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BETHEL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
BETHEL UNIVERSITY

HEALTHY PARENTING IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM

A THESIS PROJECT REPORT  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY  
IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

BY  
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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA  
MAY 2021



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## ABSTRACT

In the New Testament, there are several passages that illustrate the way in which Christians are to interact with each other. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, Romans 12:3-5, and Ephesians 4:4-5 the apostle Paul describes the connection Christians have with one another as being like a body. Through Jesus Christ, Christians are all connected in this body, the body of Christ. The apostle Paul writes, “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).<sup>1</sup>

Between 1950 and 1960, Murray Bowen began to develop an integrative theory of the family which he called “family systems theory” (FST). FST describes the family as one emotional unit rather than a collection of autonomous people.<sup>2</sup> The theory describes humans as living in relationships with emotional connections and these connections pass the anxiety of family members to each member of the family system along interconnected pathways. This idea was a departure from the linear causation theories espoused at the time Bowen proposed his theory. Bowen described anxiety—defined in this project as a reaction to a threat that is real or imagined—as existing in two foundational forms, chronic and acute. Chronic anxiety can be passed through family generations and often shows up in recurring generational patterns and similarities. Although family systems

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<sup>1</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture citations are taken from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on [Bowen] Theory*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1988), viii.

theory was developed based on the assumption that humans are a product of evolution, this project has shown the connection between FST and biblical doctrines and theology.<sup>3</sup> This project has shown that FST can be a valuable tool for Pastors and parents as they observe their congregation or family's emotional reactivity. It has also shown that through a better understanding of the doctrine of sanctification and the body of Christ, they will improve their own family's emotional connections and bring about a healthier family system.

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<sup>3</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 3.

## CHAPTER ONE: AWARENESS OF THE FAMILY SYSTEM

### **The Lack of Systems Thinking**

Throughout history humankind have lived their lives in relationship with other people. Scripture records the first humans lived in relationship, interacting with each other. The stories of humankind's interactions with God recorded in the Bible are—at their base level—a story about relationships. Before sin entered the created world God was an unobstructed part of the man-woman relationship. There was a triad relationship that included the man Adam, the woman Eve, and God that represented the standard of human relationships in their purest form (pre-sin).

Genesis records the first act of sin as Eve succumbed to the tempting of the serpent and in turn convinced the man to sin. This original sin altered the God-man-woman triad permanently and created the broken family system seen today. Many have studied and theorized about this relational system in which humans relate to one another. In the middle of the twentieth century, family therapist Murray Bowen theorized that families exist and interact as an emotional unit, a complex and interconnected system of relational triangles and emotional reactivity. His theory went against the prevalent theories of the time, in which families were thought to be made up of autonomous individuals. The Freudian psychoanalytic method of therapy saw pathology in the individual that resulted from linear causation. The linear way of thinking says that the actions of person A cause person B be affected negatively; pathology goes one way. Contrastingly, Bowen's theory observed that the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of each

family member both contribute to and reflect what is occurring in the family as a whole.<sup>4</sup> He observed that all family members were interconnected, and each affected the other. In 1976, Bowen published the eight concepts of his family systems theory. It was a groundbreaking theory that Bowen had developed over a period of more than four decades. Henry Lederer stated that “throughout history there have been four hundred original ideas; Murray Bowen has produced one of them.”<sup>5</sup>

The problem that this project addressed is the lack of awareness of and instruction in the concepts of nuclear family emotional system and Differentiation of Self Scale (two of the eight concepts found in family systems theory) in the local church as it relates to parenting children. In response to this problem the researcher reviewed foundational and supporting Scripture along with the theological material dealing the subjects of family relationships and interactions, self-differentiation, and spiritual formation. The researcher reviewed relevant literature in the areas of family systems theory (FST), focusing primarily on the concepts of the scale of self-differentiation and the nuclear family emotional system, and relevant literature addressing biblical parenting. After assessing awareness of these concepts through original qualitative research involving Christian parents living in Nebraska and Minnesota, the project developed a set of principles that may be used for equipping parents in the local church.

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: J. Aronson, 1978), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2019), xiv.

### **Project Parameters**

The research was limited to traditional families with a husband, wife and biological children living together. Further, the research was limited to traditional families with evangelical Christian values who lived in the midwestern United States. In this project, “evangelical Christian” describes a person who believes in the authority of the scriptures, attends church regularly, and believes that Jesus is the only way to salvation.

The eight concepts of Bowen’s family systems theory build in a logical progression that build on the family as an emotional unit are:

- Nuclear Family Emotional System
- The Differentiation of Self Scale
- Triangles
- Cutoff
- Family Projection Process
- Multigenerational Transmission Process
- Sibling Position
- Emotional Process in Society

To narrow the focus of the scope of the study, the research was limited to the first two concepts from the list above: nuclear family emotional system, and the differentiation of self scale. These two concepts are foundational concepts in family systems theory.

### **Project Assumptions**

For this research project, the researcher assumed that all families have varying levels of chronic anxiety that exist beneath the surface of relational interactions. This chronic anxiety is often passed down through the generations creating patterns of anxious behaviors. The researcher also assumed that psychological science and research do not supersede biblical doctrine and instruction, but rather affirm it. Some individuals

experience a more intense level of dysfunction in their family of origin and would benefit from professional counseling to work through the trauma that occurred in their family or at other points in their lives. Therefore, it was assumed that the principles developed through the research of this project could be applied more easily to families that function with a higher level of differentiation. Finally, it was assumed that self-differentiation from an unhealthy family system is evidenced by a willingness to go against that emotional system.

### **Streams of Study**

To show the biblical and theological foundation found in family systems theory, the researcher reviewed the foundational and supporting Scriptures along with the theological resources that made connections between FST and the Biblical narrative. The researcher studied both the old and new testament and examined those sections of scripture that addressed the FST concepts examined in the project. In addition, the researcher examined the areas of scripture and that dealt with the subject of spiritual formation and then connected those to Bowen's concept of self-differentiation. In addition to the biblical theological study, the researcher explored the relevant literature in the areas of family systems theory (FST) specifically related to the concepts of the Differentiation of Self Scale and the nuclear family emotional system, as well as relevant literature that addressed biblical parenting. The researcher also conducted field research through an anonymous survey distributed to Christian families, and through face-to-face interviews of Christian parents who fit criteria delineated by the project parameters. Lastly, the researcher developed a set of principles to be used by the local church to equip parents to better understand their own family's emotional system, and to help the individual in the family system differentiate themselves.

