# ERIKSON'S STAGES OF PERSONALTIY DEVELOPMENT:

# AN ANALYSIS FROM AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

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## Introduction

Erik Erikson's theory of personality development surfaces in almost every introductory psychology course, so for this reason I have chosen to analyze and evaluate his eight stages of personality development in the light of my understanding of the Bible and the Spirit of prophecy. If this study will help me integrate faith and learning in my teaching, stimulate my interest to continue to evaluate other psychological theories or other concepts, arouse the interest of my colleagues to do the same, then I shall have accomplished my purpose for writing this paper.

## Erikson's Stages of Personality Development

Erikson, in his book, Childhood and Society, presents eight stages of personality development. These stem from three interrelating processes: biological development, psychological development, and social organization. In his view everyone goes through eight crises or conflicts in the process of development. The adjustments a person makes as he enters each stage can be altered or reversed later in life. For example, a child who has been denied affection can experience a normal adulthood if he is given special attention at later stages of development. Adjustments, however, play an important role. How a person adjusts at each stage affects the way he will handle the next crisis. Erikson explains that while each conflict or crisis is critical at only one stage, it is encountered throughout life. For example, trust needs are especially important to infants, but throughout life people must continually test the degree of trust they can expect in each new relationship. The

stages as presented are extremes, for no one will truly become entirely trusting or mistrustful. Instead people will develop varying degrees of trust or mistrust throughout life.

Religion to Erikson is an ultimate drive or vision, a conversion from the ordinary world to the sacred world. It finds its various forms of expression through creeds, myths, rituals, and codes. It has its origin in the concrete experiences of an individual. He does not define religion in terms of a belief in God. There are a number of world religions which do not maintain a belief in a personal God. But a person has basic attitudes on human life and the world such as attitudes of reverence, prayerfulness, adoration, oneness, courage, wonder, and these may be connected with a belief in God or may exist outside the belief of God (Ibid.). Smart says this concept seems to deny the complex phenomena of religion—the mythological, the doctrinal, the ethical, the social, and the experiential (The Religious Experience for Mankind, pp. 6-12). It is quite difficult to reconcile the attitudes, such as reverence, adoration, and wonder, outside the realms of an understanding of God or gods.

Erikson's biological development process uses Freud's oral stage, where the sucking and eating instincts develop; the anal stage, when the person develops the control of excretory functions; the genital stage which witnesses the conflict between parent and child called Oedipus complex; and the latency stage when inner development happens. From these stages Erikson brings out his interpretations.

Stage 1: Basic trust vs. basic mistrust. The baby's first demonstration of social trust, according to Erikson, is the ease of his feeding, the depth of his sleep, the relaxation of his bowels. From the maternal caregiving techniques provided him he learns that the environment is trustworthy. "The infant's first social achievement is his willingness to let the mother out of sight without undue anxiety or rage, because she has become an inner

certainty as well as an outer predictability" (Ibid.).

The basic psychological attitude to be learned by the infant at this stage is that he can trust the world in the form of his mother, that she will come back and feed him, feed him with the right kind of food in the right quantity at the right time, and that when he is uncomfortable, she will come and make him comfortable. To experience otherwise, as in the case of an abandoned child, he will learn basic mistrust (Childhood and Society, p. 248).

Erikson further explains that an infant can be said to be trusting where he would go too far to say that he has confidence. This general state of trust implies that not only has he learned to rely on the sameness and continuity of the outer providers, but also that he may trust himself and the capacity of his own organs to cope with urges; and that he is able to consider himself trustworthy enough so that his providers will not need to be on guard lest they be bitten (Ibid.).

According to Erikson the child's personality begins on the day he is born. But the Bible and the Spirit of prophecy point to the importance of prenatal influence. Manoah and his wife were instructed twice as to what to do from the time Samson was conceived (Judges 13:3-14). Ellen White says, "The thoughts and feelings of the mother will have a powerful influence upon the legacy she gives her child. If she allows her mind to dwell upon her own feelings, if she indulges in selfishness, if she is peevish and exacting, the disposition of her child will testify to the fact. Thus many have received as a birthright almost unconquerable tendencies to evil" (Temperance, p. 171).

