

Utilizing Natural Family Systems Theory to Foster Health in Congregations: Murray Bowen as Teacher of Congregations

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“Natural family systems” theory is a way of thinking about human behavior drawn upon widely by theorists and consultants working to resolve congregational conflict and promote congregational health. The development of this approach is credited to Murray Bowen and is typically referred to as “Bowen Theory.” I believe there is value in reflecting upon the normative nature of Bowen Theory for congregational life. In this paper I hope (1) to affirm significant congruence between family systems theory and biblical givens, (2) to identify areas of likely or potential divergence, and (3) to suggest some ongoing conversations that are invited by this connecting of family systems theory to congregational life.¹

An Introduction to Bowen Theory

Murray Bowen was something of a pioneer in the field of human behavior. His lectures, many of which are now on videotape, reveal a fertile imagination and thoughtful approach to individuals, families, and groups. His keen intellect was particularly striking as he delivered his lectures in a casual style with a keen but restrained wit. He laid the foundation for what would become a significant innovation in psycho-social understanding for the later half of the twentieth century – an approach called “natural family systems theory.” Trained as a psychiatrist at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, Bowen eventually became the director of the Georgetown University Family Center, where his insights on family life continue to be explored and expanded. Edwin Friedman is credited with extending Bowen’s insights to issues of leadership and organizational life, particularly in the church and synagogue.

A case can even be made that Bowen Theory has become the dominant theoretical framework informing the philosophies and strategies of church consultants and congregational theoreticians today. Perusing the catalogues of the Alban Institute or many North American seminaries, experiencing a training session of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, studying the Healthy Congregations program developed by Peter Steinke,² or completing training to become a “specialized interim minister,” one cannot but be impressed with how they have arisen out of the theory of natural family systems. Friedman’s *Generation to Generation, Family Process in Church and Synagogue*³ has become a seminal work in this area. Friedman’s post-graduate seminar was attended by a number of current practitioners, including Larry Foster, who has introduced

Bowen Theory concepts to many at Western Seminary. The influence of Bowen Theory constitutes a noteworthy trend.

On some levels this is a remarkable phenomenon. Bowen's theory of human behavior arose out of his observations of the human and animal world, a perspective that was greatly influenced by a Darwinian naturalistic model. Much of Bowen's research crosses easily between the world of animal behavior and the world of human behavior. His evolutionary understanding, influenced significantly by Darwin's theories, appears throughout his work. In this regard, I would observe that the twentieth century church has, on many fronts, been less than receptive to Darwin's thinking about the development of the various species inhabiting the planet. Considering that Bowen Theory is widely used in the Christian church, exploring for points of incongruence with the tenets of the Christian faith also seems prudent. This exploration is undertaken with significant appreciation for what has contributed to the development of natural family systems theory.

First, we explore points of congruence and mutual enlightenment. Within the Reformed field of the Christian church there is a generous and hospitable perspective on nontheological fields of inquiry and a recognition that these arenas of discovery can enhance our understanding of the biblical drama and the Christian life. The Belgic Confession asserts the world is an "open book," the reading of which can be helpful on many fronts. Richard Mouw reminds us of the value and integrity of this perspective in the Reformed faith.⁴ But it can also be said that the "insights" of the psychosocial disciplines have been less palatable to the Christian church than have those of other disciplines. Brand and Yancey's *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*⁵ is a fitting example of how ready the church has been to embrace insights from the field of physiology and medicine. But the insights of Freud, Skinner, and the social scientists have been less widely embraced, so the strong connection between Bowen Theory and congregational life is noteworthy.

It does seem to be the case that Bowen Theory alerts us to aspects of the family of God that might otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood. This perspective suggests to us new approaches in considering congregational vitality, signs of resilience, and desired qualities of church leaders. It may also help us clarify what has happened when a congregation has been "derailed" by ineffective leadership or by unexpected currents of change.

