

NATURAL PERSONALITY
DIFFERENCES

The majority of conflict and evil in ministry results from natural personality differences. As we have just seen, Jesus struggled with his leadership skills to change the Pharisee leaders. Jesus' own mother conflicted with him over his ministry decisions. When he was a youth at the temple, talking with the religious leaders, Mary questioned his having stayed behind (Luke 2:48–50). At Cana, she challenged his initial refusal to perform the miracle of the wine that would begin his public ministry (John 2:3–5). The Gospels thus reflect the reality of day-to-day leadership conflict coming from natural skill or personality differences.

So to solve conflict we must understand this primary cause. I have explored this issue, both in psychology and in Scripture, since the mid-70s when I titled my doctoral research, *An Exploration of Teacher-Student Relationships*. No issue in ministry has more daily practical relevance than how we deal with relationship conflict, irritation, concern, anger—evil that is happening to us in ministry leadership. A positive resolution most often flows from understanding the cause and thereby coming up with an intelligent solution.

• THE VALUE OF IDENTIFYING PERSONALITY SKILLS

Besides the value of understanding the primary reason conflict happens, we will also identify other personality skill values, as we (1) explore God's overall plan for human life, (2) seek God's will for our

unique individual life, (3) learn how to achieve happiness, (4) acquire emotional health, and (5) enhance human motivation and productivity in ministry.

God's wisdom for all of these values or benefits comes again from Scripture, Matthew 25:14–30, the parable of the talents. Near the end of his life, as in his attack on the Pharisees in Matthew 23, Jesus provides a summary of help for future ministry. In this parable he outlines the overall plan of God's kingdom on earth in preparing for eternal life. The Master entrusts three different combinations of "talents" to his three servants. Then he leaves them, expecting the best use of what he has given. When he returns, two have traded their talents. The fearful third servant has buried his talent. He is sent by the master to "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30).

1. Explore God's overall plan for human life.

These "talents" in Jesus' parable are provable as the unique combinations of natural psychological skills with which God endows each of us. We are expected to use them in service to others, in effect trading them with others who use their unique set of skills in service to us. In our life of unique service, we thereby end life with a multiplicity of talents received in the process of bartering talents with others. By "trading" we help merit God's invitation to "enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:23).

One may wonder why God gives a different set of personality skills to each person, which then in turn becomes such a major cause of conflict between people. The parable of the talents again provides the wisdom. Since we each have different skills, we must help one another, trading what we can do with what the other person can do. We are, in effect, forced to act out in service our love for each other, the active love that God intends as our primary way of salvation.

2. Seek God's will for our unique individual life.

Not only does this parable tell us God's general plan for our life, but we

also can learn his particular will for our own life. We do not have to sit back and wait for God's voice to tell us what God wills for our particular journey. We do need to pray always for God's light and strength of discernment. But all we need to do is intelligently notice what we most enjoy doing and are most good at. Doing so will guide us to recognize our natural personality skills or talents. This in turn tells us the activities God wants us to do with most of our day-to-day life, such as our career, marriage and free time. I will expand on this in detail in the next section of this chapter.

3. Learn how to achieve happiness.

Another value of identifying our skills lies in the happiness that comes from *using* our skills. To use our skills, to match them to what we spend our life doing and to those we spend our life with, creates the greatest natural source of happiness available. God made the human personality open to happiness also, if we would just listen to how we are made.

4. Acquire emotional health.

Emotional health is closely aligned with how we experience happiness and peace. To the extent we listen to and use our unique skills, we normally eliminate anxiety, the primary symptom of emotional illness. So, if we enjoy and become proficient in math and use math in service to others, each such event helps to ensure our overall emotional health. I use the term *normally* because chemically caused anxiety exists, due to abnormalities that can occur in the brain. Providentially, scientists in our own time are learning to correct this imbalance. For ministry, our emotional health keeps us from contributing to the second cause of conflict and evil, emotional illness.

5. Enhance human motivation and productivity in ministry.

Another value of identifying natural personality skills comes from the powerful motivation and productivity that flows from the happiness and emotional health we have just described. If our primary unique skills match what our ministry needs, we are highly motivated by the

enjoyment that using our skills produces. High motivation in turn makes for high productivity and successful ministry.

First, we will identify how these different natural personality skills cause conflict. If you know your skills and can recognize other people's skills, you have what it takes to understand most conflicts going on between you and them. After that, the solutions are just common sense.