To Erikson who is a naturalist, man as an animal has an inherent capability of adjusting to his environment to survive. The Bible views man from a different perspective. He was created upright, but through disobedience the thought of his heart was evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

Erikson indicates that the beginning of religious faith is the child's

need to feel he can trust those around him, especially his parents. He sees religion as the institution which safeguards the basic trust, for trust borne of care is the foundation of religious faith. Religion provides the opportunity to express childlike trust in life and in the provider. This stage has a tremendous impact on parents in dealing with the young minds. Ellen White says that parents should encourage in their children a disposition to be open and frank with them, to come to them with their difficulties and, when they are perplexed as to what course is right, to lay the matter just as they view it before their parents, and ask their advice (Messages to Young People, p. 335).

Stage 2: Autonomy vs. shame and doubt. The crisis in the second stage is autonomy vs. shame and doubt, depicting the struggle of the two- and three-year old. They discover their own bodies and learn how to control them. They try feeding, dressing, toileting, and many new ways of moving about. If they succeed in doing things for themselves, they develop self-confidence. If their efforts to be autonomous are thwarted by criticism or punishment, they learn to feel shame and self-doubt. Craig states that all children need to feel competent and successful. If these needs are repeatedly blocked, the personality development is often affected. They may give up and become passive. When children learn to feel anxious about their needs to be independent, they often learn to deny, minimize, or disguise their needs (Human Development, p. 276). Erikson warns that external control at this stage must be both firm and reassuring. The child who is encouraged to stand on his own feet must be protected against meaningless and arbitrary experience of shame and early doubt (Childhood and Society, p. 252). So he concludes that this stage becomes decisive for the ratio of love and hate, cooperation and willfulness, freedom of self-expression and its suppression. A sense of goodwill and pride result from a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem, while a lasting propensity for doubt and shame is a result of a sense of loss of self-control and of

foreign overcontrol (Ibid.).

Ellen White talks along the same vein. "The work of 'breaking the will' is contrary to the principles of Christ. The will of the child must be directed and guided. Save all the strength of the will, for the human being needs it all; but give it proper direction. Treat it wisely and tenderly as a sacred treasure. Do not hammer it in pieces; but by precept and true example, fashion and mold it until the child comes to years of responsibility" (Counsels to Teachers, p. 116). To break the will of the pupil because he is unruly is not Christ's method. She suggests that through heavenly wisdom, through meekness and lowliness of heart, the teacher may direct the will and lead in the way of obedience (Counsels on Sabbath School Work, pp. 174-175). Parents should allow the child to develop self-control. Again, Ellen White points out that the object of discipline is the training of the child for self-government; that he should be taught self-reliance and self-control. As soon as he is capable of understanding, his reason should be enlisted on the side of obedience (Education, p. 287).

Stage 3: Initiative vs. guilt. Erikson describes a child, age four to six, as one who suddenly seems to grow both in his person and in his body. He appears more confident, more loving, relaxed, and brighter in his judgment. He seems to possess a surplus of energy which makes him forget his failures quickly and to approach what appears to be desirable even if it seems uncertain and even dangerous. This, to Erikson, is exhibition of initiative. He advises parents to respond positively to the self-initiated activities of the children. If they are given freedom, the sense of initiative is reinforced. Questions they ask must be answered. Parents should not inhibit the children's fantasies and play activities. If the efforts of the child is curtailed, he will feel guilty over his self-initiated activities. He further states that the child is more ready to learn quickly and avidly then at any other time. He is more ready

to share obligation and performance, to do things cooperatively with other children and learn from his teachers. He remains identified with the parent of the same sex but looks for opportunities for work identification. He forms adult ideals, especially those who are recognized by their uniform and functions (Childhood and Society, p. 255).

The counsel for parents is for them to encourage children to bear their share of the burdens of the home, cultivate habits of industry as age and strength will permit. Children are to be given responsibilities, not only to keep them busy but to interest them (Fundamentals of Christian Education, p. 65).

Stage 4: Industry vs. inferiority. The school child, ages six to eleven, is set for this stage—industry vs. inferiority. Erikson says the child is now ready to learn skills and perform tasks. He is taught how to handle the utensils and tools. The danger for the child at this stage lies in a sense of inadequacy and inferiority. If he is overwhelmed by the multiplicity of the skills he has to learn and loses status before his peers, he may be discouraged and retreat to a less tool- and skill-conscious environment. Beyond this, he continues, is another more fundamental danger—man's restriction of himself and constriction of his horizons to include only his work. "If he accepts work as his only obligation, and 'what works' as his only criterion of worthwhileness, he may become the conformist and thoughtless slave of his technology and of those in a position to exploit him" (Op. cit., p. 261).

