked down and saw a book that I had purchased some months before sitting on my desk: *Leaders on Leadership*, which was edited by legendary researcher George Barna. Out of confusion or reflex or divine inspiration, I picked it up and looked at the table of contents. I saw a chapter by H.B. London Jr. titled "Being a Tough but Tender Leader" and decided to give it a read. As I did, the tears began to flow, and I was pretty sure he had written it for one person on the planet: me. I remember literally thinking God was speaking to me through this book as I read a quote inside from Stuart Briscoe that said, "To be a successful pastor one must have the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child, and the hide of a rhinoceros."² In that moment I knew two things: (1) I did not have the hide of a rhinoceros, and (2) if that was what it meant to be a pastor, I had a long way to go—and I wasn't sure I even wanted to get there.

The next day I preached my sermon in a trance or something, and then Shannon and I dropped off our son at her parents' house and headed for a three-day getaway we arranged months earlier to celebrate our anniversary. But we both knew this year would now be less about celebration and more about a marital soul searching. I was deeply wounded and desperately needed to rest in the love of my wife and my God. Before I left, I called my senior pastor and left a voice mail on his office line and told him this: "John and I had another massive problem

at the end of camp. I'm sure you'll hear all about it. I'm leaving with my wife to celebrate our marriage, think, and pray. I'll be back on Wednesday, and all I ask is that you meet with me before you meet with him."

Over the next three days, my wife and I wrestled with the situation, prayed, and cried. In the end, we concluded that I had somehow signed up for the wrong job. I felt like Jeremiah when he got angry with God and said, "*You deceived me*" (*Jeremiah 20:7*). I felt deceived by my Creator and misled by what it meant to be a pastor. This criticism thing was literally more than I could bear. I couldn't do this—and besides, the volunteer I was at odds with was so influential in our youth group and church that I was pretty positive I would cause a church split if I didn't just leave. I decided I needed to quit—but not just quit being a youth pastor at this church. I needed to quit ministry and be something other than a pastor. Like Peter, who in his own funk of confusion went back to fishing after Jesus' death, I thought maybe it was time to pick up the hammer again.

So without going home or getting our son, we checked out from our bed-and-breakfast and drove straight to the church office for a closed-door meeting with my senior pastor. Through tears and deep regret, I said, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do this anymore. I think I need to resign."

But much to my surprise, our pastor wouldn't let me. He said he was going to get involved. I told him he couldn't step between John and me in this way and that this was a church-splitting bullet he didn't have to bite. I honestly expected it to cost us both our jobs if he did. He, however, disagreed, and I agreed to humbly submit and follow his lead.

In my despair, I called my old high school youth pastor, Mark Teyler, and asked if he would meet with me. I remember vividly sitting in his office

and sharing my story as he listened. He had been a pastor for over a decade, and after I was done, he looked me in the eye and said, “Brian, this is straight and simple an issue of your calling. You don’t need the support of your senior pastor. You need the conviction of the Holy Spirit. You don’t quit your calling when life gets tough. If you’ve been called to ministry, then it’s time to search your soul, buck up, and deal with your discouragement. That’s what Jeremiah had to do in chapter 20.” My senior pastor was my comforter. My youth pastor was my confronter. The truth is, I desperately needed both.

As I huddled under my senior leader’s wings and sought any kind of conviction from the Lord, I found solace and connection in Psalm 55. David cried out to God with these words: *If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were rising against me, I could hide. But it is you, one like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship at the house of God, as we walked about among the worshipers (Psalm 55:12-14 TNIV).* Perhaps harder than the criticism was the feeling of betrayal I felt in the midst of a group that I felt was so close. Trust was lost, and it was not due to a school district with a different ideology or a neighbor who didn’t follow Jesus—I could understand those kinds of situations and even label them as from the enemy. But my spiritual dark hole was revolving around confusion in my calling and the death of a friendship in Christ. This seemed unbearable.

In the following six months, life only got worse. I did my first funeral when Scott, my father-in-law, died of a melanoma at 50 years old. Then my Grandpa Roger died and so did my wife’s only living grandparent, “Gram.” It was a deep season of soul searching and mourning that seemed to never end—both at home and at church. Through it, we didn’t lose one other adult volunteer in our ministry, but our youth group lost about 50 percent of its students. Rumors were rampant, and students chose sides. I remember my wife looking at me one day and asking, “Are you ever going to be the same again?” I said to her, “I really don’t know, and I’m not sure I want to.”

It literally took a year before I got the confidence back to stand up again and consider taking another criticism bullet from anyone. John and I remained at the same church, but he no longer worked in the youth ministry. It took us several years and a lot of grace, but John and I eventually forgave one another and had our lives restored to a level of Christ-like brotherhood again. No, we would probably never be best friends, but we were again at a place of family in the kingdom of God.

With this shaping experience distantly in the rearview mirror, I can tell you that God was working in my life during those days. I would not wish them on anyone, but I'm not sure I would remove them from my story either. God clearly used those dark days of criticism to shape my life. I now understand what the author of Hebrews meant when he wrote this: *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11)*. God truly used the men and women who loved God and loved me to shape me into who I am today. After almost 20 years as a youth pastor in just two churches, I've weathered many a storm that had the potential to knock out my passion for ministry, some storms more gracefully than others—but weathered nonetheless. I now confidently know this: In those days, God was refining my calling, sharpening my soul, and preparing me for the road ahead.

If you asked me to summarize that season of my life, I'd offer you the following conclusions.

- Remain broken so God doesn't have to break you. The fewer lessons you learn the hard way, the better off you'll be.
- The ability to deal with criticism is a mandatory life skill. We must learn to both ignore it from some and heed it from others.
- Without a clear calling from God, ministry longevity will never be a reality.

SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER AS WE BEGIN THIS JOURNEY TOGETHER:

- What has been your most significant “criticism bites” moment to date? In other words, what life-shaping story would you tell if this were a chapter about a season of criticism in your life?
- What did you feel when that criticism came? If it’s in your past, how did it shape you, and what lessons did you gain from it? If it’s in your present, how are you responding, and how is it shaping you today?
- Who would you list as people who have cared enough to comfort and even confront you in seasons of discouragement in your own life?