### **Setting of the Project**

The setting for the project was among Christian parents living in the Midwest; specifically, Christian parents of traditional families with a husband, wife, and biological children who live in the upper Midwest. Descriptors such as “traditional” that were previously used for the family are starting to change meaning in our current society. It is not uncommon to meet families that have experienced divorce, abuse, or the addition of stepchildren, and these family dynamic factors may have a negative influence on the effectiveness of the principles identified in this project. It may be necessary for these non-traditional families to engage in professional Christian therapy to help them navigate the complex emotional obstacles caused by high levels of emotional anxiety and reactivity. Therefore, the setting of this project focused on families who would be identified as traditional and attempted to help them to recognize the chronic anxiety in their family emotional system.

In addition to the family setting, this study focused on the role of the local church as a means for instruction in the principles given in the project. Whereas families rarely submit willingly to professional family therapy, most will attend a seminar or class or listen to a sermon in their local church. The psychological principles found in family systems theory are not necessarily incongruent with biblical preaching and teaching and this study will show there can be points of compatibility. One caution held by some in the evangelical church in the United States is the fear that the field of psychology seeks to usurp biblical doctrine as a foundation for a person’s mental health. This study sought to find a niche in the teaching and discipling life of the local church that complements and is centered in theological soundness.

## **Origins of the Project**

### *Connection to the Researcher*

The idea for the project had been developing in the mind of the researcher for several years prior to the actual process of writing. His spouse has spent twenty years educating preschool children and observing and interacting with the parents of those children the researcher had the occasion to observe the emotional reactivity of parents and their children in a Christian preschool setting over the last several years. Through informal conversations with teachers and observing the behavior of parents and their children over the course of a school year during transition times such as student pick up and drop off, the researcher observed a general lack of self-awareness of chronic anxiety forces at work. The researcher's spouse drew the same conclusion as she interacted with parents throughout the school year and at certain school events such as parent-teacher conferences, and in conversations with parents outside the classroom setting. Some of the evidence to support this hypothesis is seen in the behavior change in the anxious child once the teacher takes charge of the students in the class. The children show an observable positive behavior change over a short period of time after the parent leaves the child in the teacher's care. When the parent comes back to pick up the child, the same anxious negative behavior between parent and child surfaces again. The hypothesis arrived at by the researcher in these specific situations is that the parent is likely transferring their own anxiety or the anxiety in the marriage onto their child through triangling—a concept developed by family systems theory—causing the anxious behavior.

In addition to a Christian preschool setting, the researcher has spent over twenty years in full-time ministry in a variety of settings including children and youth ministry in



the evangelical church context, and children's and youth ministry in the Christian camp setting. The same characteristics observed in a preschool setting are often recreated in the church setting. However, in the church setting the time spent with children is less than in a preschool setting, which results in fewer opportunities to observe a change in behavior. Over the years the researcher has developed an increasing passion for equipping parents with tools to become better people emotionally (more differentiated), and as a result becoming better spouses and better parents. As the researcher studied the concepts of family systems theory and saw the practical nature of the principles espoused by the theory first introduced by Bowen, the need for instructing the layperson in the local church became more evident.

#### *Immediate Ministry Context*

The local church setting is a logical place to equip Christian parents. Many of the families with children who are members of the local church have a desire to train their children to follow Jesus Christ and are motivated to find answers to their parenting questions. The project was not directed to a specific church context, but to parents and pastors in evangelical churches in the upper Midwest where the researcher has spent his entire ministry career, specifically Nebraska and Minnesota. The area of emotional health has begun to gain a broader audience with the work of pastors like Peter Scazzero, Robert Creech, and Jim Herrington. However, associating the concepts of family systems theory with a Christian parenting philosophy is an area of study that is less common, and can be a positive tool for Christian parents. Most parents with young children belong to the so-called "Generation Z" and "Millennial" generations. These groups have a value system and parenting philosophy that is different from their predecessors. Family system theory and its concepts go beyond generational labels and describe relationships at a

foundational level not bound by generational and cultural morays. They address family problems in a way that focuses on helping those who are emotionally the strongest member of the system, rather than focusing on the symptom bearer or so-called identified patient. As the evangelical church in the Midwest seeks to fulfill its mandate to “make disciples” given by Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19-20, it will need to be better equipped to identify and address the increase in chronic anxiety among its members.

*Importance of the Project to the Church at Large*

In the mid-1990s Edwin Friedman, a student of Bowen and a pioneer in bringing the theory into the church and synagogue, published “Failure of Nerve.” He proposed that “the climate of contemporary America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership.”<sup>6</sup> Friedman’s observation was made in the 1990s and the anxiety of our society has continued to grow from that time till our present day. Our societal regression is observable in a reading of the news stories of the day. The coronavirus pandemic, the presidential election, and the social unrest of 2020-2021 have shown just what acute anxiety can do to a relational system. During times of high stress like a shutdown of society and the many uncertainties related to it, it can be observed that those individuals who would be described as more “self-differentiated” in FST rise above the anxiety and lead with confidence and courage. The body of Christ in the United States has an opportunity to become the “differentiated self” as it were. Scripture states that Christians have not been given a “spirit of fear” (2 Tim. 1:7 *Christian Standard Bible*) God, who

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Church Publishing Inc.,2007), Chapter 2, “A Society in Regression.” Kindle edition.

holds all things in His hands is in complete control of this world. The Church can become a tool to be used by the Holy Spirit of God to raise up individuals who rise above the societal anxiety and can be a light to the lost and unsaved world.

The project was qualitative in nature. Case studies and grounded theory research were the main model employed. The primary tools used in this project were face-to-face personal interviews with couples with children, and an online anonymous survey. The main purpose of the field research was to assess the level of the parent's awareness of the anxiety within their family system.