A vicious circle of low mental capacity, immaturity, low self-esteem and loss of status with peers, coupled with the multiplicity of skills to be learned can be the reason why the child is overwhelmed. On this regard, Ellen White counsels that teachers must consider that they are working with children, not men and women. Children have much to learn, and it is much more difficult to learn for some, like the dull scholar, than others. To be treated with

exactitude and severity will create confusion and insubordination (Op. cit., pp. 269-270).

Stage 5: Identity vs. role confusion. The child has now established a good initial relationship to the world of work and tools. Puberty has arrived and childhood proper comes to an end. This is the beginning of youth. According to Erikson the psychological development of the individual ego commences at this stage, between twelve and eighteen. He calls this the stage of conflict between identity and role confusion (Op. cit., p. 263). There are three elements in the identity crisis. First of these is the need for devotion to some ideology or some world view. He needs a cause to which to dedicate himself. The second is the need to repudiate part of his existence such as his parents, religion or friends. It appears that for a young person to form his own identity, he needs to reject the identity he acquired from his parents. The third is the need for moratorium. He needs some time to sort out his personal attitudes and values in terms of those around him.

The identity crisis often takes the form of an authority crisis. He begins to doubt the value of authorities--his parents', the religious leaders'. Sometimes he takes on a negative identity by taking on those values authorities have warned him about. He chooses to accept the nothingness of the world rather than a faith that appears to him nothing but pious words (Ibid., p. 265).

If he can discern his self-image from a confusion of roles as son, friend, student, gas station attendant, and sexual being, he will emerge with a fairly solid feeling of an integrated identity. His failure to fit the pieces together results in a fragmented personality and he becomes a victim of role confusion.

It is very easy to blame society or the environment as the cause of many of the youth's identity problems. However, Jesus, the world's greatest Example

of a perfect personality, did not have any societal or environmental advantage. He grew up in Nazareth, the inhabitants of which were proverbial for their wickedness. For nearly thirty years He lived among these wicked inhabitants. "This fact," Ellen White writes, "is a rebuke to those who think themselves dependent upon place, fortune, or prosperity, in order to live a blameless life. Temptation, poverty, adversity, is the very discipline needed to develop purity and firmness" (Desire of Ages, pp. 71, 72).

Stage 6: Intimacy vs. isolation. Young adulthood covers the period of courtship and early family life. The adjustment to be made at this stage involves the dimensions of intimacy and isolation. The intimacy that Erikson talks about concerns more than sexual intimacy, although the question of sexuality and human friendship becomes strong at this stage, too. But intimacy includes the ability to share one's self with another person of either sex without fear of losing one's own identity.

The other side of intimacy is isolation, the inability to enter into close relationships with others for fear of losing ego or identity. The danger of this stage, says Erikson, is that intimate, competitive, and combative relationships are experienced with and against the same people (Op. cit., p. 264).

In the struggle to achieve intimacy, a religious significance can be seen. For a religiously oriented person, sexual love has a sacred character, for it is one of the deepest human experiences. Marriage is one of the institutions ordained by God in Eden. Intimacy in this case demands both love and fidelity. These virtues demand that a person sustain his loyalties in spite of difficulties and frustrations. "It is only in Christ that a marriage alliance can be safely formed. Human love should draw its closest bonds from divine love. Only where Christ reigns can there be deep, true, unselfish affection" (Ministry of Healing, p. 358). Ellen White counsels: "Encourage the expression of love toward God and toward one another. The reason why there are so

many hardhearted men and women in the world is that true affection has been regarded as weakness and has been discouraged and repressed" (Ibid., p. 360).

Stage 7: Generativity vs. stagnation. Generativity, to Erikson, is everything that is generated from generation to generation--children, products, ideas, and works of art (Dialogue with Erikson, p. 51). In cases where a person cannot have children, he can fulfill his generativity by working with other people's children or helping to create a better world for them. The important thing is to recognize that this is a stage of the growth of the healthy personality. Where such enrichment fails, regression from generativity to an obsessive need for false intimacy takes place, resulting in stagnation and interpersonal impoverishment. "Individuals who do not develop generativity," says Erikson, "often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own one and only child" (Identity and the Life Cycle, p. 103). He also states that this problem of generativity vs. stagnation or self-absorption can be resolved through loving care (Ibid.).

The second great commandment is to love one's neighbor as he loves himself. The life of Jesus is an inspiration for many individuals to give their lives to the care of others. There is room for improvement among the churches to meet the needs of people who are facing this middle age crisis. Opportunities must be available for adult members to become involved in works of caring for others. The Lord desires that all shall constantly be growing in holiness, in happiness, in usefulness. All have capabilities which must be considered as the Lord's gifts and these must be rightly employed. Ellen White says, "He desires them to enjoy all that is useful and precious in this life, to be good and to do good, laying up a heavenly treasure for the future life" (Ministry of Healing, p. 398).

