

Spiritual Temperaments

Don Straub, Principal, Okanagan Adventist Academy, Kelowna, BC

Throughout scripture, we see a God who is passionate about our experiencing Him personally.

Many of us, who lived within Adventism through the 70's and 80's as adults, have witnessed the evolution of the understanding of Christianity from a head thing to a heart thing; from a religion to a relationship. Morris Vendon and more recently his son Lee Vendon have championed this theme. The students we presently teach have more or less grown up in this environment and perhaps do not appreciate the freshness of this truth. Having a "relationship with Christ" is almost a cliché and therefore has lost some of its power. When Jesus stated in John 17:3 that eternal life was essentially "knowing God," He was speaking in very intimate terms as when scripture says, "Adam knew his wife and she conceived." Throughout scripture, we see a God who is passionate about our experiencing Him personally.



I have pondered this theme in a personal way: "How can I have a relationship with God?" and as a teacher: "How can I teach my students to have a relationship with God?" In fact, I have concluded that if I have done nothing else as a teacher other than help my students find a personal, experiential relationship with God, I would feel successful in my profession. If, on the other hand, I failed to teach them how to have a relationship with God, then I would have essentially failed as a teacher.

It is one thing to teach students about the importance of a relationship with God but it is another thing to teach them how. I used to think that the how part was very simple: read the Bible, pray, and share with others about God. I have come to understand, however, that it's not that simple. Some people, for example, find that they fall asleep when reading or praying and have consequently given up on the relationship and either dropped out of the church altogether or settled for religion.

In recent years I have discovered that just as there are personality temperaments, there are also spiritual temperaments. Why not? God has created us as individuals and just as our personalities affect our relationships with one another, they would also affect our relationship with God. In his book, *Sacred Pathways* (First Zonderman edition, 2000), Gary Thomas describes nine spiritual temperaments. Like personality temperaments, most people are a combination of several of these temperaments and no two people are alike.

Each spiritual temperament has its strengths and temptations (weaknesses) but if one is aware of all this, then it is possible to find a meaningful personal relationship with God in a variety of ways. No Christian can eliminate scripture, prayer, or sharing with others from their Christian walk, but there are so many creative ways to participate in these that make them meaningful to people of different spiritual temperaments.

Naturalists love God in the out of doors. They see God most clearly through nature. Sensates love God using their senses. They worship more meaningfully when they

see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Many of the old testament ceremonies involved all the senses. Traditionalists love God through ritual and symbol. There is no one set of rituals, and symbols change through time and culture, but traditionalists often live very routine, disciplined lives which brings them into a meaningful relationship with God. Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity. These people prefer to be alone in prayer and meditation. They care little for the “trappings” of religion, programs, etc. They find God in an internal existence even within a group of people. Caregivers love God by loving people. When they serve another person, they see the face of Jesus. While caring for others wears some down, this activity energizes a caregiver. Activists love God through confrontation. These people serve a God of justice. The church is a place to recharge so they can go back into the world and fight for social reform and change. Contemplatives love God through adoration. They refer to God as a lover. They love the biblical metaphors of the bridegroom and the bride. They don't focus on obedience but on just loving God with the purest love. Intellectuals love God with the mind. You will find these people with not only their Bibles but commentaries and concordances open as well. Faith to intellectuals is something to be understood as much as experienced. Enthusiasts love God with mystery and celebration. Joyful celebrations with singing, shouting, and even “dancing” bring them close to God. They don't just want to know the concepts and theories, they want to experience God's power and the miraculous.

Through studying these temperaments, I have gained an acceptance of other Christians and other styles of worship which I do not understand. I may not understand it or it may not bring me into a closer relationship with God, but it may be positive and faith-inspiring for another person.

If you wish to learn about the details of HOW to have a relationship with God and if you wish to teach your students the nuts and bolts of how to have a relationship with God, then Gary Thomas's book and others like it, such as *Celebrating Discipline* by Richard Foster, are a must read.

(Don Straub is the principal of Okanagan Adventist Academy and the Pastor of Son Valley Fellowship, a “church for people who don't like church” located in Kelowna, British Columbia.)