



# Family Systems Theory, Theology and Thought

To many pastors and seminary professors, it will seem as if family systems theory with its non-Biblical vocabulary, its therapeutic and clinical focus, its medical and sociological schema of metaphors, and its understanding of “natural systems theory” has entered the church sanctuary and elders committee discussions without sufficient examination or critique. It is now common to hear of boundary analysis (as in, “you are overstepping your boundaries”) or consultants examining a worn-out pastor as being “undifferentiated.” “Genograms” are found in seminary textbooks and on the white boards of pastoral counsellors working out the divorcing of a church eldership couple. Almost every pastor’s family has some understanding of “emotional triangles” and is probably conscious of not inflicting their “family of origin” issues onto the next generation. Most of us would like to know if “sibling position” is more valid than horoscopes, and pastors might wonder if their lack of success in building the equivalent of a Fortune 500 church (“you are fortunate to have 500 in your church”) is because they are middle children or the “identified problem” in a conflictual family.

How does the Christian begin to understand family systems theory as it relates to his or her faith? Is the church and its leadership required to accept the helpful teachings of family systems theory holus-bolus without the discernment of theological reflection? Does the conflicted church leader find a new nostrum in differentiation and triangles? Is “undifferentiated ego mass” what theologians have understood for centuries as the prevailing nature of sin? These are relevant questions to our enquiry and call for an examined response.

To evangelical Christians, biblical revelation provides the necessary and sufficient authoritative lens through which we are permitted to view the Christian’s life in the body of Christ, the family of God. Family systems theory provides a corresponding and helpful family-based psychological mechanism for conceptualizing the dynamics of congregational life, though clearly this is not the Christian’s Scripture. The biblical writers were not concerned with proving a modern day theory that had yet to be conceptualized. Not surprisingly, neither are family systems theorists concerned about proving the validity of biblical revelation. These are separate but tandem disciplines worthy of independent study but not careless melding. However,

A believer who strives to stand upon a distinctive commitment to the truths of the living Christian faith and build an understanding of persons that is true, broad and more complete can validly engage in a constructive dialog with the psychotherapy theories. The bible, although containing God-inspired revelation that is infallible and authoritative, is nevertheless limited in scope (i.e., Scripture doesn’t cover everything). Thus it is not unfaithful to search out how to reasonably expand our understanding beyond what God chose to reveal in the Bible. (Jones and Butman 1991, 21)

While the Scriptures are primarily concerned with a just understanding of God and only secondarily the response of pilgrim followers, family systems theory focuses on people, how they affiliate in family groupings and hardly at all on their devotion.

This, I think, is important to say; it is too easy to confuse the appreciation of a helpful theory (though tandem to the primary) with viewing it as a panacea of life’s ills. Thankfully, a theological consideration of family systems theory has been initiated with the writings of Edwin Friedman, Paul Stevens, Ron Richardson, Peter Steinke, and others (as previously noted). I say “initiated” because the

writers do not concern themselves with many of the central biblical themes that most Christians consider of vital importance: biblical sin and relational anxiety are not cross-theory equivalents; repentance and redemption are not adequately understood as self-differentiation; wholeness is not salvation, at least as Christians conceive of salvation as trusting in the work of Jesus Christ. At the same time, these family systems theory writers have helped our understanding of church and biblical conflict through the systems idea of emotional triangles. We are served with an appreciation of the transmission of generational sin through an understanding of extended family field. And personally, writers of family systems theory have helped me by their empathic understanding of what it is to be a pastor and Christian leader continually in the process of knowing and loving God.

In addition to these texts, several authors have directed critical reviews to particular aspects of systems theory and Bowen's family systems theory. Stanton Jones and Richard Butman (Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal) have devoted a chapter of their textbook to a "collectivist view of persons" they see in systems theory. They argue for "a more balanced perspective on personhood (that) would stress dimensions of community, family, and individuality as bases for our identity, but anchor our understanding of them in the context of a personal relationship with a Creator-God" (Jones and Butman 1991, 362). Anderson and Guernsey (1985) in their social theology of the family entitled On Being Family provide an evangelical understanding of systems thinking through the various developmental stages of the nuclear family. Ron Richardson in "'Differentiation of Self' as a Therapeutic Goal for the Systemic Pastoral Counselor" (Richardson 1987) contends for several biblical parallels to Bowen's systemic concepts and his ideas about differentiation. This is an illuminating reading for the church leader who appreciates family systems theory but wishes to understand something of the nature of "the one and the many" (Richardson 1987, 33). Hanisch and Nuechterlein (1990) examine the Gospel of Matthew from a family systems theory perspective. The authors contend that the writer of the gospel narrative focuses on the themes of "connectedness and differentiation in his portrayal of Jesus and ... the disciples, who struggle with the challenge to grow toward connectedness and differentiation and also resist that challenge" (Hanisch and Nuechterlein 1990, 212). William Watson in "Soul and System: The Integrative Possibilities of Family Therapy" (1997) reviews the interface of family systems theory and therapy with religious, spiritual, or faith perspectives, with particular emphasis on Christian theology and Scripture. In probably the most affirming article on the relationship of family systems theory and Christian theology, Craig L. Nessian in "Surviving Congregation Leadership: A Theology of Family Systems" (2000) argues that "family systems theory has exerted a major and salutary influence on congregational ministry" (Nessian 2000, 390). He provides a brief overview of family systems theory and wrestles with theological concepts of God, creation, anthropology, sin, and other requisite ideas. In a recent article published on the World Wide Web, Thomas F. Fischer (Ministry Health Journal, 2002) provides a helpful critique of Bowen theory from an evangelical perspective.