### **Research Methods**

The primary research data used in the project included face-to-face interviews with parents as part of the field research in the bounded system of parents of traditional families. The families represented multiple ages (from young families to families with college age children). The project also included personal observations of and interviews with teachers in a preschool setting and observing families informally. Finally, the project compiled and analyzed the results from surveys administered in an anonymous online format.

The project also examined what the biblical and theological resources taught concerning the topic of family relationships as they relate to FST, as well as the role of the Christian in the universal body of Christ. The researcher studied the biblical narrative when it recorded family interactions, observing where FST could identify the interactions through FST terminology. This data was collected from various resources pertaining to FST from both a Christian psychological viewpoint and a secular psychological viewpoint.

## **Project Overview**

The researcher designed the project in three phases of research. The first phase was to review foundational and supporting Scripture along with the theological material as it relates to nuclear family systems and self-differentiation found in FST, and to show the congruency between spiritual formation and the differentiation of self. The researcher looked at examples from the Old Testament narratives that described interactions within the biblical families that portrayed family systems as predicted in FST. He also examined the life of Christ described in the gospels and showed how Christ exemplified the well-differentiated person. The researcher revealed how spiritual formation in the life of the Christian, uniquely equips him to become more differentiated from his family system as he emulates Christ's example.

The second phase was to review available literature relating to family systems theory and the concepts of nuclear family systems, and self-differentiation from both Christian and secular psychological viewpoints. The project relied heavily on the work of Murray Bowen, Michel Kerr, and Roberta Gilbert, who worked directly with Bowen and have continued to develop the work he began. These scholars have greatly influenced the literature stream and provide a large share of the descriptions of the FST concepts that were addressed in the project.

The third phase of the project was to conduct original research that gave support to the principles presented by the researcher. That field research had two parts, an online anonymous survey, and personal interviews with five traditional couples with children. The primary purpose of both parts of the field research was to assess the ways in which the parents handle anxiety in the family, and to assess their awareness of chronic anxiety that influences their reactions under stress. The researcher sought to understand how the

amount of chronic anxiety that exists in a family system can hinder progress in self-differentiation. Further, the researcher made a connection between self-differentiation and spiritual formation in the Christian. The data gathered from the surveys and interviews was evaluated and the researcher, synthesized with the biblical data and literature stream data to discover how the Christian faith influences the progress toward self-differentiation.

The final phase was to create a set of principles based on the data gathered from the interviews and surveys and through the grounded theory study, that could be used in the local church to equip parents to apply FST to their family system.

## CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL CONNECTIONS TO FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

### **Theological Considerations: Nuclear Family Emotional System**

Bowen's family systems theory is based on the assumption that humans are a product of evolution.<sup>7</sup> Bowen anchored his theory in the belief that the human and the human family were driven by processes "written in nature."<sup>8</sup> The Christian, however, believes that God created the systems found in the natural world and, like all creation before the fall, they were "good." This project examined the connections between family systems theory and biblical doctrine, and the connections in the narratives found in Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. Since the Bible contains accounts of human behavior, it is appropriate for interpreters to bring questions from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology.<sup>9</sup> When one studies Scripture with a family system frame of reference, the connections to FST become clearer. Though Bowen's theory does not come from the perspective of a Christian researcher, some biblical scholars have made the connections. Rabbi Edwin Friedman was integral to bringing the family systems theory concepts into the realm of the church family structure. His work has helped bridge FST and the biblical worldview. In the recent history of the evangelical church, some of its more conservative wings have been reticent to include a

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<sup>7</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 26.

<sup>9</sup> R. R. Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 101.

psychological aspect to biblical theology. The argument of some comes from their opposition to the Darwinian foundations of Bowen's theory. Suhendra, for example, believes that the differentiation-of-self concept is contrary to biblical anthropology at three points: the identity of man, the purpose of man, and human relationships.<sup>10</sup> In his critique of Bowen's theory Suhendra describes where FST fails the biblical test.

Concerning man's identity, the Bible teaches that man is created in the image of God, fully dependent on the creator. ... Therefore, Bowen's assumption that man is only a natural being is contradictory to scriptural teaching. The purpose of man is to glorify God, not merely be a differentiated being. ... Human relationships have to be seen in the context of the primary vertical relationship between man and God.<sup>11</sup>

Suhendra's critiques have some validity. Kerr would agree that integrating Bowen theory with theology and the spiritual realm is a misinterpretation of Bowen's intent.<sup>12</sup> Bowen did consider supernatural phenomena such as religious healings as part of the functioning of the system that had real impact on individuals. However, Bowen only addressed the facts of a religious healing or any religion in general and avoided the mysticism associated with the supernatural. Nevertheless, Kerr has proposed a potential ninth FST concept. This new concept would include a supernatural aspect of the functioning of the family system, albeit a scientific examination of supernatural. This chapter shows that despite the evolutionary foundation of family systems theory and the absence of any biblical consideration of human relationships, many of the concepts and processes of FST are demonstrated in both the Old and New Testaments.

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<sup>10</sup> Junianawaty Suhendra, "A biblical Critique on Bowen's Family Systems Theory of Differentiation of Self", Ed. Chris Shirley (D.Min. Diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 6 accessed June 17, 2020, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> Suhendra, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Kerr, 323.

Bowen was not concerned with “why” an individual reacted as they did; he focused on the “what,” “when,” “where,” and “how.” If God is the creator of man and of relationships, then He is also the creator of the systems Bowen observed. The literature stream dealing with the spiritual aspect of FST is expanding, and a growing number of biblical scholars are making the connection between family systems theory and biblical doctrine. God created humans to be relational beings and to live every day in relationship with other human beings. Therefore, seeking to understand how reactions to anxiety in a family system are demonstrated in the narrative of Scripture must not lead the researcher away from a foundation based in Scripture. Theological connections can be made to FST as well as examples of the nuclear family emotional systems and self-differentiation in the narrative of Scripture.

