

# Leadership Styles and the Heart of Conflict

Ernie Baker September 16, 2014

2 Comments



**BCC Staff Note:** You're reading the third in a new three-part Biblical Counseling Coalition *Grace & Truth* blog mini-series on *Conflict Resolution and Church Restoration*. In today's post, Ernie Baker writes about leadership styles and getting to the heart of church conflict. In Part 1, Judy Dabler instructed us in [The Discipline of the Lord](#). And in Part 2, Robert Cheong developed the idea of [Casting "A Vision of the Sea" for Church Discipline](#).

## My Story

In my pre-professor days of pastoring, I often noticed that as the weekend approached I would get tenser. In particular, on Sunday mornings my stomach would be tied up in a knot and I rarely ate breakfast as I anticipated the worship service.

I began to explore why this pattern was in my life. In the Lord's perfect timing the root of this pattern became evident as part of my own self-counseling project when I started the doctoral program at Westminster Seminary. The Lord was gracious and opened my eyes to understand how my heart was influencing me to respond to life this way. It became clear that one of the themes of my inner person was people pleasing or fear of man. This was confirmed when I realized that one of the thoughts of my heart ([Hebrews 4:12](#)) was "I wonder what they'll think of my sermon" along with the accompanying worry or fear.

I soon realized though that this same concern led to passivity as a leader. I was not as aggressive as I should be for setting the pace in the church because there were stronger leaders, and I would have to stand up to them or would have to address issues in the flock that made me uncomfortable. By default my leadership style was laissez-faire. Because of this non-proactive style, issues that should have been addressed were left to simmer.

Praise God for His work of sanctification though because I have learned a lot about leadership since those days, and the Lord has done a major work in my life teaching me to be much more concerned about what the Lord thinks than what others think. By the grace of God I have learned much about the truth behind [Proverbs 29:25](#), “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.”

## Another Story

There are many church leaders who are the opposite of me though. They are aggressive and do not seem to care what people think. The culture would say they have an authoritarian or commanding leadership style.

This leader can intimidate people into silence because, sometimes unknowingly, they convey that it is not all right to disagree. Then issues are not properly addressed because the atmosphere of the church is not conducive to dialogue. The ministry “climate” is more about uniformity than unity in the midst of the diversity of the gifts in the body ([Philippians 2:1-5](#); 1 Corinthians 12).

## The Heart

As mentioned above, I realized that my heart desired the approval of others. To put it bluntly, I served and was overly concerned with the opinions of others. Unfortunately, this revealed my value system or as the Lord said in [Matthew 12:33-34](#), “...For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good...”

Do you see what the Lord is comparing there? In 12:33, He says we speak out of our hearts but in 12:34, Christ switches to a parallel word—treasure. In other words, my heart equals my treasures according to the One who knows human nature better than anyone. I was treasuring, valuing, bowing down to, and worshipping the approval of others. This was revealed by my thinking and my emotions and influenced the way I led.

But what could be going on in the heart of the more aggressive leader? What could this person be valuing or serving? Maybe his thought life is something like, “No one is going to push me around.” Or, “I need others to respect me and do things my way.” I would submit for your consideration that those statements could reveal a worship of control or respect. This theme then influences the way the church is led.

## Leadership style

Doesn't this raise questions like, “Isn't leadership style just part of my personality?” Of course it is. But think with me. The secular world speaks of various leadership styles and personality types using terminology like laissez-faire on the one hand and authoritarian or commanding on the other but with no consideration of the biblical teaching on the heart.

I think it is safe to say that we have not thought deeply enough about how the heart influences leadership and the personality. We also have not considered that the biblical corrective is to change at the level of the heart rather than just accept that the personality is locked in place.

## A Warning and Motivation

A leader might find himself or herself saying, “Well I’m just a Type A and Type A’s are aggressive.” This thinking carries an underlying assumption that if you have this type of personality it is just the way you are and you cannot change; your personality is fixed.

Please consider that if this is true you cannot believe in (or your thinking needs to be fine-tuned about) the doctrine of progressive sanctification which tells us that we are growing toward Christlikeness. His leadership style is one of a shepherd ([John 10: 1-18](#); [1 Peter 2:25](#); [5: 1-4](#)) who knew when to be gentle and knew when to be aggressive.

This leads us to a chief motivation for being willing to change in that we too are called to be loving shepherds. Stating it differently, learning to be a shepherd demands that out of love for the flock I put to death my natural heart propensities. As a shepherd I am called to lead, feed, protect, and care for the flock. If a leader does not deal with his own heart tendencies (whether more passive or aggressive because of what is being valued) these primary activities of a shepherd will be out of balance in some way and the church will be more vulnerable to conflict.

The biblical corrective is to both try to understand how the inner person is influencing the way you interact with people and issues and correct it biblically, and also to more completely practice a model of leadership based upon shepherding. To explore this further I would invite you to study a passage that has been tremendously helpful for me. In [1 Thessalonians 2:1-12](#) we see how Paul interacted with people, and we see the characteristics of a Christ-like leader.

## Recommended Resources

- [Motives, Why Do I Do the Things I Do?](#) Edward T. Welch (Resources for Changing Lives, P&R Publishing).
- [The Leadership Opportunity: Living Out the Gospel Where Conflict and Leadership Intersect](#), by Peacemaker Ministries.

## Join the Conversation

How does scriptural thinking interact with the topics of leadership style and personality types?

Can you think of ways that passive leadership makes a church more open to conflict?

What ways can an aggressive leader make a church more open to conflict?

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