This brief review of the literature shows the relative paucity of academic work concerning the interface of family systems theory and Christian theology and Scripture. This is, perhaps, somewhat unusual since some authors contend that family therapy (including family systems theory) "is a particularly fertile ground for the integration of theological, religious and spiritual considerations" (Watson 1997, 123). The task of this interface is oftentimes complicated: "While appreciating what is good in a particular theory, we must also discern the erroneous baggage it carries" (Jones and Butman 1991, 22). In the task of integration, it is important to retain an attitude of deliberate and cautious critique.

### Is Family Systems Theory Appropriate For Use Within The Church?

Is Murray Bowen's family systems theory safe for use within the church? "Can a Christian, without sacrificing the essential integrity of the Christian faith, use family systems concepts in a way that enables one to uphold the formal and material principles of Scripture without any compromise?" (Fischer 2002, 3). Can family systems therapists and pastors use the understanding of family systems theory without

violating the essential basis of Christian fellowship, a fellowship rooted exclusively in God's Word of grace which calls and binds Christians as the body of Christ?

The most demanding issue for Christians in working with and consenting to the theory of Murray Bowen is Bowen's understanding of the natural processes in biology and nature and including human relationships.

Bowen deviated from the mainstream of psychiatric thinking of the 1940's and 1950's in two important ways: First, his theory was developed on the assumption that an understanding of man's emotional functioning must extend beyond psychological constructs to recognize the human's relatedness to all life, and second, his theory assumed that an adequate understanding of human behavior must rest on a foundation that went beyond the study of the individual to include the relationship system.

In essence, Bowen proposed that the family operated in ways that were consistent with its being a system and that the system's principles of operation were rooted in nature. (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 23-24)

According to Friedman, "It is not really possible to comprehend the thrust of the Bowen approach to human families without also considering the nature of our entire species and its relationship to all existing life, and indeed to all previous life (and other natural systems) on this planet, if not throughout the cosmos" (Friedman 1991, 135).

Bowen was not looking for comparisons between the family and various studies on whales, slime molds, and sociobiology. Rather he was seeking what is common (or homologous) to all natural systems. "I was strongly influenced by reading and lectures in aspects of evolution, biology, the balance of nature, and the natural sciences. I was trying to view man as a part of nature rather than separate from nature" (Bowen 1978, 345). This, it seems to me is critical. Bowen's helpful understanding of humankind came from examining the practices of human relationships in groups while observing the wider field of all living thing and their interactions one with another.

The tensions that exist between natural systems theory and orthodox Christianity are several. (1) Natural systems theory has its origins in evolutionary biology and not in the divine, supernatural working of a providential God. In truth, an orientation towards God as Creator and Sustainer of the world and its families is not within the purview of family systems theory. (2) Natural systems theory has no objective moral or ethical basis. Right and wrong are contextual and changing. (3) Bowen's anthropology is best understood in mechanistic and reductionistic terms. The distinctive mark of the human being is that mankind is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). This is a particular dignity which is conferred upon humankind, male and female, that is missing in the Bowen theory. He argues, in fact, for the essential sameness of humankind with the evolutionary world. Understanding personhood through psychological and relational interactions is partial and incomplete without understanding the formation of a life through the vertical dimension. (4) For Bowen, organizational structures are value neutral. For the Christian, however, the family and church are more than organizational groupings; they represent the manifest care of God. It is the family and the church that have special access to His redemptive purposes. It is in these God-ordained groupings that the pursuits of meaning and personal significance are most affirmed. (5) For many Christian leaders, Bowen thinking "works" and it is this utilitarianism that provokes some concern. An intimate faith in a personal God, not pragmatism, is the foundation of the Christian's confidence. It may be too easy to adopt an effective theory without wondering what disservice it does to devotion.

While the contours of family systems theory and biblical theology are in contrast in some places, family systems theory, in my opinion, is still amenable to consideration by church leadership. There are several reasons for such cautious openness.

1. First, the church is committed to evangelism, numerical growth, and increase in personal and corporate maturity. It is part of our kingdom of God thinking that causes us to be restless with taking care of ourselves without reference to the rest of humankind. However, many of us are frustrated with technocratic, “management by objectives” analyses when the major metaphors of church development are “natural processes” (as in the lilies of the field, the seed that grows by itself, the growth of the mustard seed, the four soils, the tree and its fruit, the laws of sowing and reaping).

In Matthew 6:28 (NIV) Jesus says “See the lilies of the field, how they grow.” The word “see” (katamathete) is the intensive form of “mathano,” meaning observe, study or research. The Greek “kata” intensifies the verb and gives us the meaning of diligently learn or diligently study. What is worth this effort according to Jesus? It is not the form of the flower but the natural processes of its growth that Jesus is calling us to learn from. “Natural process” thinking is consistent with our understanding of the New Testament teaching of the church. In this regard, Christian Schwarz in “Natural Church Development” (1996, 8) argues for the “biotic nature” as the most comprehensive understanding of the church and its maturation.

2. Family systems theory emphasizes the family as the primary context in which people develop. Though Bowen’s family systems theory does not understand the family as God’s avenue of redemption and care, Bowen does view the family as the context of formation and maturity.