*Theological Connections: The Trinity*

A logical starting place to study the connections between Scripture and FST is in the three persons of the Trinity. Among the religions of the world, Christianity is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God.<sup>13</sup> The nature of the trinitarian relationship is eternal and therefore cannot be fully comprehended by humans. However, the Christian can deduce from Scripture the relational nature of the Trinity. According to 1 John 4:8b, God is love. “If the central way of characterizing the Trinitarian communion is love, we can find in the inner-trinitarian life of God reasons for assuming that this love also embraces the Trinitarian relations.”<sup>14</sup> In a relationship based

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<sup>13</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 292.

<sup>14</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, “The Eternity of the Triune God: Preliminary Considerations on the Relationship between the Trinity and the Time of Creation,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 3 (2018): 353, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/moth.12421>.



on love, there must be an object of that love; love assumes freedom in giving and waiting to receive. Understanding the love relationship within the Trinity gives a standard for humankind to emulate. The importance of this idea to the examination of the theological connections to FST lies in the relational basis of the Trinity. Because of their relationships with each other, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute a single system.<sup>15</sup>

The Trinity is a foundational doctrine of the Christian belief system; from the viewpoint of the Christian, it is a complete, anxiety-free, functioning family system. The members of the trinitarian relationship has their own distinctives that contribute equally to the system, and at the same time has their own individual role to play. For example, “the Father is the Speaker, the Son the spoken Word, and the Holy Spirit the Listener who communicates what he has heard in the divine conversation to God’s created conversation partners.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both other members. Erickson states that “each member of the trinity has had a particular function unique to [themselves], but this only is a temporary role for the purpose of accomplishing a given end and not a change in essence.”<sup>17</sup> The Son was sent to live as a man on earth, willingly fulfilling God’s plan of redemption. That does not mean the other members must “overfunction” to compensate

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<sup>15</sup> Craig L. Nesson, “Surviving Congregational Leadership: A Theology of Family Systems,” *Word and World* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 393.  
<https://ezproxy.bethel.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000009339&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

<sup>16</sup> Schwöbel, 355.

<sup>17</sup> Erickson, 309.

for the change; the members remain eternally equal. No member of the Trinity could be comprehended apart from the unity of the entire system.<sup>18</sup>

The Trinity serves as the standard of the perfect union of individual members in a relationship system. It can be understood in two senses: as orthodoxy, right belief about God, and as orthopraxis, the right practice or living out of this belief.<sup>19</sup> As the Christian lives out their right belief about the trinitarian relationship, the relationships in their family system will benefit when the Trinity relationship is the standard.

#### *Theological Connections: Creation*

Scientific discoveries of systems in the natural order have occurred in multiple branches of study and at multiple levels of the created universe. From the micro level to the macro level, each scientific discovery finds deeper interconnection and relationship. Nesson notes how creation involves dynamic interaction between freedom (innovation) and order (preservation).<sup>20</sup> God intervenes when homeostasis—the concept that systems tend to remain the same—becomes detrimental, and sends the change needed to bring about health, thus bringing innovation to counteract the preservation (homeostasis) in the emotional system. Bowen believed his family system theory occurred as a natural product of evolution just as the systems found in the universe functioned for billions of years prior to human beings coming on the scene.<sup>21</sup> Evangelical Christians discount evolution

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<sup>18</sup> Nesson, 393.

<sup>19</sup> Declan Marmion, “Trinity and Relationships: Theological Trends,” *The Way* 43, no. 2 (2004): 118. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=CPLI0000391474&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>20</sup> Nesson, 394.

<sup>21</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 24.

as it relates to human development; they believe that humankind was created and in turn, the relationship system was also created.

*Theological Connections: Sin*

The essence of the theological understanding of sin is broken relationships. This applies to relationships between a human and another human and, more importantly, between humans and God. When studying FST, a question that must be asked is: why do humans struggle to maintain healthy relationships with their fellow humans? The biblical answer to that question is sin. Before sin, creation was in a state of what Hebrew describes as *shalom*. Shalom is the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight.<sup>22</sup> Every relationship in the created world experienced shalom; God said it “was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Genesis describes humankind relating to one another without emotional anxiety, in shalom with each other. This was the nearest humankind ever came to replicating the trinitarian family. That family was broken when the man and woman disobeyed God’s law. When Adam and Eve sinned, the consequences of that sin reached through time and space to affect every human relationship. Paul stated in Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way, death came to all people, because all sinned.” The Trinity is an example of a relationship humankind can never replicate because of original sin. Family systems theory gives the Christian another perspective into the understanding of human sin. Family systems theory describes dysfunction or sin as not attributable only to individuals but also to the system of

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<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 10.

relationships in families.<sup>23</sup> Sin or dysfunction is often passed down from generation to generation, and the scriptural record bears that out in the Old Testament narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others. Biblical families are often described as repeating the dysfunctions passed down through generations showing how sin has an effect on individuals, family systems, cultures, and societies.

*Theological Connections: Salvation*

If the manifestation of sin is broken relationship between God and man, then the restoration of that relationship is in the theological concept of salvation. The Hebrew concept of “shalom”—sometimes translated peace—might be better understood as salvation, a hope of relationship at peace.<sup>24</sup> The relationship between man and woman and the Trinity first severed by sin in Genesis one, can now be reconciled through salvation. God as the Heavenly Father (parent) restores humankind’s place in the trinitarian community through his son Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf. God created a world that lived in a constant state of shalom, and through His Son and through His Spirit he is actively seeking to restore relationships broken by sin. Because of the forgiveness available to the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the world is free to forgive one another, when sin brings relational conflict.

Relational triangles in FST are observed when anxiety between two people is transferred to a third party in order deal with that anxiety. Triangles are where dysfunction is fed and maintained. It is by salvation through faith in Jesus Christ that broken relationships can begin to be properly restored. In salvation the Christian is given

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<sup>23</sup> Nesson, 395.

<sup>24</sup> Craig L. Nesson, “Surviving Congregational Leadership,” 396.

the grace of God for the forgiveness of their sin (Eph. 4:8,9) as the only means to restore humankind's relationship with God. As the concepts of FST are brought into the study of salvation, Jesus' example of grace and forgiveness are shown to be the marks of one practicing self-differentiation in their family system.

