Dealing with Conflict

Ronald R. Lee

THERE is probably little doubt about the importance of our subject, dealing with conflict. On the national scene the advocates of violence and revolution seem to be increasing. The news media announce the activities of militants on almost a daily basis. On the other hand, recent mayoral elections indicate that the forces of conservatism are marshalling a full scale counter attack under the banner of "law and order." It appears, then, that we are in a deepening cycle of conflict. Any possible light which can be thrown on the nature and function of conflict is an urgent concern for those who practice ministry.

It is not easy to deal with conflict, whether this is on the national scene, in the church, in smaller social units, or in individual persons. Not only is courage needed to face potentially explosive situations, but also demanded are types of knowledge and skills not easily acquired. For the problem of conflict is a complex one to understand. Its complexity so pervades every aspect of life that it is studied in one form or another in most disciplines. A part of our dilemma arises from the fact that no one discipline holds all the answers to conflict, although sociology, social ethics, and the social sciences in general, are in the forefront. The task before us, however, is to see what possible contribution pastoral psychology can make to our understanding of both the nature of conflict and ways of dealing with it. Here I have four points to make.

I. Dealing with conflict means dealing with aggression.

In any conflict situation it is not difficult for us to recognize the great amount of hostility and aggressiveness which lie just beneath the surface ready to burst forth in naked violence. The riots of Watts, Detroit and other cities are ample testimony to this point. Psychologists and psychiatrists have been saying for years that the aggressive drives were far more important in determining a person's behavior than the sexual drive — with due respect to Sigmund Freud. What had previously been recognized by those who worked with the mentally ill is now obvious for all of society to see. Karl Menninger, in his important book **The Vital Balance**, goes so far as to measure the seriousness of mental disturbance by the degree of control the person has over his aggressive drives. Both normal and disturbed people show aggression, but the disturbed person's aggression breaks out in impulsive and explosive ways. There is always a self destructive element to the disturbed person's behavior. In the healthy person the aggressive drive is harnessed to constructive goals. Menninger's chapter describing the psychotic breakdown is entitled "naked aggression." If what Menninger says about individuals is also true for social processes, this nation is on the verge of a social psychotic breakdown.

One of the most important contributions to our understanding of aggression in this century comes from the work of the ethologist Konrad Lorenz in his study of fish and birds. In his book entitled **On Aggression** he stresses not only

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the fact that aggression is a major drive with which we all must cope but also that aggression has served a positive and vital function in the evolution of the species, including man. Without this aggression man would not have survived his evolutionary struggle. Lorenz appears to be moving at first in the direction of saying that the aggressive drive, once man's greatest asset, has now become one of man's greatest liabilities at this stage in his evolutionary cycle.

Not so, says Lorenz. The aggressive drive still happens to be one of man's greatest assets. Apart from man's need to sometimes use aggression as a means of defense, aggression in sublimated forms is what gives richness and variety to life. Moreover, the most important use for aggression is its conversion into a bonding force—the binding together of individuals in social units. Without the bonding force of converted aggression social grouping would not take place and civilization would be impossible. According to Lorenz it is the ritualized behavior of the animals he has studied which converts the aggression into a bonding force. Thus when conflict erupts, the question we must ask is not so much, why the aggression, but, why the breakdown of the bonding power of society's rituals? One of the important ways of dealing with conflict is to keep meaningful the rituals and ceremonies of society, especially those which are associated with religion.

From what has just been said, it is obvious that as practitioners of ministry we must take seriously our ceremonial functions. We play a major role in the social bonding which takes place in our communities. In a sense, our traditional way of dealing with aggression has been to convert it into a bonding force. Yet while we have become expert at binding aggression, we have generally done this at the expense of using other ways of dealing with aggression. Consequently, as a tradition, the ministry tends to be at a loss in dealing with conflict. For example, one of the functions of clinical training is to equip each trainee to be more comfortable in dealing with open and naked aggression. Without this kind of conditioning it would be an unkindness to send such a trainee on to a mental hospital ward.