Bowen's initial focus was directed toward patients diagnosed with schizophrenia. Over time he broadened his study to include first the mother of the identified patient, then both parents, and, finally the entire family. Through extensive observation he concluded that the "identified patient" was greatly

affected by the behavior of the family and that the most lasting improvements to the identified patient came as attention was focused on the person or persons within the family most motivated and able to change. When these individuals changed, the emotional system of the family changed, thus fostering the more lasting changes in the identified patient. The same principles have been extended to other "families," such as congregations, particularly by Friedman in *Generation to Generation*.

In working with various members of a family, Bowen developed a core concept to his theory, the concept of *differentiation of self*. All humans need to manage the twin but opposing needs of the need for *individuality* and the need for *togetherness*. Persons with a relatively high level of self-differentiation are more effective in managing this tension by defining a self, remaining a self, staying in emotional contact with the family or group, and taking responsibility for self without impinging on the welfare of others. This requires that a person act and react more from a thinking process than a feeling process. Well-conceived disciplines such as physical exercise, proper diet, and sufficient rest are all factors in enhancing if not increasing one's self-differentiation.

A significant aspect of managing one's self is managing one's anxiety. The management of one's anxiety is a key factor in remaining a self in the context of increasing family or group anxiety. The demonstrated insight and courage required to manage one's anxiety and remain self-differentiated is commonly observed as *maturity*.

Bowen theory focuses considerable interest on the functioning of the brain and how anxiety affects its functioning. Paul Mclean's work on the *triune brain* has been adopted and applied within the application of family systems thinking. Mclean's research postulates there are three sections of the brain consisting of the brain stem area, the limbic system, and the neo-cortex. Since the brain stem section of the brain is similar in structure and function to that of reptiles, it is called the *reptilian brain*. Its function has to do with automatic systems within the body, including the fight/flight mechanism. This part of the brain acts and reacts quickly and functions to protect the safety of the individual. The limbic system, similar in structure and function to that of mammals, is called the *mammalian brain*. This part of the brain provides the ability to herd, to nurture, to play, and in some cases, to fight. Its functioning includes connecting within community.

The large section of the brain unique to humans is called the *neo-cortex*. The neo-cortex, comprising 85 percent of the human brain, is the region in which higher level thinking occurs, such as imagination, problem solving, and self-reflection. Research indicates that, as people become more anxious, they tend to act and

react less out of the neo-cortex, the thinking brain, and more out of the mammalian or reptilian centers of the brain. This line of observation helps explain the rise in immaturity and reactivity in highly anxious families, groups, or congregations.

Bowen Theory and the Bible

This brief summary provides us with key aspects of Bowen Theory that can expand our appreciation for selected passages of the Bible. *Philippians* 4:2-9 is such a passage. These verses stand as part of a larger letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi. An annotated commentary on key aspects of this passage will illustrate how the previously outlined insights of Bowen Theory might enhance one's appreciation for this passage. I will also suggest areas of potential disconnect as I move through this passage, some of which will be addressed later in the essay.

Vs. 2: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." Paul's open appeal to two conflicted parties in the Philippian congregation suggests that Paul did not see their conflict as isolated from the rest of the congregation. He seems to recognize that a congregation is an emotional system in which everything is connected. Like a family, if there is tension in one aspect of the family, there are causes and effects throughout the whole system or congregation. Recent commentators using social-scientific methods of interpretation also point out the system-wide importance of this issue.

Vs. 3: "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel. . . ." Paul's open request that others play a constructive role in the resolution of the issue indicates that he is looking within the larger family of the congregation to access some capacity for conflict resolution. He does not see the interpersonal issue between the two in conflict as "just between them." It could even be the case that Paul recognizes these two church members as too anxious or reactive to resolve their own issues and that others in the congregation may be more able to grow, change, and work toward a resolution of the issues. As in a family system, the observable symptoms or the persons with the presenting issues may not be the place to look for the most lasting resolution.

Vs. 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" This phrase presents us with an illustration of how Bowen Theory and attention to brain functioning might be extended into the practices of a faith community. I would contend that this challenge of Paul is a way of helping the congregation think larger thoughts, thoughts that connect them with their maker/redeemer – thoughts that also arise out of the creative, imaginative, and most human part of the brain.