*Theological Connections: The Church*

Through baptism into the Holy Spirit, humans become part of a new kind of family and a new way of relating to one another that is unified around Jesus Christ. Theologically speaking, this is the "church universal." Every person who is in Christ is part of the church. It is a church without walls or classes, and it is not bound by time or place. The young boy or girl who receives the gospel of Jesus Christ is just as much a member of the universal church as the great apostle Peter. "While universal in nature, the church finds expression in local groupings of believers who display the same qualities as does the body of Christ as a whole."<sup>25</sup> One of the key concepts in family systems theory is the idea of interconnectedness, meaning that person A and B and C and D are all interconnected, and all influence each other. This is opposed to the concept of linear causation, which says that pathology or unhealthiness in person in A affects B, and B affects C, and so on down the line.<sup>26</sup> The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 that the members of the local church groupings are connected in such a way that "when one part suffers, every part suffers, if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor.

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<sup>25</sup> Erickson, 957.

<sup>26</sup> R. P. Stevens, "Analogy or Homology? An Investigation of the Congruency of Systems Theory and biblical Theology in Pastoral Leadership," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22, no. 3 (1994): 174. <https://ezproxy.bethel.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=1995-21039-001&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

12:26). The concepts of connectedness are brought out by Paul in his other writings. In his letter the Romans, he describes members of the church body as belonging to each other (Rom. 12) and Ephesians 4:4, in which he writes, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called.”

As connections between the nuclear family emotional system and the church of Jesus Christ are studied, the parallels between the two are revealed. The family as an emotional system means that whatever affects one affects each one in the system, as anxiety moves easily from person to person in the group.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the same principles at work in biological family relationships are also present in the relationships created through the bond of the Spirit of God. As a result of that similar bond, emotional anxiety passes through the local church from person to person, just as it does in the biological family. It is humankind’s chronic and acute sin that ensures that the local church will always fall short as it tries to live out its relational mandate found in Matthew 22:37: to love their neighbor as themselves. To repair this relationship breakdown between God and man, Scripture teaches that God intends to restore the original kingdom of God described as a “new Jerusalem” in Revelation chapter 21. He will restore the original human-human-God triad relationship seen in the Garden of Eden. In Revelation 21 and 22, the vision of a new Jerusalem and the removal of the curse of sin are indicative of the restoration.

The Church of Jesus Christ functions much like any family system; it is made up of people living in relationships and behaving in the ways described in FST. Scripture

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<sup>27</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, (Leading Systems Press, 2006): 6, Kindle edition.

reveals that the body of Jesus Christ is the example of a true family and all earthly relationships that function outside the body of Christ are copies or secondary types of the original family that lived in the Garden of Eden. Without the working of the Spirit of God in individual spiritual formation as a stabilizing relationship force, these relationships will inevitably remain less emotionally healthy than their Spiritual counterparts.

### **Nuclear Family Emotional System in the biblical Narrative**

#### *Old Testament: Adam and Eve*

In Genesis 2:18 God said that it was not good for man to be alone, so He created Eve to be a helpmate for Adam, thus creating the first nuclear family. The narrative in Genesis chapter 2 shows us the love of God. He took care to form Adam out of dust and to imbue Him with life.<sup>28</sup> Adam describes the interconnectedness of their relationship, saying “this is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 3:23); the author of Genesis comments in verse 24 that the man is “united to his wife and they become one flesh.” Adam and Eve were fused into an emotional oneness and that fusion was “good,” as God intended. The first nuclear family functioned just as it was created by God to do in its purest form. Adam and Eve lived and worked in the garden naked and unashamed in an unhindered relationship with each other and with God in a perfect relational triad. Kidner states that like the father of the bride, God Himself leads the woman to the man.<sup>29</sup> What one observes in the first human relationship is the use of a relational triangle with God as the third side of the triangle in an uncorrupted emotional state.

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas Mangum, Miles Custis, and Wendy Widder, *Lexham Research Commentary: Genesis 1-11* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), section on Genesis 2:4-25. Logos version

<sup>29</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic): 71.

## Triangling

Sometime after the first family is introduced in Scripture, there is the first recorded sin against God in Genesis 3:6. Following the first sin, the Bible records the first symptom of anxiety in the family emotional system brought about by that first sin against God. When God confronted Adam with that sin, he responded by bringing the woman into the conflict and the woman brought the serpent into the conflict. This type of emotional response is defined in Bowen family systems theory as “triangling.” Bowen observed that a two-person emotional system is unstable, and under stress it forms into a three-person triangle in reaction to the anxiety.<sup>30</sup> The concept of triangles provides a theoretical framework for understanding the microscopic functioning of all emotional systems.<sup>31</sup> The first nuclear family functioned as a healthy triangle between man, woman, and God. After sin was introduced, the first unhealthy triangle in which God was excluded was created by Adam and Eve. In addition to triangles, there are three other typical postures or patterns taken by anxiety in relationships: conflict, distancing, and overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity.<sup>32</sup> Each of these postures of anxiety can be observed in their early forms in this first confrontation between God and humans.

## Distance

In Genesis 3:9 Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden. When God posed the question to Adam, “Where are you?” Adam’s response was that he was afraid, so he hid. In the infancy of his life of sin Adam had already begun to distance himself from

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<sup>30</sup> Bowen, 478.

<sup>31</sup> Bowen, 478.

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 11.



God. When a person distances themselves from the person with which they are in conflict, the hope is that the anxiety will decrease. However, though they are distanced externally they are still a great deal connected internally.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conflict**

Conflict results when neither person gives in to the other on major issues.<sup>34</sup> The conflict between Adam and Eve and God was major because of the consequences. Going against God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil would result in death. In Genesis chapter 3 there are the classic characteristics of conflict—blaming and accusations. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and the serpent accuses God of lying. In family systems theory, conflict is merely a symptom of the chronic anxiety in the system. In the conflict between humans and God in Genesis 3, eating the forbidden fruit was not the problem to be corrected; rather it was disobeying God's command—the sin—that was the true cause of the anxiety.