In view of this bonding role, which is one of the key characteristics of the parish ministry, we must ask what kind of personality the ministry tends to attract into its ranks. A number of years ago I was fortunate to be able to conduct a study of several hundred students attending Garrett Theological Seminary. Among other tests I gave the students the Crown and Marlow Social Desirability Scale. This scale is actually designed to measure how much approval a person needs in order to function. People with high approval-needs are generally those who find it difficult to handle and express aggression with any degree of openness. The overall results of this test indicated that the seminary student body was slightly, but not significantly higher in its need-for-approval than a sample of graduate students from Northwestern University. However, when the Garrett sample was examined more closely, it was obvious that it consisted of two sub-groups, one of which was quite low on need-for-approval and the other quite high. While I did not follow through on this matter because it was not the main function of the study, it was my impression that the high need for approval students were those who were the most successful in their student charges. The parish ministry to small charges seems to be more comfortably served by people with a high need-for-approval, because their bonding role in these charges is more consonant with their own personality structure and their habituated way of dealing with aggression. Undoubtedly, such men are often the most successful in their work, provided conflict does not arise. Yet once it does they have the greatest difficulty in handling it.

Of course, what contributes to the difficulty of ministers dealing with conflict is a social expectation on the part of many members that the minister not express any hostility on any occasion. This applies to them as members, so it must apply even more to the one who is expected to be a better model of a Christian than they are. I have heard many fine sermons to the effect that just as Jesus showed anger in casting the money changers from the temple, so it is acceptable in certain circumstances to show a little anger. Despite this kind of preaching there exists in our churches a strong underlying feeling that it is unchristian to express any anger whatsoever. The tenacity with which this belief is held indicates quite clearly that it serves as a key item in the defensive structure of many personalities involved. Where the minister actually believes that anger is unchristian it is often because he simply has not resolved some of his own inner problems. This kind of minister finds it difficult to resolve conflict in the church. His technique tends to be to encourage the repression of anything controversial. Even where the minister believes that some expression of anger is sometimes justified and does not seek to repress expressions of difference and controversy, he often has to accept the fact that he operates within a frame of reference which makes it difficult to handle controversy and conflict with any kind of openness.

2. Dealing with conflict means dealing with ambivalence.

Carroll Wise, in his retiring presidential address at the 1969 meeting of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors, indicated that ambivalence was the perfect paradigm of conflict. When ambivalent, the person both loves and hates those people to whom he is attached. This conflict arises out of the earliest or oral stage of development and is illustrated by the depressive and suicidal personality types. Of these people Karl Menninger indicates that they hate themselves only a little more than they love themselves. In spite of their talk about unworthiness, they demand an inordinate amount of attention, sympathy, anxiety, and care. Normally the ambivalent personality is not very noticeable. The ambivalence becomes obvious only when such a person suffers a loss of great significance and commences to grieve. Then the negative side of his feelings towards the person, buried for long, can cause considerable guilt feelings.

Normally, however, the ambivalent person is able to unconsciously hide the negative side of his feelings. But when this happens these negative feelings come out in other ways. Such a person then tends to have his inner conflict projected into the outer world. Such externalization makes him feel more comfortable. The world is split into the good and the bad. The thing that must be stressed is that such ambivalent people are inept at resolving conflict because deep inside they need to see conflict taking place in society. Then the world is consonant with their own personality structure and they feel more comfortable. And if there are not any worthwhile conflicts taking place when they arrive in a new community, they seem to have an unconscious knack of getting one generated.

There is also a strong relationship between ambivalence and prejudice. Gordon Allport, in his key work, **The Nature of Prejudice,** indicates this and supports the relationship with some convincing evidence. In a study of anti-semitic women students he found that these girls without exception declared that they liked their parents. Yet when their projective tests were examined it was discovered that they in fact saw their parents as being mean and cruel. In contrast, a group of women students who were tolerant towards Jews, were more openly critical of their parents, yet at the same time showed less animosity towards their parents on their projective

tests. Thus, for different reasons than the need-for-approval people, ambivalent, prejudiced people are unable to effectively resolve conflict. They, in fact, foster it out of their own personality needs.