• IDENTIFYING PERSONALITY SKILLS

What are the natural personality skills with which God endows us? Psychologists have provided us with many different attempts to list them. As I searched for years for common denominators, the best grouping I could find was that of Edwin Megargee. I used his *California Psychological Inventory*, with its 400-plus questions, for evaluating the skills of Christian leaders across the United States. I found that when the leaders identified their strongest skills, they took much better advantage of them in their ministry. For over twenty years I worked at coming up with a shorter skills list that everyone could identify with and easily apply in ministry.

In the following list, pick out the skills you most enjoy using.* Also, pick out the ones you least enjoy. This helps round out the picture of your unique God-given personality skills. The twelve skills are:

1. Decision making

People who possess this skill enjoy leading others. They are the decision makers and like to take charge. They enjoy giving advice and direction.

2. Sociability

The talkative tend to possess this skill. These people enjoy and are con-

* A more comprehensive description of these twelve natural personality skills is available in the form of a self-scoring questionnaire, in chapter four of my book, *A Practical Guide for Starting an Adult Faith Formation Program* (San Jose: Resource Publications, 2003).

fidant in group situations. Light conversation with a stranger at “the drop of a hat” delights them.

3. Organization

People with this skill like order. Everything is kept in its proper place, whether it is files or the day’s schedule. Those who possess this skill avoid impulsive behavior.

4. Responsibility

Those who possess this skill enjoy carrying out a task to its completion. They are conscientious, dependable and govern their lives by reason.

5. Logical intelligence

People with this skill prefer step-by-step logic to solve a problem. They can accept the value of rules and regulations.

6. Intuitive intelligence

People with this skill excel in original thought and creativity. They come up with new ideas, solutions and directions. Authoritarianism repels them.

7. Artistic intelligence

Those who have this skill enjoy creating or simply appreciating beauty, such as painting, music and dance. Sunsets, mountain views and beautiful people excite them.

8. Counsel

Good counselors perceive people’s feelings, needs and concerns, even when the others have not stated how they feel. This skill draws people to seek their help.

9. Nurturance

People who possess this skill are responsive to the physical and emotional needs of others. They like to verbalize feelings and be physically affectionate. Hospitality reigns.

10. Flexibility

People who possess this skill judge each situation on its own merit, rather than limit themselves to a few set principles in life. They are flexible rather than rigid or dogmatic.

11. Tolerance

People who possess this skill are open to personalities different from their own. They accept without judgment others' beliefs and attitudes. They are trusting and nonauthoritarian.

12. Emotional Health

People who are emotionally healthy are peaceful rather than anxious and enjoy a rational, positive outlook. They look forward to the day enjoying what they do well.

One's ability to identify these twelve major personality traits in other people will contribute most to resolving day-to-day ministry conflicts and evil. This ability of identification lies simply in noticing what others enjoy and what they do not enjoy doing. Also, given time and opportunity to develop, what they enjoy should also become what they are good at. That enjoyment conveys the unique skills with which God endowed them. Watch others' behavior for clues and listen closely to what they say. Listen for, "I really like to..." or "I really hate to..." These are the "life enjoyment" questions to ask when interviewing a candidate for ministry work. Though not directly related to ministry itself, they are no less important when trying to discover where a person's interests and skills lie.

Understanding natural personality skills is about connecting the psychological experience of enjoyment that flows from having a skill to the fact that you also have a need for that enjoyment. For example, you have the skill of an animal to eat to maintain your physical nature. You also have a need to eat, a need to use that skill. In your human personality, you may have a strong nurturing skill, but this automatically gives you a strong need to be nurturing whenever you get the chance. As we

shall see, when that need is denied or cannot function, anger and conflict result.

We will now consider how anger comes from the denial of our needs. God put anger in our personality as a way to ensure that we meet our legitimate needs. God cannot miraculously step in and take care of each of them for us, no matter how much God loves us. Besides depending on others to respond to our needs, as we saw in the parable of the talents, God has built into us various tools by which we see to our own needs. The natural response of anger when our needs are not being met provides one of the most effective of those tools. When we cannot use a skill, anger provides us with the energy to see that we get the chance to use our denied natural personality skill.

• **HOW NATURAL PERSONALITY SKILLS CAUSE CONFLICT**

We naturally move from the dynamics of anger to how natural personality skill differences cause conflict. When ministry leaders have different skills, and therefore differing needs, the potential for not meeting each other's needs is huge. Needs that are not met lead to anger, and anger often leads to conflict. This simple formula for conflict represents why so much relationship conflict exists in ministry.

Another element we need to mention is the fact that every person has all of the psychological skills. Comparing a full glass of water to a glass with only a quarter inch of water, we see that both contain water. So also each person has at least a minimum of each skill. The differences in levels of skill make one person strong in some areas, while another person is strong in others. But each strong set of skills represents a different set of strong needs. People therefore come in conflict when they do not meet each other's needs due to different skills.