### **Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity**

Bowen states that in this posture of overfunctioning/ underfunctioning “one spouse becomes the more dominant decision-maker for the common self, while the other adapts to the situation.”<sup>35</sup> In the fruit eating narrative in Genesis 3, Eve appears as a more dominant partner, convincing Adam to follow her lead in disobeying God. Adam defers to Eve when he is confronted by God, and furthermore God's curse for Eve is that her

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<sup>33</sup> Gilbert, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Bowen, 204.

<sup>35</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 17.

desire will be for her husband. There are some arguments that the phrase “her desire will be for her husband” refers to a sexual desire similar to that expressed by the same Hebrew word *teshuqah* in the Song of Songs 7:10. Waltke interprets this phrase to mean that she will desire to control and dominate. This response is opposed to God’s plan to love and cherish, because of its parallel use in Genesis 3:16 with the word *mashal*, “he shall rule over you.”<sup>36</sup> Given the context, the former interpretation seems preferable.

*Old Testament: Jacob and His Family (Genesis 30-31)*

A family is an emotional unit. Gilbert gives two characteristics to further explain this concept.

1. Whatever affects one affects each one in the system. That is, anxiety moves easily from person to person in the group.
2. Family members trade “self” into the family relationship togetherness in a family “fusion” of selves.<sup>37</sup>

These characteristics can be found in the narrative of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 30-31. In Genesis 29:30, the author describes the state of the marriage relationship between Jacob and Leah as follows: “So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah.” Anxiety moves between Jacob’s wives Leah and Rachel when conflict grows as one bears children while the other does not. The barrenness of Rachel creates conflict between her and her sister Leah, and Jacob. Jacob is triangled into Rachel and Leah’s conflict by Rachel (Gen. 30:1-2), who states, “Give me children or I will die.” This is an overfunctioning posture taken by Rachel in order to force Jacob to relieve her anxiety about not having given him children. Rachel also triangles her servant Bilhah into

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<sup>36</sup> Mangum, Custis, and Widder, section on Genesis 3:1-24.

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 6.

the conflict and she is forced to sleep with Jacob to bear him a child (Gen. 30:4). This scenario demonstrates Gilbert's description of a family as a unit in which family members trade "self" into the family relationship togetherness in a family "fusion" of selves.<sup>38</sup> There is also a heightened sense of chronic anxiety in Rachel because of cultural expectations regarding the stigma of infertility. Barrenness and childlessness were at times viewed as either a test or a punishment by God and even as a cause for disgrace.<sup>39</sup> This cultural moray adds to the emotional anxiety in Jacob's family system. The narrative shows how easily the anxiety moves through the spousal competition spread among Rachel, Leah, Jacob, the children, and servants. In Genesis 31 the conflict between Jacob and his father-in-law Laban reaches a peak, and Jacob's response is to distance himself from Laban in secret (Gen. 31:20). Jacob resorts to trickery to deal with the conflict, which Laban discovers, and the conflict intensifies. Laban too demonstrates a dysfunctional behavioral pattern of deception. The first instance concerns the giving of his daughters to Jacob when Laban went back on his promise to give Rachel to Jacob (Gen. 29:25). The second is his self-seeking behavior—keeping the spotted and black lambs away from Jacob so that he might gain greater benefit from the livestock business arrangement (Gen. 30:35). The deceptive and self-seeking behavior of Laban is then seen to be repeated in his daughter after Jacob flees from Laban. Rachel steals the family goods and when Laban confronts her, she is deceptive with her father (Gen. 31:19, 34-35). The patterns of dysfunction and unhealthy relationships can be observed moving

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<sup>38</sup> Gilbert, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *The Israelite and Early Jewish Family: Summary and Conclusion* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), 182.

from Laban to Rachel and Leah. Jacob also acted deceitfully with his own family and came to find Rachel because he was distancing himself from his brother Esau (Gen. 27:43). The narratives of Jacob and Esau and of Laban and his daughters portray what Friedman describes as the five symptoms of chronically anxious families.<sup>40</sup>

1. Reactivity: The vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another. (Gen. 31:14-16)
2. Herding: A process through which the forces for togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members. (Gen. 29:22-27)
3. Blame displacement: An emotional state in which family members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny. (Gen. 31:14-16)
4. Quick-fix mentality: A low threshold for pain that constantly seeks symptom relief rather than fundamental change. (Gen. 31:14-16)
5. Lack of well-differentiated leadership: A failure of nerve that both stems from and contributes to the first four symptoms. (Gen. 27, 28)

#### *Other Examples*

Some other examples of the concept of the nuclear family system in the Old Testament can be found in the narrative Abraham and his emotional triangles with Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16). Another is the cultural anxiety in Israel after the period of the Judges when the people sought the “quick fix” and victory over their enemies by calling

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<sup>40</sup> Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, chapter 2, “Society in Regression.”

for a king like other nations had (1 Sam. 8). One can observe additional examples in the conflicts and triangles of David, Saul, and Jonathan (1 Sam. 19-26); David's anxiety and triangles with Absalom and Amnon (1 Sam. 15); and David's triangles and conflict with Uriah, Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 11). Furthermore, there are examples of similar unhealthy emotional patterns passed down through the family generations (which is predicted by FST concept "multi-generational transmission process"). For example, the emotional reactions in Abraham and Sarah and Hagar are repeated in the proceeding generations as was observed in the narrative of Jacob and Laban.

In these narratives of the Old Testament, the concept of a nuclear family emotional system is observed being played out among the characters in these narratives. These descriptions of family systems in the Old Testament demonstrated to the researcher the universality of the concepts of FST. The connections between FST and Scripture can help the pastor or teacher bolster their ability to help their members and students better understand themselves, and thereby become more differentiated in their own family, work, and church systems.

### **Theological Considerations: Differentiation of Self**

Bowen defined self-differentiation as a sliding scale of human functioning or, in broader terms, similar to a scale of emotional maturity.<sup>41</sup> His definition of emotional maturity had more to do with emotional equilibrium than what others define as "normal" or mature. The differentiation of self scale has no correlation to intellect or socio-economic levels, though those factors do play a role in one's place on the scale.<sup>42</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup> Bowen, 472.