3. Dealing with conflict means dealing with polarization.

Polarization is a feature of social conflict, for if conflict develops in a group, polarization will be present to some degree. By polarization I mean that two clear distinct sub-groups are formed. These sub-groups are strongly opposed to each other. The essential part of polarization, nevertheless, is that there are clear boundaries between each of the sub-groups. This is not as easy to achieve as might first appear. For each large group of people consists of a whole host of overlapping sub-groups depending on such factors as age, sex, education, occupations, religion and interests, to name just a few. Kenneth Boulding, the University of Colorado economist, is helpful when he indicates that it takes an important issue, deep feelings, and a strong sense of conflict for people to discard all other potential loyalties and groupings for this one issue. Yet polarization occurs frequently in society and has been a common phenomenon of history. As a result of Martin Luther's stand at Worms the German princes became sharply polarized and eventually engaged in the religious wars of the Sixteenth Century. Our nation, for example, was polarized over the issue of whether General MacArthur should have been allowed to implement his extensive military plans to invade North Korea. But perhaps the most relevant example of polarization can be seen in the present campus disorders where a radical student group opposes the "establishment" as represented by college administrators, state and federal officials.

The pastoral psychologist tends to be most familiar with polarization through family counseling. Here the family conflict reveals itself in the kind of sub-grouping which takes place. In one family of five the conflict was represented by a father supported by two daughters on one side, while on the other, the mother was supported by her youngest child, a son. In another family of four, the sub-grouping and hence conflict were along sexual lines with the son supporting the father and the mother supported by the daughter. In yet another family parents were aligned against the children. If sub-grouping, no matter what kind, is not very clear-cut, then there are strong chances that the conflict in the family is not yet very severe. For conflict and polarization go hand in hand. The clearer the group boundaries, the stronger the polarization, hence the stronger the conflict. The fuzzier the group boundaries, the less the polarization, and the weaker the conflict. In dealing with group conflict, then, any way of breaking down the group boundaries will tend to lessen the conflict.

4. Dealing with conflict means dealing with stereotyping.

Mrs. Jones is a pleasant, attractively dressed person in her mid-forties. She came for counseling because of an unhappy marriage. Her husband, a few years older, is a rather successful accountant with considerable inherited wealth. They have a teenage son who attends church each Sunday with his mother. Mr. Jones is an atheist. Years before he was hospitalized as a paranoid schizophrenic—so the doctors said—but soon successfully escaped the hospital and has never been near a doctor or hospital since. In her earlier years Mrs. Jones developed tuberculosis but had recovered from this disease. She is now slightly hypochondriacal and tends to run to the doctor far too frequently. When the pressures at home are too much she has her doctor hospitalize her for a few days of rest, an expense which infuriates the husband. On the other hand, Mrs. Jones is a passive, dependent type of personality, warm in her rela-

tionships, and very creative in an artistic way. Mr. Jones is a rather cold insensitive person, whose major asset is his ability to make money.

In dealing with this kind of marital conflict the task is to diagnose the stereotyping which is taking place. Mr. Jones, it was eventually learned, saw himself as the responsible person of the marriage, while he thought his wife was the irresponsible one. She was an utter spendthrift, according to him. So he kept rigid control over his wife's spending. She was never given any monthly cheque to cover household expenses. Each item Mrs. Jones needed, whether for herself or the household, she had to specifically ask for. Thus each day commenced with a ritualized haggle over what money she needed for that day. Mrs. Jones, on the other hand, saw her husband as an uncouth tyrant—her father had been one—while she saw herself as a sweet, refined, and interesting person. Both Mr. and Mrs. Jones had cast the other partner in the role of a bad person and themselves in the role of the good one. What they saw as being bad or good depended on the values they had acquired in their upbringing.