For the Christian, the normative structure and essential functions of the family are a crucially important part of the creative order. Indeed, an important part of our identity as Christian has to do with our place in both our biological families and in the church as our new family of God. (Jones and Butman 1991, 360-61)

The identity of a person forms within the complexities of the nuclear family, various family-like communities (including the church, school, community centre as examples), as well as the intra-personal attributes of individuality. Whereas individual models of psychology may view the development of a person as primarily an intrapsychic phenomenon, family systems theory understands the growth of personhood in personal and relational ways and primarily within the family. This rings true to the Christian that sees God working in covenantal relationships through the family and the family-like relationships of the church.

3. The development of family therapy diverges from the medical model with its emphasis on focusing on pathology rather than on health. With the focus less on ill health or “finding fault and fixing it,” family systems theorists were open to explore normalcy, strength, wholeness and the capacity to adapt to stressors and change. Such a focus on wholeness in the context of human relationship permits non-medical practitioners access (pastors and priests, as examples) to its understanding. While church leaders and its members appreciate a theology of wrongdoing or sin, Christian faith is about more than “finding fault and fixing it.” Churches are places of celebration and somber reflection; the church is an aggregate of like-spirited persons seeking to know God for the ultimate purpose of being known; Christian people are to manifest the generosity of heaven through spiritual gifts and gracious activities of the kind that Jesus did on earth. Family systems theory is concomitant with such a view.

4. Further, with a shift in focus from disease to wholeness came an “appreciation of the health-promoting aspects of ‘normal life’ in families and communities, including involvement in religious organizations” (Watson 1997, 124). Family therapy and, in particular, family systems theory, is neither anti-faith nor anti-religious. In much of psychodynamic theory there is a significant anti-Christian bias. William Watson notes that “the professional roots of family therapy are multidisciplinary and extend to religious and spiritual traditions ... consequently, the anti-religious bias of Freudian thinking and the medical model find much less of a foothold in family therapy” (Watson 1997, 123). Also, pastors and priests were the primary therapists in the early stages of marriage and family work. When many had given up on the Western family, church leaders were calling for a reformation in our understanding of the importance of the family.

5. The ultimate goal of family systems theory is self-differentiation. Bowen states “the core of my theory has to do with the degree to which people are able to distinguish between the feeling process and the intellectual process” (Bowen 1978, 355). Bowen realized that “those with the most ability to distinguish between feeling and thinking, or who have the most differentiation of self, have the most flexibility and adaptability in coping with life stresses, and the most freedom from problems of all kinds” (Bowen 1978, 355). This, again, is consistent with how Christians approach truth as objective and comprehensible. We are not called primarily to a formless, emotional experience in salvation but rather an experience of Jesus Christ as the truth (John 14:6 NIV). The phrase so often in Jesus confrontations is “I tell you the truth” as in “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt 5:18 NIV). This phrase is attributed to Jesus 78 times in the NIV translation of the gospel accounts. The idea of responding to truth essentially corresponds to the family systems understanding that wholeness results from an approach to truth separated from the compounding factors of emotion.

6. Family systems theory as an interpretative framework is not limited to narratives of only biological families. Family systems theory is especially applicable to groupings of people who accept a family metaphor as significant for the formation of their identities. Using family for understanding the congregating force of Christian fellowship is, of course, well illustrated in Paul’s letters. For example, in Galatians Paul recounts his own call from God to preach the gospel to non-believing gentiles. In chapter one he makes the point that his call was not from any religious group but directly and personally from God: “God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles” (Gal 1:15-17 NIV). This is a forceful and distinguishing statement that holds in tension the determinative importance of Judaism, his originating religious family of origin: “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Gal 1:13-14 NIV). Paul’s self-description is consistent with Bowen’s conception of self-differentiation.

It appears to me that Murray Bowen’s family systems theory, while not authoritative, is useful and instrumental as far as church leadership is concerned. For pastors and elders who find themselves involved in conflict, an understanding of generational patterns of conflict, triangles and the identified patient is eminently helpful. Jones and Butman find “family therapy to be a refreshing contrast to some of the excesses associated with ... overly individualistic approaches to change” (Jones and Butman 1991, 371) that are found in other psychological theories. They contend that the basic tenants of family systems theory (as well as other forms of family therapy) provide for a deeper understanding of how people grow in relation to primary others in their biological and family-like families. It is clear that growing up interactively in families comes with problems that can be better understood by utilizing the teachings of Bowen and his followers. Many of Bowen’s concepts can be applied to organizations that adopt a family metaphor, and this too is of value to the Christian who has high value on understanding the relational dynamics in the church. Concerning church leadership, “Family systems categories offer an insightful look at the relational tendencies of those who serve in pastoral ministry” (Nessan 2000, 390).

### Systems Thinking and Theology

As has been noted, there is some cursory research and writing on the relationship between family systems theory and Christian theology. Much of the integrative writing between these disciplines focuses on particular church-related subjects, for example, building a healthy church structure (Steinke 1996) or developing an equipping model for church leadership (Stevens and Collins 1993). Craig Nessan looks at family systems theory with two questions in mind: “What are the contours of a theological approach that takes seriously the concepts of family systems theory? How would family systems theory need to be

reconsidered if it were to take seriously theological insight?" (Nessan 2000, 393). The author is not intending to create a comprehensive family systems theory, even if that were desirable or possible. Rather, he is constructing a framework for thoughtful critique between the disciplines of theology and family systems theory. Nessan considers eight theological points of intersection in this reflection: God, creation, anthropology, sin, salvation, atonement, justification and the church. I will overview his insights and provide additional comment where appropriate.

