

## **Book Review: Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry** **Grappling with theory and its application through a Biblical lens (ed. Brown & Errington)**

**By Kathy Thurston**

If you are anything like me, sometimes you get stuck. I'm not referring to getting stuck in traffic but stuck in the way you are relating to someone. It might be a difference of opinion with a work colleague where you are just not sure how to resolve it. You might have a broken relationship with a relative over a past grievance. Maybe you are caught in the middle of a sibling triangle or struggling with resentment towards your spouse who wants to change you. If you have been stuck in any of these situations, or a myriad of other relationship difficulties, then Murray Bowen's family systems theory can help be a lens through which you can see the "problem" differently. That has been my experience.

Murray Bowen developed his family systems theory in the US in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by observing the patterns anxious families adopted to lessen their shared anxiety. More recently, since the publication of Rabbi Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation* (1985), authors such as Friedman, Peter Steinke and Ronald Richardson, have applied the theory to congregational life and Jim Herrington, Robert Creech and Trisha Taylor, to personal transformation in the role of Christian leadership, all opening the way for this secular theory to help in the Christian context.

I was first introduced to the theory in a very practical and personal way, when we booked in for marriage counselling at the Family Systems Practice and Institute in Sydney over 10 years ago. We needed help and we got it. I learnt that my over-functioning is my attempt to control my world and my anger is the result of the realisation of the futility of that attempt! The idea that I can only change my responses and not anyone else's seems obvious to me now and managing myself more maturely has been vital to my personal health and wellbeing, as well as the stimulus to growing godly character. Learning to understand how I react under pressure and observing how I have learnt that in my family of origin, has been invaluable in God's work of change in me.

The question I have grappled with however, is how do I incorporate a secular theory into my life as a Christian? And this is the very question that *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry* begins to answer. Containing essays by 13 different Australian Christians, who come from various denominational backgrounds and ministry roles, this book does several things to assist us to understand Bowen's theory from a Christian perspective. Firstly, the book explains the major concepts of Bowen family system theory such as differentiation of self and its alternatives of fusion and cutoff, the patterns that families develop in order to manage stress such as over-functioning, under-functioning, conflict and distancing, the function of relational triangles and the impact of multi-generations on the emotional maturity of the individual. Secondly, various essays critique the theory in light of the Bible's teaching on doctrine like sin, God's providence, human responsibility, service of others, the role of suffering, just to name a few. Other essays apply the theory to the issues that Christians face every day such as caring for people in need in ways that make a difference, serving others as well as caring for self, how people change and building real

emotional connection with others while at the same time allowing differences of opinion. And all this is discussed in an Australian church context by a variety of practitioners.

Let me briefly expand on a topic I personally found insightful and practical. As a classic “rescuer”, Tara Stenhouse’s essay entitled “Applying Bowen Theory to Pastoral Care” immediately caught my attention. It was affirming to read that it is not just me who has struggled for many years to “help” those in need, sometimes seeing little change in the situation, but always feeling the burden of responsibility and the unsustainable physical demands of caring for others. Tara exposes the reasons why we want to “rescue” others, many of which are associated with our own need for affirmation and our pride. Family systems theory enables us to see the complexity of most pastoral care situations; there is usually not one problem or problem person, so a simple “cause and effect” perspective will rarely make a long-term difference. Tara then introduces the concept of the “alongside coach”. This role is modelled from the counsellor-coach role used by Bowen systems clinicians, whose role is to support a person do their own thinking and manage their own responses in a given situation. The extremely helpful table outlining the roles, goals and methods of the “rescuing pastor” versus the “alongside coaching pastor” summarises the counter-cultural role of the alongside pastor who:

- Encourages a person through their pain rather than trying to “fix them”
- Allows a person to struggle and find their own way through their problem rather than doing it for them
- Views those they are helping as capable people who have resources from God at their disposal, not helpless
- Can share a genuine two-way relationship with those they seek to help
- Asks good questions to encourage those in trouble to think for themselves
- Acknowledges their own limitations to themselves and others
- Works on change in themselves and others by praying and trusting God’s Spirit to act

In a world where anxiety reigns, and as part of Christian communities where anxiety is also, not surprisingly, prevalent, a way that helps us to understand how we work, and guides us to get unstuck, is a theory that God can use to grow us in awareness of self and dependence on Him as He grows us into maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:15). This book helps us to do this.



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