It is worth noting that the dominant Pauline metaphor for personal redemption is that of being “united with Christ” or being “in Christ.” Setting one’s thoughts on “things above” and having the “mind of Christ” are strong emphases in Paul’s writings. Paul’s challenge to “rejoice in the Lord” may well be a challenge that helps people think, meditate, and act out of the most creative, imaginative aspect of their brains.

Vs. 5: “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” Paul connects gentleness with the assurance that the Lord is proximate both in time and space. His challenge to the Philippian believers connects the nearness of their Lord with the faith reality that their wellbeing does not depend upon their self advancement or self-protection. And, given the proximity of their advocate and protector, they have the resources to foster a gentle center rather than an anxious center.

This does, of course, suggest some potential disconnects between Bowen Theory and the Christian faith. It bears noting that a source of Pauline gentleness or calm courage is a relationship with another person who is nearer than some might realize. Being joined to this other person is a source of strength and mature response, perhaps even a support to one’s self-differentiation. Later, we will look at the level of congruence and incongruence between being self-differentiated and being united with Christ.

Vs. 6a: “Do not be anxious about anything. . . .” In the context of congregational conflict and tension, Paul challenges the Philippians to manage their anxiety. Here we see a clear indication that Paul recognizes how unmanaged anxiety becomes counter-productive to a congregation under duress. Our experience also demonstrates that conflicted congregations are often highly anxious congregations and, thereby, congregations in which people are not differentiating themselves from the group, are reacting automatically rather than thoughtfully, and are demonstrating behavior less mature than helpful. Anxious, conflicted congregations are often deficient in what they most need – creative, imaginative, problem-solving thought.

It also bears noting that, although Philippians 4:6 is a well known and often memorized passage, it is seldom understood in its biblical context, a context of congregational tension and conflict. In this way Bowen, Friedman, and Paul seem much more on the same page than many Christian congregations in which the subject of conflict is often avoided or banished to the “acknowledge only if necessary” regions of congregational conversation.

Vs. 6b: “with thanksgiving . . .” Brain research indicates that the human brain is not able to hold both appreciative thoughts and fearful or angry thoughts

simultaneously. The inspired Apostle Paul seems to understand how thanksgiving functions to help people think and act from the most thoughtful parts of the brain. One theme throughout the scriptures is a recommendation to thankfulness and caution toward chronic complaint. Perhaps the Israelites waiting for Moses to return from Mount Sinai were not at their best not only in terms of behavior, but also in terms of brain functioning.

Vs. 7 & 8: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- think about such things. . . ." Again, Paul's attention to the mind is apparent. Not akin with Bowen, Paul appeals to what God can do for a person's heart and mind. Akin to Bowen, Paul challenges these believers to manage their own thinking and so direct their thoughts that the part of them which is most reflective, imaginative and even *human* is engaged with "best thinking," a strategy that Paul indicates as advisable for Christian disciples.

Vs. 9a: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. . . ." As Paul ends this line of thought, he recommends practices that will serve them well as individuals and as a congregation. There is a fertile connective line between the disciplines Bowen suggests that can help move a person toward self-differentiation or maturity and the spiritual disciplines that the church, through the years, has recognized as contributing to the health and well-being of the Christian disciple.

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*,⁶ Dallas Willard recommends that disciples of Christ need to develop "off the spot" disciplines to act with maturity and grace when they find themselves "on the spot," that is, at a time of opportunity, challenge, or threat. This is a fertile line of thinking upon which to expand. When people are under pressure or "on the spot" they are, by nature, inclined to be anxious – responding with fearful, self-protective, and less mature expressions. But, through practiced disciplines that train both the mind and the emotions, a person is able to prepare for those times of pressure when they feel "on the spot."

In Bowen Theory, the individual is challenged to do some "off the spot" work, particularly in regard to family of origin, as a strategy to enhance one's functioning in "on the spot" situations such as at the office or as a leader in a congregation. Acknowledging that the "on the spot, off the spot" differentiation is not always clear or clean, we can find some value in the principle of preparation. Paul's challenge toward "practice" is congruent with this concept. Most of us need practice to become prepared for the unexpected confrontation or the unusual opportunity. A well ordered life will include practices that enhance one's functioning on emotional, relational, and spiritual levels.