<sup>42</sup> Bowen, 472.

family is an emotional unit that creates a togetherness force. That force creates fusion in relationships in which we trade our self and pass anxiety through the family group. When there is too much fusion, the individual self becomes lost in the family group (less differentiated). The opposite of that togetherness force is the individuality force of self-differentiation that says, “be yourself, be an individual.”<sup>43</sup> The differentiated self is the one that is able to take part in relationships without giving up or taking on self. Relationship fusion taken to an unhealthy level causes much of the dysfunction in relationships. Self-differentiation works against the unhealthy fusion in a family system. Theologically construed, the capacity for self-differentiation is the capacity to be the persons God intends us to be.<sup>44</sup> If this is true, then one can conclude that Adam and Eve were able to fully differentiate themselves from each other before the fall. Since that profound dismantling of the sinless relationship between God and humankind, the ability of humans to differentiate themselves from the family system is a struggle. Until the future time when God restores the original Edenic state, human relationships will always be fraught with anxiety. In response to this state of being, biblical examples can be utilized by the pastor and teacher in the local church to point their members to a better differentiated self.

### *The Trinity and Self-Differentiation*

Just as God differentiates His own divine nature from but is in relationship with all that is other than Himself (His own internally generated modes of Father, Son, and

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<sup>43</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Leroy T. Howe, “Self-Differentiation in Christian Perspective,” *Pastoral Psychology* 46, no. 5 (1998): 348. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1023/A:1023067921771>

Holy Spirit), human beings are created with the capacity and calling to differentiate themselves as distinct individuals.<sup>45</sup> In the Trinity one can assume the example of a perfect functioning between individuality and togetherness. In the Trinity relationship, one can observe true personhood as an example that humanity can never achieve.<sup>46</sup> This agrees with Bowen's assertion that on the differentiation of self scale the highest level (100) was reserved for a being who was perfect in all levels of emotional, cellular, and physiological functioning. He later observed that only a small percentage of society would be classified above 60.<sup>47</sup> This project describes Jesus Christ in His role as a human male living on earth as the only person to live at 100 on the differentiation of self scale.

### *The Church and Self-Differentiation*

The theological theme of the "body of Christ" or the "church universal" also expresses the concepts of differentiation of self.<sup>48</sup> The individual Christian is called into a relationship with God (Gal. 2:20) but is also called into relationships with other believers (1 Cor. 12) as well as their neighbors around them (Matt. 22:39). In the midst of these callings, the Christian is commanded to serve others empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to eventually become mature (Eph. 4:13). Maturity is the Christian doctrine that best describes the differentiated self of FST. The apostle Paul wrote that one achieves greater maturity when there is unity of the faith, and knowledge of the Son of God (Eph.

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<sup>45</sup> Howe, 348.

<sup>46</sup> Brian D Majerus and Steven J. Sandage, "Differentiation of Self and Christian Spiritual Maturity: Social Science and Theological Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38, no. 1 (2010): 48. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1177/009164711003800104>

<sup>47</sup> Bowen, 474.

<sup>48</sup> Majerus and Sandage, 45.

4:13). This maturity is measured against the standard of what Paul describes as “Christ’s fullness” (Eph. 4:13). These higher reaches of the Christian life cannot be attained in isolation from one’s fellow believers.<sup>49</sup>

*Ultimate Differentiated Self: Jesus Christ*

Differentiation deals with the effort to define oneself, to exhibit self-control, to become a more responsible person, and to allow others to be themselves at the same time.<sup>50</sup> The record of Jesus in the gospels describes Him as someone who illustrates the ways in which He functioned at a high level of differentiation in His relationships.<sup>51</sup> If Bowen reserved the highest score of 100 on the differentiation of self scale for the perfect human, then Jesus is the one whom many Christians believe fits that level of human functioning.

Yet, there are problems that arise when one studies the gospels with the goal of understanding the human functioning of Jesus. First, the gospels were not written as scientific biographies by unbiased researchers; they were written as historical narrative motivated by theological concerns. The authors of the gospels believed that Jesus was the Son of God.<sup>52</sup> Second, the time span of discourse and narrative concerning the earthly life of Jesus is no more than 50 days of recorded public ministry, which may have extended

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<sup>49</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Bath, U.K.: Kingsley Books Inc., 2012), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Jim Herrington, R. R. Creech, and Trish Taylor, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 18.

<sup>51</sup> R. R. Creech, “Generations to Come: The Future of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Congregational Ministry,” *Family and Community Ministries (Online)*, (2015): 117, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://www.familyandcommunityministries.org>.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 29.



for up to three years. Bowen believed that differentiation had to be studied over months or years to get an accurate measure.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, the pastor and the teacher in the local church must put his faith in the accuracy of the accounts of Jesus found in Scripture.

Likewise,

*Jesus' Acts of Differentiation*

When studying a person's level of differentiation, FST demands that one puts the individual into the context of their family system, both immediate and extended. This is documented in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which both show the connection of Jesus to His earthly relatives in their genealogies (Matt. 1:1-17, Luke 3:23-38). In Jesus' earthly life, His acts of differentiation are recorded in the gospels and can serve as an example of His level of differentiation in His family system. For the individual who wishes to raise her level of differentiation through her spiritual formation she looks to Jesus Christ. Paul says that when one beholds the glory of the Lord he is transformed into the image of Christ with ever increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Luke records a brief scene with Jesus as a 12-year-old boy. The scene begins after the family visits Jerusalem for the Passover feast and Jesus becomes separated from them. After several days they find Him in the temple and Mary says, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you" (Luke 2:48). Mary attempts to put the blame for her and Joseph's anxiety on Jesus when she asks, "Son, why have you treated us like this? (Luke 2:48)." In response, the young Jesus takes an I-position with His anxious parents, demonstrating an already growing

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<sup>53</sup> Bowen, 473.

differentiation from His parents and an understanding of His relationship with God.<sup>54</sup> He asks, “Why were you searching? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). Bowen describes the differentiated person as one who takes the position as a “responsible I,” or one who takes responsibility for her own happiness and comfort and avoids blaming others for their lack of happiness.<sup>55</sup>

After the scene with the boy Jesus in Luke 2, the Bible records nothing of Jesus’ life as a young adult or His interactions with His family before He started His ministry. In the first scene Jesus comes to John the Baptizer to be baptized by him (Matthew 3:13-16). John initially refuses the act, but Jesus responds to this well-respected prophet in a “responsible I” posture. Jesus defines His own obedience to God’s purpose for Him and is baptized. Later in Matthew, Jesus further defines His ministry and methodology in contrast to John’s, His disciples’, and the Pharisees’ (Matt. 9:14-16).