1. God. The primary issue for the Christian relative to family systems theory and Christianity is the identity of God. However, there is no clear convergence between Christian theology and family systems theory that is a-theological. Nessan believes that understanding God as Trinity provides a foundation for considering "the ultimate ground of a systems approach" (Nessan 2000, 393). Though there is no correspondence between Christian theology and family systems at this point, the theology of God as Triune provides ground for looking at family systems as a useable theory. In knowing the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we understand one essence with three "persons" who are coequally and coeternally God. Among the persons of the Trinity, there exists a "perichoresis" or a "being-in-one-another, (and a) permeation without confusion" (Nessan 2000, 393). The Trinitarian relationship gives expression to both the unity of the system and the distinction of the persons within the Godhead. The correspondence between the Trinity and family systems theory at this locus is telling.

2. Creation. In Genesis, God creates by making order out of chaos. He also recreates by making chaos when there is sclerotic order in the system. Nessan calls this the principle of "innovation" and illustrates it with the Old Testament history of God removing Israel from Egypt through divinely caused chaos. "At every level, creation involves a dynamic interaction between freedom (the principle of innovation) and order (the principle of preservation)" (Nessan 2000, 394). Bowen's natural systems theory is grounded on the principle of innovation or continuous and progressive change. Morphogenesis (continuous change) stands in tension with homeostasis (the principle of preservation). Nessan sees both forms of family systems process in the biblical material.

3. Anthropology. The most basic foundation for understanding personal identity is the biblical revelation that people, male and female, are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-28; Psa 8:5-8; 1 Cor 11:7; Col 3:10; James 3:9). "There is a profound sense in which human beings are never individuals ... but always persons, that is, those who by definition exist in relationship with others" (Nessan 2000, 395). The image of God means that every person has intrinsic value, irrespective of his or her behaviour. It also suggests that every person belongs to God. His image in mankind also leads us to understand that every person can experience full humanity by relating to God through Jesus Christ, and by following the teaching of Jesus, who is the complete revelation of the image of God. Nessan believes that a further aspect of the image of God in humankind is the ability to live as self-differentiated people while at the same time a part of the overall system. "Each one of us should remain free to be a self, yet connected to others in life-giving community" (Nessan 2000, 395).

4. Sin. Sin is both an act of wrongdoing and a state of alienation from God. It signifies the rupture of an intimate relationship with the Creator God, a betrayal of the trust that He has placed within us. Thus, while we speak of ourselves as being in the image of God, it is clear that this image has been disfigured by our volition and in our solidarity with humankind who have all sinned as have we (Psa 14:3; Prov 20:9; Eccles 7:20; Rom 3:23). The record of Scripture imputes sin to the system of the world. "Paul, in Romans 8, described this universal system, dragged down by the continued systemic inter-relationship and unceasing interaction of the co-causal effects of sin" (Fischer 2002, 11): "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom 8:22 NIV). Family systems theory sees the patterns of dysfunction moving from generation to generation. "Dysfunction or sin is not attributable only to isolated individuals but to the system of relationships in which we engage. Sin is not merely individual but systemic" (Nessan 2000, 395). There is correspondence between a biblical view of the state of generational sin and the family systems concept of emotional family process and extended family field. Also, the understanding of liberation theologians

regarding structural sin finds its equivalent in family systems thought. “Structural sin has dimensions that transcend the good will of individual actors with the system. Homeostasis can be powerful in the case of a dysfunctional relational system” (Nessan 2000, 395-96).

5. Salvation. The biblical idea of salvation derives from the Hebrew meaning spaciousness, deliverance and freedom. In the New Testament it also adds the additional idea of wholeness and health. Salvation is not a human achievement; rather it is the provision of God who intends to relate to His creation. While sin is manifest in the disfigured image of man and woman, the Hebrew concept of shalom conveys the hope of a world restored, where all broken relationships are reconciled with God, other persons and the entire creation. Family systems theory does not address this awesome vision with quite the same majesty. Wholeness in systems thought is more mechanical resulting in reconciled relationships based on self-differentiation. While Nessan argues for a therapeutic trinity (or triangle), I see little correspondence on this point between these tandem disciplines.

6. Atonement. “How can sinful man ever be accepted by a holy God?” This is the wonder of the entire bible and the source of much anxiety in spiritual-minded people. Nessan makes the connection between the scapegoat or identified problem in family systems theory and the sacrificial lamb in biblical theology. “By his death on the cross, Jesus worked atonement by eliminating the need for any more victims” (Nessan 2000, 397). In family systems theory the identified patient is the one who bears the blame for the malfunctioning of other parts of the whole. Nessan concludes “the phenomenon of an identified patient within a family can be understood as an instance of the human penchant for scapegoating (sic) on a larger scale” (Nessan 2000, 397).

7. Justification. What is the source of our standing before God and one another? How is it that when we are liable for what we have and have not done that we are not judged, condemned and destined to everlasting isolation? This acquittal that excludes all possibility of condemnations is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from all works and despite all demerits (Rom 3). According to family systems theory, a non-anxious presence is by sufficient self-differentiation such that one has learned how to respond to one’s family of origin. The vast majority of people according to family systems are anxious and reactive much of the time, and no one is free all the time. “While insight into one’s own family system is extremely helpful, one cannot be empowered to non-anxiousness on this basis alone ... In myriad ways, trusting that one has been justified by grace alone in Christ is the heart of the matter for living non-anxiously” (Nessan 2000, 398).