Vs. 9b: "And the God of peace will be with you." This summary benediction of Paul serves well to transition our pondering into some of the theological congruence and incongruence that Bowen Theory presents.

Bowen Theory presents eight basic concepts. In the last seasons of Bowen's life, he was beginning to develop a ninth concept, "spirituality." His development of this concept is only partially available to us. Bowen recognized that religious beliefs function in the lives of individuals and families. His approach was not to consider the possible veracity of particular beliefs but rather to see how holding these beliefs influenced a person's level of functioning as an individual and as part of a family or group.

Here we begin to see some potential disconnects between the biblical story and the primary assertions of Bowen Theory. At the root of the Christian church is the belief that God created the world; that God's only Son became an historical figure by birth; that he lived in a particularly cultural context; that he was executed on a cross; that he rose from the grave and ascended into heaven — all of which are attested as historical events. Although Christians generally hold that believing and acting on these attestations leads to a certain quality of life, their "functional" effect on a person's life has little to do with their foundational place in the life of Christians or the church. The starting points for the Christian faith are revealed events, rather than observed activity. This fact of faith should not be lost. To be sure, Bowen did not intend to engage in a conversation about ontological truth. Rather, he was interested in human behavior and how behavioral functioning was affected by religious belief. So, on some level, critiquing his position is illegitimate. On the other hand, we do well to remember that the veracity of Christian belief is not, first of all, based on how it contributes to our human functioning.

On another front, it is noteworthy to observe maturity or self-differentiation as defined by Bowen and maturity as modeled and taught by Paul. There is a remarkable distinction. Bowen's interest focused on how well a person was able to define a self and remain a self, while remaining connected to the family or group. He introduced a concept called *fusion* as he observed people functioning not as a self, but as attached to another. This attachment is seen as a loss of self and a less mature way of being.

But Paul, in various places and ways, indicates that his strength, his courage, his comfort, his very *self* arises from being attached to another — to Christ. From Paul we hear such things as, "For me to live is Christ," "I want to know Christ," "Christ's power working within me." It's as if Paul has been de-selfed as he becomes fused or united with Christ.

Paul would argue differently. He would suggest that one cannot be truly one's self without being united with Christ, one cannot be truly free without being bound to Christ, one cannot "grow up" without growing in Christ. As noted above, the dominant description of salvation in the New Testament is "union with Christ." Paul's care-free spirit about life and death arises out of a union with the one who has conquered life and death.

Bowen might counterpoint that fusion refers primarily to two coterminous individuals and not to the relationship of a current human being and a historical figure who no longer coexists in the same time or space. This, of course, gets us to a crucial belief of Christians that Christ arose from the dead and lives today.

This in turn leads us to recognize some of the unique practices of Christ's followers both as individuals and as a group: Prayer as a key aspect of relating to the God who made and redeemed us. Worship, both personal and corporate, as a purposeful focus on another in such a way that Christians believe they again find themselves having the mind of Christ as a picture of maturity. These are all strategic aspects of the Christian life that could be seen as less than helpful from a narrow understanding of Bowen Theory.

One additional disconnect bears mentioning. As Bowen and Friedman consider the possibility of a person intentionally working toward change, particularly growth in self-differentiation, they observe that the work is difficult and, generally, minimal in effect. Although they grant that small changes can hold significant benefits for a person's functioning as a self in a group, they are not optimistic that many of us can make much change in our own lifetimes. Over generations, the possibilities for growth in self-differentiation within individuals of an extended family do increase.

The biblical record and our own observations within the Christian community would suggest a more optimistic picture. Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, gives a clear anticipatory signal of God's interruptive grace, a grace that liberates from a futile life, welcoming people from sinful, chaotic families into the shalom of the kingdom of heaven.