Stage 8: Ego integrity vs. despair. To Erikson "only he who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments of being, by necessity, the originator of others and the generator of ideas--only he may gradually grow the fruit of the seven stages." This he calls integrity. Some attributes of this state of mind, according to him, are acceptance of one's own and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, allowed no substitutions; a new and different love of one's parents, no desire or wish that they were different from what they are; accepting responsibilities for his own life; and a sense of affinity with men and women of the past who have created orders and objects and sayings that conveyed human dignity and love.

He adds, "Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human strivings, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and economic threats. For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands and falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes" (Op. cit., p. 104).

This is a position a humanist would take. Erikson seems to be saying that man is the ultimate designer of his own destiny. But is he? God is the Great Designer. Man did not come into being by mere coincidence. He was created by God to be a participant in labors of love, diffusing blessing to his fellow men. Ellen White counsels: "Let the youth be led to understand the object of their creation, to honor God and bless their fellow men; let them see the tender love which the Father in heaven has manifested toward them, and the high destiny for which the discipline of this life is to prepare them, the dignity

and honor to which they are called, even to become the sons of God" (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 601).

God does not condemn ambition. Again, Ellen White says: "God does not bid the youth to be less aspiring. The elements of character that make a man successful and honored among men--the irrepressible desire for some greater good, the indomitable will, the strenuous exertion, the untiring perseverance--are not to be crushed out. By the grace of God they are to be directed to objects as much higher than mere selfish and temporal interests as the heavens are higher than the earth. . . . Even in this life we may catch glimpses of His presence and may taste the joy of communion with Heaven, but the fullness of its joy and blessing will be reached in the hereafter. Eternity alone can reveal the glorious destiny to which man, restored to God's image, may attain" (Ibid., p. 602).

Erikson states that the lack or loss of this ego integrity is signified by despair and an often unconscious fear of death. He expresses the feeling that the time is too short to start another life and to find an alternate route to integrity. One's despair often hides behind a show of disgust with particular people and institution, but in reality is disgusted with himself (Identity and the Life Cycle, pp. 104-104).

How different is the view of life after death to a Christian. He sees love as an answer to the mystery of death. "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52). "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 18).

Specific Concerns About Erikson's Theory

Erik Erikson's insights on man, the world, and God are challenging to a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. The role of God, sin, the Holy Spirit, prenatal influence, and revelation have been left out in his discussion of personality development perhaps due to his religious orientation. His interpretations of the eight stages pose some problems for me:

First, as a Bible-believing Christian I know that coincidence or chance was not the reason for my being. I was created in God's image but because of sin I have inherited bent tendencies to evil. However, through Christ and the Holy Spirit working in me, I can be changed in character and body, and I have a hope after death.

Second, Erikson implies the predictability of behavior. To him the environment alone shapes the person's personality, although in later life it may be reversed or altered. The Bible says that Jesus "increased in wisdom and stature," and His personality was "in favor with God and man" unaffected by the environment (Luke 2:52; Supra, pp. 7, 8).

Third, the placement of approximate age levels to the type of development denies the concept of the diversity of behavior manifestation. The child's personality development may be delayed or advanced for some reasons.

Fourth, the simplicity of the explanations to life's conflicts or crises bothers me. Personality development is a complex process. A personality type is due not only to the presence or absence of certain kinds of environment. There are elements that are unknown such as the inherited tendencies that Ellen White refers to.

Although Erikson's definition of religion is somewhat confusing, his insights are significant and valuable for a Christian teacher. He sees the significance of religion in the way a person faces life's crises, such as the connection he places on religion with basic trust. It is true that we all

look to religion for strength, hope, and comfort. But sometimes we as teachers are so enslaved by our course outlines or lesson plans that we are unable to hear our students express their concerns which may have religious significance. Through query and dialogue we might see the deeper meaning of our students' questions, and if we take time to discuss their concerns we might be of help to them and possibly to their parents.

Religious education needs a strong developmental psychology base for it to be relevant and valuable. "True education means more than the pursual of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world, and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come" (Education, p. 13).

## Conclusion

Erikson's theory of personality development has some merit but must be studied in the light of what the Bible teaches on the nature of man, the effect of sin, and God's saving grace extended to man to restore him again to the image in which he was created. For man cannot of himself develop a personality that is of any worth except through Christ's redeeming him from the depths of sin and degradation.

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