8. The Church. This is the family-like community of those people who have trusted in Jesus Christ and have been brought into a Father-child relationship with God and a brother-sister relationship with like-spirited others, where Christ is “intentionally triangled into every relationship. Through word and sacrament, prayer and worship, the church remains centered in Christ” (Nessan 2000, 398). The church is not perfect—it too misses its mission because of individual and corporate sin. Though less than ideal, the church is God’s agency for mission in the created world.

Nessan has attempted to lay a foundation for discussion around the tandem fields of biblical theology and family systems theory. He argues that “family systems concepts are certainly valuable in their own right” (Nessan 2000, 398) but clearly Bowen theory is not sufficient nor intended to comprehend the realm of God and his people. While family systems theory hopes to provide open-minded understanding to the nature of emotional processes, Christian theology has the task of comprehending and communicating the person, nature and work of God. Nessan has documented some of the parallels between the two disciplines and has provided a framework for further discussion and thought.

### The “One and the Many” in Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen's family systems theory represents an important approach that seeks to understand the reciprocal impact between the individual and the context of the larger social group, family, church or, indeed, any social gathering. Family systems theorists posit that individual maturity and development as well as pathological symptoms and dysfunctions can best be understood within the context of the family emotional system. The emotional system is driven by two needs present in all people: a need for togetherness (unity) and a need for separateness (diversity). The togetherness force in individuals often opposes the separateness force, especially in highly fused relationships.

People who are dominated by the togetherness force talk only about "we" and "us"; they emphasize unity. Intimacy and closeness is based on sameness of thinking and feeling; differences are regarded as disturbing and detrimental to family unity. Moves towards independence in thinking and action are regarded as "selfish" and even "hostile." (Richardson 1987, 35)

The church contends with just this issue: how the one and the many coalesce to be God's people. "God seems ... concerned with more than just individuals, and has in the biblical record dealt with his people as families, as a tribe and as a body" (Jones and Butman 1991, 361). It is a common critique that psychology individualizes mankind to the unimportance of collective realities, including the family and family-like institutions. Such cultural individualism is sometimes found in those that describe themselves as Christians. "Some approaches to the Christian life emphasize an individual's relationship to Christ to the exclusion of his or her relationship to the church" (Hibbs 1991, 110). The oft-heard comment "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian" opposes the biblical teaching that "the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body" (1 Cor 12:12 NIV). As family members in a nuclear family are related by birth, Christians are related to each other by reason of birth into Christ. Hibbs comments that "it is not an option to whether or not to be related" (Hibbs 1991, 110). The Christian life is experienced in the interrelationships of Christians with one another and with Christ.

This thinking between the one and the many, the individual and the collective, is at the hub of family systems theory. It is the unbalancing of this dynamic tension that produces the anxiety provoking symptoms common to individuals and collectives. As has been noted elsewhere, when the individual overly engages with the group, the drive for individuality rises in response. Conversely, when the individual finds little connection with the group, anxiety produces a drive for closeness and covenant. In the midst of this reciprocal anxiety, family systems theory calls for self-differentiation. That is, the maturing individual defines himself and determines his preferred future in the midst of the conforming pressures and processes of the group.

Unlike the modern world that thinks predominantly of individualism, the ancient world thought in terms of family groupings, tribes, people-groups, and other aggregates. It was an "ensemble" culture in contrast to our "star" acculturation. To refer to a person or a marriage or a tent or a faith community was not simply to make reference to that particular object of interest but to invoke as well the essence of the whole grouping of persons, or marriages, tents and faith communities (Richardson 1987, 38). For this reason, singular and plural are often used interchangeably in biblical language (thus "adam" can mean both "mankind" and "man"). Every person belongs to many different entireties and it is these different aggregate people-groups that give the stamp of different characteristics to a person. For example, "the house of the wicked" (Isa 31:2 NIV) defines not just the particular man but also the particular man as he represents wickedness as a human characteristic. Each of these memberships gave their mark upon her and it is by these memberships that she is known. One is defined, then, by the context of family, culture, tribe, character trait and grouping more than by any individual accomplishment or failure.

#### Family Systems Theory and the Metaphor of the Family



To the ancient world, the most basic and essential whole to which one can belong is the “household.” The Jewish Bible is formed around the genealogies of the biblical people of faith and in Jesus’ genealogy we read that he is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt1:1 NIV). While this family solidarity may be alien to Western individualistic thought and life, it was the norm in the Ancient Near East. The Old Testament is a narrative of households (though this history is often taught in Sunday school as a chronology of heroic individuals of faith). The Old Testament formula “he and his house” referred to the nuclear family, the extended family including their parents and children of all ages. It may also include those who were brought in by warfare, adoption, slavery, the patriarchal concubines, those less fortunate relatives and children of all of these (Miller and Miller 1982, 89). Children were also inherent in the Ancient Near East concept of household. In Genesis 17 every male in Abraham’s house was circumcised including a baby eight days old. Deuteronomy 6 shows the importance of teaching children the revealed way of blessing, while Exodus 12 includes children in the Passover meal.

