



The Amazing Personality¹

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In this day of mass culture, stereotypic behavior, and maintenance of useless habits, there is a value in each person doing his or her own thing when it can be done unto the Lord; and there is a very real sense in which, as we do our own thing for God, we can be in it, happy and approved of God. I find nothing in the Word of God that suggests that we are all to look alike.

Conformed to the image of Christ and transformed to his image, for sure, but maintaining individual personalities and playing out, or acting out, individual characteristics, talents, and attributes. My thing is behavioral science: the study of humans, the study of human behavior and the development of human behavior, that development we call “learning.” I am concerned with the study of human change: societal change. I am a college professor. My medium of sharing is teaching and my vehicle is language, words; but my task is communication. This morning, my objective within that task is to share with you, perhaps to share with you in simplicity, experiences from one man’s quest for a clearer view of the person of Jesus. I rather well identify with the Greeks who checked in with Philip that day and said, “Sir, we should like to see Jesus.”

A true behavioral scientist has found that learning begins with watching. Such a person has developed a professional style of watching. He or she recognizes the importance of careful observation. He values interaction with other people because these interactions with other people lead him to make inferences; and on these inferences he builds hypotheses. These hypotheses become the structure of his understanding. A responsible behavioral scientist tries very hard to suppress her preconceptions, and she is always interested in getting a fresh picture. She is always interested in getting a more clear picture.

Before we get too far into this, I must go back a few years to reflect on something I began to observe in myself. As I became increasingly involved in those things that a college professor does—the mixed roles of teacher, advisor, counselor, and other functions demanded in the academic community, I became concerned about what I was becoming. I became suspicious that there were certain values that I might be compromising; particularly, values with reference to the worth and value of other people and my responses to them. In a sense, the symptoms I observed were, in themselves, rationalizations—and whenever we begin to observe rationalizations in ourselves, we ought to assume that they might be symptoms of something potentially serious.

- I was becoming increasingly preoccupied with matters that clearly were more important than people—*Symptom #1*.
- I was trying to relate myself, conscientiously, to more and more people, but in order to spread myself so thin, I had to justify, to rationalize a much less involved relationship with people—a shallower relationship with people—a less sincere relationship—*Symptom #2*.
- And symptom #3—the one that really caused me to take notice—the development of a stylized response to people, stylized along a rather standard set of responses that I would make to other people.

I speak for myself, but perhaps for some of you this may serve as a kind of personality mirror. I recognized in my own behavior more formality, more stiffness, and certainly more indifference. I particularly became anxious because I noticed that I was dealing with people less in their terms and more in my terms. In fact, for

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“good reason,” I became disinclined to trust anyone’s view of himself. My view of the person was the one I operated on. I was becoming less sensitive to peoples’ views of themselves and their needs.

Perhaps I was sensitized by an encounter recorded in Matthew 8: “After Jesus had come down from the hill, he was followed by a great crowd. Now a leper approached him and bowed low. He said, ‘Sir if you will, you can cleanse me’.” And I wondered, what would I do in a moment like that? Here is where my rationalizations would kick in; where I would become obsessed with the fact that I had more important matters to deal with; that I had larger crowds of people to be concerned about; and that, in the final analysis, this man didn’t even have his basic need defined correctly. And it struck me: “Jesus stretched out his hand and said, ‘Indeed I will, be clean again’.” I wondered, is this characteristic of Jesus Christ? This “failure,” apparently to recognize that this poor leper had a Spiritual need; this “failure,” apparently, to recognize that Jesus Christ was here for much more important business than that? This “failure” to recognize that the man couldn’t even be trusted to define his own problem?

And now, for several years I have enjoyed the Gospels in an altogether new way. I enjoy reading the Gospels to notice how Jesus reacted when people came to him. And, here is the behavioral scientist coming out: is he consistent? Is this a pattern? Is it predictable? Does it tell us anything about his personality? I could read to you verse after verse, demonstrating in a remarkably consistent way, that Jesus Christ dealt with people in his first contact with them in terms of their definition of their problem. He was consistent, whether it was children, young women, older women, young men, older men. Jesus dealt with each person in terms of his own definition of his problem. Many times, he healed first and preached later. Jesus Christ—this Person, this God/Man Person—reveals a beautiful, amazing personality.

We understand personality largely through examining the needs in a person that the personality plays out. We infer the needs of people, needs of which they are aware and needs of which they may be unaware, in terms of the way they behave. If we infer anything at all about the needs of Jesus Christ as a person, we must conclude that his personality was totally structured by a basic need to meet the needs of other people. This is not an altogether unrealistic model for us; it is possible to orient one’s person in terms of a responsiveness to the problems of others. This is not a Utopian model. To live it to the degree of perfection, that apparently Jesus Christ did, would be a goal far beyond us; but as an objective, it is worthy. Jesus revealed in his personality a virtually singular need, the need to precisely and fully meet the needs of others. And I wonder, does this relate to any issues in the church today? I wonder, as a Christian am I stylizing my responses to people? As a Christian, do I posture as if I know more about your needs than you know? As a Christian, when I recognize that a people need repentance, do I disallow their view of themselves and badger them until they accept my view of their basic needs?

In a recent newsletter of MARC (the Missions Advanced Research and Communications Center on the west coast) I came across this paragraph. Ed Dayton writes,

For the past quarter-century, there has been an increasing polarization within mission agencies toward either proclamation or presence. There have been those who have decried as unchristian an emphasis on verbally proclaiming the lostness of man and the salvation available through Jesus Christ to people whose material needs continually force them lower into the mud of poverty and despair. Some even question our right to invade the personality of another individual with such a divisive message. To many in this group, the task of the Church is to be a presence for God in the world and to testify to God’s concern and goodness by acts of compassion and love. At the other pole are those who are burdened by the lostness of men and driven by the command of God to make disciples of all nations. What good, they ask, does it do to fill a man’s stomach if he is separated from God and under judgment?

The issue will continue to rage, I suppose—this polarizing argument between an emphasis on spirituality and an emphasis on social action. But, for this individual Christian, one thing is very clear: Jesus, himself, was interested in meeting all the needs of people; and it is inescapable, from the evidence in the Gospels, that he met needs systematically in the terms and in the sequence, that those who approached him described their needs.

One psychological footnote: It is amazing how contemporary behavioral science provides data that increasingly shows the insight and the integrity of the Word of God. This should come as no great surprise. There is a proposition in psychological therapy that runs like this: *unaware needs cannot be treated until aware needs are reduced or relieved. Unaware needs, needs that a person may not be aware of, cannot be treated until the needs that one is aware of are, at least, reduced.* Is this modern psychology? Yes. It is Scriptural; in the life of Christ it was. The behavior we see in Jesus Christ is just one more evidence that Jesus Christ, not only our Lord, but our Creator, is completely in command of the human affairs that he encountered and that we encounter.

As a Christian, I must accept people in their own terms, not expecting them to change themselves as some pre-condition of my trying to relate to them. As an individual Christian, it is encouraging to me to recognize that my Lord is in the habit of meeting needs; and I feel free to describe my problems as I see them and to know that he starts there to provide the help I need. And I'd like to develop to the point where my most basic personality manifestation is this thing I see in Christ—a need to meet other peoples' needs.

For me, this is what it will take to become Christ-like.