The major thing to be learned from this case is the inaccurate perceptions which Mr. and Mrs. Jones had of each other. They were relating in fixed images which had little to do with each other's actual behavior, nor the behavior they were capable of achieving. In a sense they both related to the fantasies they held of each other and not to each other as real persons. The conflict was not so much a conflict between two persons, but a conflict of stereotypes. As long as the stereotypes remained so could the conflict. Modify the stereotypes and the conflict would diminish. So the counselor commenced to work at showing how inaccurate these stereotypes were. Slowly, over a pericd of time, he was able to indicate to Mrs. Jones that a person with her incessant concern for her own health was not always as interesting as she saw herself to be. At the same time he focused on the fact that Mr. Jones in certain areas of her life gave Mrs. Jones a considerable amount of freedom. In fact she was more fortunate than most. It was also possible to indicate to Mr. Jones that if Mrs. Jones was able to run successfully a small antique business, she was not entirely irresponsible. Nor was he as responsible as he thought himself. Would he not sometimes throw all caution to the wind and spend lavishly on some unnecessary item? The work task in this marriage counseling consisted of breaking down the stereotypes. It took time and patience, rejection and hostility from the couple, but eventually the stereotypes were modified. As this happened the conflict abated and the marriage improved.

The foregoing case illustrates what is meant by stereotyping. I want to go so far as to say that conflict is never present without stereotyping in one form or another. This applies just as much to the national scene as to marriage. If stereotyping is not taking place, but people are making a heated or even angry display of differences, then this is controversy and not conflict. Of course, controversy is a potential form of conflict. If it continues it can develop into conflict, but in the developing, stereotyping will take place. Of course, if the conflict is developing between more than two people, polarization as well as stereotyping will also occur. The most important feature of stereotyping is that it forces or enables one partner or group to overlook significant aspects of the other partner's or group's behavior. Once the die has been cast, the stereotype filters and distorts all further behavior. In industry, for example, management will often idealize the workers, while workers will cast paranoid-like suspicions on the management. Once these stereotypes are adopted, real progress in industrial relations becomes difficult because neither

side is relating to the other in a realistic manner.

In the four points which have been made about conflict, no claim to a complete and comprehensive understanding of the subject has been made. Yet in stating that dealing with conflict means dealing with aggression, ambivalence, polarization and stereotyping, I claim that four of the essential dimensions of conflict have been touched on. To ignore them is to be less effective in coping with what seems to be the major problem confronting the nation at this time. And even in dealing with these points I realize that much more extrapolating could have been done. For example, the formation of large black ghettcs in the cities has all the marks of polarization and therefore a clear indication of a deep conflict which has only now really surfaced. Any attempt to break up the ghetto patterns of our large cities has been the right strategy, even though in most cases the tactics used were not effective. If I can be indulged a digression for a moment, I can remember from my study of metallurgy many years ago, that the weakness of cast iron lies in the fact that large pieces of graphite are present. Yet with heat treatment these large areas of graphite break up into hundreds of small globules evenly distributed throughout the iron, hence making heat-treated cast iron infinitely stronger. Perhaps in our efforts at integration in the past we have thought in too idealistic terms. Perhaps we should have encouraged and even fostered hundreds of smaller black communities throughout our cities as a more realistic step in the direction of full integration. Of course, this tactic would probably be as ineffective as the rest. Yet of this much I am sure: That having worked out the therapeutic strategies we must continue to test out our tactics, just like any therapist. Most therapists experience many tactical failures. We must continue, however, until we find effective ways of reducing the conflict which threatens to break this country apart at the seams.

Permit me, in closing, to speak not as a pastoral psychologist, but as one who comes from a different culture yet is neither treated as, nor thinks of himself as a foreigner. It is intended as a word of encouragement. For as disappointing, as frustrating and messy as things seem to be in this country right now, the United States has to be admired. For when I think of the policies of the British oriented countries towards the black races, of England towards the West Indians, of the South African policy of apartheid, of Australia's white Australian policy, I can't help but feel that in what is now taking place in the United States lies the hope for successful world relations in the future. For if 200 million people cannot learn to live together with racial harmony and justice, what hope is there for the 3 billion people of the world as modern transportation shrinks the nations of the world closer together? You may not think you have made much progress in this country, but believe me, when compared with elsewhere, the progress has been significant. Even so, the growing conflict has to be faced and dealt with. If the conflict can be successfully handled and the divergent forces integrated into the life of the nation, the country will be all the stronger, and succeeding generations will look to the seventies as one of the significant turning points in history.