The New Testament is replete with teachings on the church as the household or family of God composed of people joined together in Jesus Christ to be brothers and sisters with one another (Mark 3:33-35; Gal 6:10). The metaphor of the church as God’s family flows naturally out of Paul’s reference to “God as father, believers as brothers and sisters, and the apostle as a household manager” (Fee 1994, 873). This is not the family of origin from family systems theory. Rather it is a family of the Spirit where those who were not included have been adopted in (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:14-17). In the Romans passage the Spirit is identified as “the Spirit of adoption,” where the evidence of being God’s children is found in the Spirit’s prompting them to cry “Abba, Father.” The “Abba cry not only denotes intimacy with God, but especially signifies that this is the language of God’s only Son” (Fee 1994, 873). Now this language of heavenly intimacy is granted to the fellow-heirs and disciples of Jesus.

Of course, this family is no ideal; in its reality, the family can form into triangles, one member can be given undue prominence, parent and child can become fused together in conflict and hope, all the while reducing potential change by avoiding challenging a cutoff member. As in the nuclear family, these complications can be passed from one generation to another, assumed as “normal” and be potentiated through use. A church born of a split can become a splintering faction in the overall body of Christ; never recovering from what Friedman calls “the still active background radiation from the big bang of that congregation’s creation” (Friedman 1985, 196).

The family metaphor for the church, while being warm and endearing, is also riddled with complexities. The family-like church is not an actual family in the literal sense. In families, couples combine to enjoy marital love, children are conceived as flesh and blood, and decisions are made with the considerations of biological parents in mind. As well, our modern family is only remotely similar to the ancient near east household that is reflected in the biblical teachings. Our churches tend to be as modern, administrative, and upwardly mobile as are our suburban families. A further complicating factor with using the family metaphor for the church is that in our Western culture, undifferentiated family members often find their personal identity in substitute families or family-like organizations that employ the same family metaphor. Kerr and Bowen comment:

Many people “escape” their families of origin determined to be different from them ... They frequently develop “substitute families” through friends or organizations and invest emotionally much more in them than in their extended families. (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 272)

These people who find their definition by rejecting their family of origin seldom go through a process of self-differentiation. They did not leave home thoughtfully and with a purpose. Frequently they bring their unresolved problems from their family of origin into the family-like church and project some attribute (noble or otherwise) upon the leadership team or parson and are quickly found to be disheartened and disillusioned. This is not so much the problem of the church leader as it is the nature of undifferentiation from the family of origin.

Stevens and Collins argue that, while the church should not be a substitute family, it can act as an extended family (Stevens and Collins 1993, 80). This is a helpful distinction. Family of origin matters can be resolved in the context of an extended family church where church members can become “functional relatives.” Homegroups or bible study groups frequently function as extended families where new believers learn by participating. It is not uncommon that in such cell groups (the “cell” metaphor is appropriate when one considers the church as a “body” comprised of myriads of cellular structures) that adults learn how to treat the other sex even as they are learning to pray and that emotions are experienced differently and processed more helpfully as members of the cell share their life experiences. At the same time, these family-like groupings are not the biological family of origin nor can they make up for the experienced deficiencies in the originating family. But these groups may encourage proactive reconciliation between parent and child, husband and wife, brother and sister.

### Family Systems Theory and the Metaphor of the Body

As illustrative as the “family” metaphor is for the church, probably the more frequent is the metaphor of the church as a “body.” The apostle Paul describes the church as a human body (1 Cor 12:12-13), as a singular unit, coalesced with many parts or members, from varying ethnic and religious groupings (Jews or Greeks), and different social strata (slave or free), that find their commonality in “the one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13 NIV). Such diverse unity includes recognition of distinctive individual members gifts, function and service (Rom 12:4, 6-8; 1 Cor 12:27-30; Eph 4:7-12). It highlights the connectedness with one another (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:14-27). It cuts across racial and economic boundaries (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 3:6). Despite unique personality differences, socio-economic backgrounds, nationality and cultures, lifestyles and languages (and, one might add, denominations), being one body in Christ creates a cohesiveness of purpose and commonness of being. Paul’s description of the church as the “body of Christ” (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-30; Eph 4:1-16) paints a word picture of the congregation as a living, dynamic, organic system. These bible passages call for harmonious concern and love between one another (Rom 12:9-13; 1 Cor 12:25; 13:1-8; Eph 4:2, 3). It entails a dynamic process of maturity from “the unity of the Spirit” to “the unity in the faith” (Eph 4:3, 13-16 NIV). Each subsystem within the body of Christ shares Christ’s call to make disciples by being his witnesses (Matt 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8).

Jesus first mentioned the body metaphor in the gospels (John 2:21), but this concept finds its full theological development in the letters of Paul. These are the primary pericopes that speak of the church as Christ’s “body”:

1. “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:12 NIV).

2. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:4-5 NIV).

3. “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:16-17 NIV).

4. “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6 NIV).

5. “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16 NIV).

6. “And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Col 1:18 NIV).

Gordon Fee in God’s Empowering Presence comments:

Paul’s primary concern with this imagery is not that the body is one even though it has many members, thus arguing for their need for unity despite their diversity. Rather, his concern is expressed in v. 14, that even though the body is one, it does not consist of one member, but of many, thus arguing for their need for diversity, since they are in fact one body. (Fee 1994, 176)

One part of the body cannot say that it is not needed and one part of the body cannot say that an un-preferred part is not needed. All parts of the body are required for it to be a body and all parts are required to perform their given responsibilities for the sake of the overall working of the body. Unity is not possible if all members do not understand and accept that there is a whole and that all members are vital to its existence.