There are also indications that individuals can change significantly within the space of their own years. The disciple Peter stands as a good example of a relatively immature person who appears as a brash "strong leader" on some occasions and a man totally unnerved by a servant girl on another. The apostle Peter, by contrast, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is able to remain calm and clear when faced with a variety of challenges and threats. His movement toward maturity seems remarkable and miraculous. An essential dimension of the

gospel is how it moves people from darkness to light, from *lostness* to *foundness*, from being without hope to having hope. This is, at the core, a highly optimistic picture in terms of the potential for change.

And this optimism seems also to be transgenerational. The prophets foresee a day when the saying, “the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” will no longer be true (Jer. 31:29; Ezk. 18:2). These passages anticipate a time when the sins of the parents will be less consequential for their children. One clear dimension of the gospel is that blessings are articulated for “you, your children and all who are far off, for all whom the Lord will call” (Acts 2:39).

It is very clear that the church exists in the “already but not yet” tension between our Lord’s first and second coming. But, in the context of this interaction, we do well to affirm that the foundational creed of the Christian church is about historical events, that the gospel has a way of changing people in remarkable albeit incomplete ways, and that miracles do happen. As we benefit from the insights of Bowen Theory, we need to recognize it as a window through which we can see important aspects of individual and communal life, but not as the front door into that life.

Further Possibilities of Bowen Theory for the Church

Finally, I would like to invite further contemplation of some intriguing possibilities that arise when the church uses Bowen’s natural family systems theory.

The first pertains to the central concept of Bowen Theory, differentiation of self. At this level, an individual is able to manage the forces of individuality and togetherness that are inherent in life. In this regard, I find it noteworthy that several major controversies of the ancient church pertained to the nature of God, particularly the trinitarian nature of God. One could argue that the variables being argued had to do with the *individuality* and *togetherness* of the three divine persons. And it is this co-eternal, co-divine community that created the cosmos of which we are a part. It is worth pondering, then, how the concept of self-differentiation as a core issue for every human may resonate with a core reality of togetherness/individuality of the divine creative community. In what way does our bearing the image of God design us for this tension? How has the fall complicated this process? Finally, how does being regenerated and growing up into Christ create a context in which we can move toward self-differentiation that, at some level, mirrors the divine wholeness of the tri-personal God?

Another area of ongoing dialogue pertains to the intentional pursuit of personal maturity and capacity for leadership within the community. Bowen theory

challenges ministry leaders to work at “growing up” within their own families of origin, thereby increasing their capacity to be calm, relationally connected, and unconditionally constructive leaders. In *The Leader’s Journey*,⁷ Herrington, Creech, and Taylor have picked up on this theme and, along with an emphasis upon understanding congregational dynamics, have outlined the role of strategically conceived and practiced spiritual disciplines in the mature functioning of congregational leaders. This approach invites greater attention, especially within Reformed circles in which the covenant nature of the church is emphasized. Understanding persons as “individuals in community” and understanding that this community has both concurrent and historical dimensions is a perspective that can be enriched and informed by reflection on Bowen Theory. Additionally, reflecting biblically and theologically on the nature of individuals and communities could provide greater understanding and sense of propriety around the growing use of family systems theory to support and strengthen Christian congregations.

Finally, the application of Bowen Theory to Christian congregations is a relatively recent phenomenon. As a variety of Christian thinkers become familiar with this construct and look at it from their various disciplines, we can anticipate increased insight and clarity as to the suitability and reach of this thinking in the church’s pursuit of God-honoring, kingdom-enriching patterns and practices. To that end, may God continue to provide us with rich arenas conversation in which light leads to light.

ENDNOTES

¹ Much of what is contained in this essay is drawn from my work in a Doctor of Ministry program at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. The title of the dissertation is, “The Utilization of Bowen Family Systems Theory in Teaching Healthy Corporate Life in Congregations—Implications and Applications.” It was completed in 2001.

² Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations* (Lutheran Brotherhood, 1999).

³ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation, Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Guilford Press, 1985).

⁴ Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁵ Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper Collins, HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

⁷ Jim Herrington, R. Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor, *The Leader’s Journey, Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).