A very sociable minister may feel irritated, even angered, by a reclusive new minister. The new minister in turn feels angered by the constant attempts of the very sociable one to break through his chosen wall, and so avoids the encounters at all costs. Unique personality skill differences produce unmet needs. Anger and conflict reign.

The one exception to this rule is in the skill of decision making. If there are two ministers who are the same, this causes the conflict of both wanting to be in charge. For example, Joan, a natural leader, may feel her fiefdom in church ministry is threatened by the arrival of a new minister who has similar interests. Joan's need for control is at risk. Her resulting anger leads her to enforce her authority in the area of ministry by looking for faults in the new minister.

The tantrum of a two-year-old child provides us with strong early evidence in human nature of the connection of anger to differences in natural personality skills. Ask any parent to describe the positive personality characteristics of his or her child, and to then carefully notice what precedes the angry tantrum. A very bright and emotionally healthy child cannot yet verbalize his or her needs well at this age, and so important personality needs are not met. Usually, that is the source of the anger. For example, a very independent child may on occasion say, "I do!" But the parent recognizes that just before a tantrum, the child was trying to accomplish something and the parent tried to help out. Suddenly the tantrum comes when the need to be independent is frustrated, and the child cannot remember what to say.

The ministry leader may experience similar anger when his or her natural personality skills, and therefore his or her strong needs, are frustrated.

• **TWELVE SKILLS AND HOW THEY CAUSE CONFLICT**

After talking about natural personality skills and how preventing their functioning causes anger, we now look at how each of these skills causes conflict. The purpose of this section is to review the twelve skills above and to find the ones that are the strongest in yourself or another minister. Here we have simple relationship descriptions of (a) why a person strong in skills feels irritated or angry, and (b) why the other person in the relationship, who is low in the same skills (except in decision making), feels irritated or angry. Each explanation is followed by an example of such conflict types. The twelve conflict descriptions are:

1. Decision making

- (a) The person strong in this skill hates it when others challenge her judgment. She thinks that others ignore her requests and try to take over.
- (b) The person who has this same strong skill is frustrated by the other person's not listening to his judgment. He thinks that she wants her way all the time.

Example: Jane was hired as pastoral administrator a year ago. Her leadership style is to give ministry leaders as much freedom as possible, to support their decisions. But Henry, in charge of youth ministry, constantly gives orders to maintenance people without consulting with Jane who has made clear that it is her responsibility.

2. Sociability

- (a) The person who possesses this skill feels anger when people ignore or reject his friendliness. Loneliness or social depression sets in when socializing is at a minimum.
- (b) A person low in this skill dislikes talkative people and prefers time alone. She also feels anxiety in group situations. And given the opportunity, she prefers serious talk over small talk.

Example: John heads his local Knights of Columbus group. Meeting once a month and also doing group service activities meets most of the men's needs. But one of the Knights, Richard, keeps insisting with John that there is too much random talk going on at the meetings. Richard insists on being the sergeant-at-arms.

3. Organization

- (a) The person who is highly organized gets angry when things are not where they should be. People who are off-schedule irritate him or her, and that irritation is visible when another forgets something, is not prompt or is unkempt.
- (b) The person who does not possess a strong version of this skill becomes angry when the "organizer" gets upset with his or her lack

of organization. In order to show his or her anger or displeasure at the organizer, he or she becomes even more disorganized.

Example: The church youth group has a separate Bible study component on every Wednesday night. Mary likes to plan the topics of all the meetings a year ahead of schedule. Recently, the pastor required her to open up each week's decision to the group as to what Scripture would be discussed the following week.

4. Responsibility

- (a) In this conflict situation, the person strong in this skill gets angry when a fellow minister does not get his or her job done on time. He or she hates chaos.
- (b) The person who is low in this skill hates being reminded he or she is off-schedule. He or she sees living with chaos as a challenge to his or her survival skills.

Example: The marriage prep ministry provides a quarterly all-day seminar for engaged couples new to their program. The team of five couples who run the program divides up the all-day seminar responsibilities. In a final check the day before, the team learns one couple forgot to rent the space or order the food.

5. Logical intelligence

- (a) The person with this skill is irritated by those who make seemingly irrational or snap decisions. Irrationality angers him or her.
- (b) A person with little logical intelligence considers the step-by-step logic for decision making an irritating waste of time. He or she angrily pushes to move on to the next agenda item.

Example: Elementary education at the church in question suffers a great loss of enrollment, because Pastor Albert has suggested that the parents had to attend a family-based program, not just drop off their children. At a staff meeting, George quickly reacts to the pastor's decision by shouting out, "Go back to drop-off!"