The key to both the unity and diversity of the church is the common experience of the Spirit, as Paul says with such lavish metaphors (“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body ... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” [1 Cor 12:13 NIV]). Paul understood this experience of the Spirit “as the basis for unity, but not uniformity, and therefore as the guarantor of rich diversity in terms of the Spirit’s manifestation in their midst” (Fee 1994, 177). Division, conflict and chronic discord are potentially destructive to the overall working of the body. The various parts experience what happens in one part: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it ... ” (1 Cor 12:26 NIV). Gossip, back biting, vengeance, blaming and other deceits are diabolical interferences in the functioning and purpose of the body. The body is harmed and the individual members suffer. At the same time “if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor 12:26 NIV). The whole body is esteemed when one or a group of its members is favored. The prizing and respect that is granted among a few members generates good to all the body. What happens to a few is experienced by the many.

#### What It Means to Be “One Another” with Each Other

“God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven: rather, he is creating a people for his name, among whom God can dwell and who in their life together will reproduce God’s life and character” (Fee 1994, 872). The church is the body of Christ, a company of others who have become “one anothers” because of the salvation of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul does not say that the church is “like” a body; he says that it “is” the body of Christ. “The body of Christ, if coupled with the Spirit of Christ, reproduces something of the life of Christ in every church where this teaching and this power is taken seriously” (Green 1988, 53). “Each congregation, each church, is the body of Christ. Each local church ... is the exemplification of the church. The people of God in any place are the people of God, the church, not simply a part of the people of God” (Carson 1987, 49).

The church is an organism made alive and sustained by the personal ministrations of the Spirit of God. Those separated by rank and privilege, by money and sex (Gal 3:26-29 NIV), find themselves grafted together in an organic unity of “one anothers” called the church. Fellowship (koinonia) is the word that Paul uses for the activity of the believer (“to share in” and “to impart”) and the identity of the believer (“fellow” or “participant”) in the charismatic community. Fellowship begins with God through Christ (1 Cor 1:9) and this produces fellowship with one another. “Life together as a body begins through their common experience of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13 NIV); inscribed by the Spirit, they become an epistle of Christ (2 Cor 3:1-3 NIV)” (Fee 1994, 870).

Throughout Paul's writings, he is gripped with the idea that those who have always been divided have been united in Christ. He is equally constrained that the "one anotherness" of the charismatic community is so frequently shattered. Twenty-one times in eighteen scriptures Paul uses his distinct "one another" phrase to describe the Christian community. It is a description of relational intimacy ("Greet one another with a holy kiss" in Rom 16:16, 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12 NIV), happy spontaneity ("Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs," Eph 5:19 NIV) and solemn warning ("Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love," Gal 5:13 NIV). Clearly, Paul sees himself as a pastor and as a father to these Christians. In examining these passages and those that describe the community of the primitive church, this believer in this century is driven to a desperate hunger to know the Spirit of God in the "one anotherness" of charismatic koinonia.

Paul's "one another" theology simultaneously emphasizes both unity and diversity, both the "one" (differentiation) and "another" (congregation). There would be no human community and no human life without the biologically rooted life force of togetherness. It is this force that drives parents to make extraordinary sacrifices for their children. It motivates philanthropists, mission boards, community centers and government leaders. Churches, synagogues and mosques are sustained by the sacrifices of individual members who view a greater good beyond themselves. Theologically, the togetherness force may be viewed as "part of or an expression of God" (Richardson 1996, 58). Paul describes Christ saying, "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:13 NIV). The author of Hebrews speaks of God by saying "for whom and by whom all things exist" (Heb 2:10 NIV). Christ is the zenith—the celestial centre point for the unity of all things.

Paul is persuaded that his human will or spirit is not the source of effective ministry, but that he is actively dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5-6, 1 Cor 2:1-5). Any fruit of his efforts (including the conversion of the Corinthians—2 Cor 3:3) as well as the form of his preaching, were the works of God's Spirit. I recently heard this comment from a preacher who mirrors the S/spirit of Paul: "God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do his great works by large committees. He trains somebody quiet enough and little enough and then he uses him."

In terms of effective ministry in Christ's church and God's world, does this depend solely on theological education or primarily on ministry experience or exclusively on vaunted personality characteristics? The apostle teaches us from four texts in understanding the relationship of the Holy Spirit to ministry in Paul's life. Each of the passages recalls Timothy's own call to ministry and informs us along several lines. (1) Timothy is reminded of "the gift of God," that is, his "sincere faith" (2 Tim 1:5-6 NIV). This gift most likely refers to the Spirit. It is clear that the source of Timothy's ministry is "the gift of God." Therefore, effective ministry is gift-dependent and Spirit-dependent. (2) Timothy is told in this same passage to "fan into flame" the gift that has been extinguished by his timidity in the face of opposition. Timothy has responsibilities in maintaining that which he has been given. Therefore, effective ministers participate in God's gift. (3) Ministry is given in the context of the "one anotherness" of the believing community. 1 Timothy 1:18 and 4:14 refer to the prophetic words spoken "over / about / to him" which was the charismatic participation of the one another community experiencing the call of God on Timothy's life. Therefore, effective ministry is coactive and participative. (4) The leaders of the community acknowledged the work of the Spirit by "the laying on of hands" (1 Tim 4:14, 2 Tim 1:16). Ordination for effective ministry is the gift of God introduced by the prophetic word in the charismatic community and acknowledged by the leadership with the laying on of hands. Therefore, effective ministry is created by God's followership—there is no leader without a follower. This theology is distinctly Pauline: by God and for man where the one and the many come together for effective ministry.

### Concluding Considerations

Most thinking about institutions in our society is oriented towards a psychodynamic point of view. In this perspective, relationships take on their character from the personalities or backgrounds of the

people involved or primary leadership rather than the possibility that the organizations are evolving structures that take shape from the adaptations of each person to each other. In other words, strong and capable leadership has as much to do with strong and capable followership. Edwin Friedman, a significant Bowen protégé and family systems theorist, contends that “the functioning of individuals in any relationship system is not primarily the result of their own personalities or past; rather, people express that part of their nature which is regulated by the emotional processes in the present system” (Friedman 1999, 251). He also argues that leadership is primarily learning the capacity to regulate the emotional processes of the system by monitoring oneself.

If a congregation can be understood as a family system, then there are, by definition, internal emotional processes that define the system. Change or no-change, numerical increase or decrease in the congregation has less to do with the excellence of programming, new ministry visions, star-status leaders or a new kind of worship. While all these factors may be secondarily important, family systems theory reasons that the development of an organization has to do with an understanding of unseen emotional process more than very obvious issues of content. The primary influencing factor that promotes the growing of a church or other system has to do with a person (say the pastor) or persons (say the eldership or pastoral team) within the system who are both emotionally connected to the system (that is, part of the system) and increasingly self-differentiated (e.g., a less or non-anxious presence) in relationship to it. This is the nature of self-differentiation.

Self-differentiation is not selfishness in a new guise. According to Bowen, “The ‘I’ position defines principle and action in terms of ‘this is what I think, or believe’ and ‘this is what I will or will not do’” (Bowen 1978, 459). It is more about decisiveness and thoughtfulness. When we are increasingly differentiated, we declare our own thoughts, feelings, beliefs and decisions, make informed “I” statements about our convictions without blaming, placating or triangling. This freedom does not come without a cost to the church leader and the cost is often deep rumination. What drives me to do what I do? Why do I want to please God? Where do my wants fit in with pleasing God? Am I a leader who operates out of a theology of creation or a theology of the fall? What does redemption mean to me on a day-by-day basis? Do I find my identity primarily in what I do as a pastor or in who I am as a saved person in Christ on a pilgrimage towards heaven? Is my day-by-day life with Christ, my family, the church, the community based on grace or the perfectionism of never-ending works? Being clear and biblical about what drives pastors and sets their values places them in a better position to lead their churches toward well-being. This happens when they discover their own sense of identity, significance, and security in their relationship to Christ and their covenant partners: spouse, children and church, and not in the functionalism of their responsibilities.

Differentiation for leaders or followers in the family of God is never fully achievable: we all exist somewhere along the continuum between fusion and differentiation. The more fused we are the more anxious we are about our standings in significant relationships. “The emotional reactivity of fusion means we are supersensitive to significant other’s response to us. We are thrilled when they love and praise us, and hurt, destroyed, and defensive or aggressive when they criticize us” (Richardson 1987, 36). Richardson also comments:

The more differentiated we are, the more we can give attention to living the kind of life we personally define as meaningful. We feel less damaged or hurt by, and more accepting of, the differences that exist between us and those who are important to us. We are able to think through our own position and take action based on this thinking, without having these positions determined by the emotional reactions of others. (Richardson 1987, 36)

The family systems theory about self-differentiation is the goal and understanding of the one and the many. It is here that Bowen’s family systems theory and Christian thinking coalesce: It is impossible to be a Christian without the church as it is impossible to be a person without a family. It is within the

church that every believer is conceived, finds his identity, is restored from predictable failures and ministers to others. Being a Christian without the church is to choose a truncated, cutoff life, disconnected from the reality of God's intended family. The person of Jesus Christ is the congregating hub around which the various "one another" members of Christ's family coalesce. It is where covenants are formed (togetherness), where personal ministry gifts are discovered (individuality) and where the necessary developmental stages of maturity are learned. Not always a pleasant experience, but always a meaningful one, the church is the gathering place of people who would otherwise fall apart.

Individual Christians are not the whole church (even if they are important and impactful leaders) as individual family members (even if they are the primogenitors) are not the whole family. Wholism has to do with the one being part of the many. While Christians and Christ are united, as parents and children are united within the nuclear family, they can be distinguished. This is the understanding of differentiation—to be a "me" within the collective "we." It needs to be remembered as well that Christ is the Head of the body and that no member of the body can be the Head. To express the complex relationship of unity and diversity between Christ and Christians, individual believers and the corporate totality, Paul uses the metaphor of the body.

Christians become more themselves in the church as people become more themselves in the family. It is within the family and the church body that we become who we are intended to be. We do not lose our personalities in community; it is here where our personalities are shaped through the tension between differentiation and congregation. Though living individually within a collective is not often easy, it is always self-defining. Cutoffs are liable to occur when the conforming demand overwhelms the drive for differentiation. When cutoffs occur the person always loses something of himself or herself.

There is greater unity because of diversity. The body is whole because of the diversity and not in spite of it. The needs of one member (say, when one member is ill) call for the resources of another (say, gifts of healing or acts of compassion). It is within this complementarity that unity comes about. Church unity is about multiformity rather than conformity. Unity and diversity fit together because the members are in Christ (1 Cor 12:12-27) and not merely because they are enmeshed or conformed with one another.