Another example of Jesus’ well-defined self is in His temptation in the wilderness. Jesus has no food for forty days and is weakened both physically and emotionally. In the account (recorded in Matthew Mark, and Luke) Satan tempts Jesus to seek comfort, power, and popularity, all of which are counter to His calling, and Jesus maintains His basic self and refuses. The basic self, Bowen observed, is that part of a person that is non-negotiable in the relationship system.<sup>56</sup> Satan attempted to get Jesus to

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<sup>54</sup> R. R. Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 118.

<sup>55</sup> Bowen, 495.

<sup>56</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 120.

give up His “self” in exchange for comfort and power. Yet, Jesus did not and thereby demonstrated His level of self-differentiation (Matt. 4:1-11).

Jesus also demonstrated His level of differentiation as he related to the religious leaders of the time. Often Jesus would say, “you have heard it said . . ., but I say to you” (Matt. 5), contradicting the well-established rabbinical teaching of His time. The religious system of Jesus’ day was in a general state of equilibrium until Jesus began His ministry on earth. Jesus often upset that equilibrium with His methods and statements about who He was, what His purpose was, and the gospel He proclaimed. Bowen saw that the family system had three reactions to a change in equilibrium. The system would react by saying, (1) “you are wrong,” (2) “change back,” and (3) “if you do not, these are the consequences.”<sup>57</sup> The Pharisees and religious leaders respond to Jesus in each of these ways (Matt. 12:2, 21:23; Luke 19:39, 47). Jesus exemplified an elevated level of differentiation throughout His ministry as He lived and taught among His family system. Differentiation cannot take place in a vacuum; it has to take place in relation to others, around issues important to both people.<sup>58</sup> Jesus connected intimately with His family, friends, and disciples and even His opponents. He demonstrated His ability to stay within His basic self, separate (differentiated), and also connected.

#### *Sanctification as Self-Differentiation*

Erickson defines sanctification as “the continuing work of God in the life of the believer.”<sup>59</sup> There are two basic senses of the word sanctification used in Scripture; one is

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<sup>57</sup> Bowen, 495.

<sup>58</sup> Bowen, 495.

<sup>59</sup> Erickson, 897.

the idea of setting apart a person, place, or thing that it may be holy, dedicated for a specific purpose. The objects in the temple such as the priestly garments were to be set apart for worship (Exod. 28), as were the priests themselves (Gen. 29). The second sense of sanctification is the idea of moral goodness or spiritual worth.<sup>60</sup> It is in this sense where congruency with the concept of self-differentiation is found. Before the connection to FST is examined, the process and characteristics of sanctification found in the New Testament should be explained. Erickson describes two main characteristics of sanctification. The first is its supernatural nature; it is a work of God. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: “May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.” In Titus 2:14 Paul writes: “[Jesus Christ] gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.” Finally, Hebrews 13:20-21 states, “Now may the God of peace ..., equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ.”

According to FST, self-differentiation is how one rises above the anxiety and regression in their family system. Kerr and Bowen define it thus:

Complete differentiation exists in a person who has fully resolved the emotional attachment to his family. He has attained complete emotional maturity in the sense that his self is developed sufficiently that, whenever important to do so, he can be an individual in the group. He is responsible for himself and neither fosters nor participates in the irresponsibility of others.<sup>61</sup>

To incorporate the concept of self-differentiation into biblical teaching one must lift up Jesus Christ as the ultimate example of self-differentiation. In 1 John 2:6 John

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<sup>60</sup> Erickson, 898.

<sup>61</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 97.

writes, “Whoever claims to live in Christ must live as Jesus did.” The Christian or disciple of Jesus Christ must strive to model their life with Jesus Christ as their human example. Dallas Willard writes that this process of spiritual formation involves three important aspects, each dependent on and connected to the other. First, the disciple of Jesus must accept the daily trials of life that come. Second, the disciple must live a life led by the Holy Spirit of God. Third, the disciple must commit to the practice the disciplines of the Christian life.<sup>62</sup>

The Christian must “make every effort” (2 Pet. 1:5) to be conformed to the character of Christ, but the obstacle to putting on that character is sin, and a symptom of sin is anxiety. Anxiety in the family system moves from individual to individual. Bowen did not believe in sin as it is defined here but believed that anxiety is a natural part of biological evolution.

Family systems theory is a scientific theory not interested in the theology of its principles or categories of right and wrong; it does not have a category for sin. FST sees human beings as either more or less “functional” in their family system, but that is an observation and not a judgment.<sup>63</sup> However, when making comparisons between FST and the theological teachings of Scripture, it is possible to view FST from both a scientific and hermeneutical standpoint and still maintain integrity as a preacher or teacher. Self-differentiation and Willard’s idea of the process of spiritual transformation described

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<sup>62</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006), 26-28.

<sup>63</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 126.

above mutually interpret each other.<sup>64</sup> The Christian teacher therefore, must take Bowen's theory a step further and interpret and describe differentiation as a partnership with Jesus Christ. Whereas Bowen saw self-differentiation as an individual effort, the disciple of Jesus Christ understands the need for the partnership of the Holy Spirit of God in order to move towards maturity. Differentiation, according to Bowen, is a working toward individuation.<sup>65</sup> Differentiation in the family system, according to the Bible, is done in the power of the Holy Spirit combined with the effort of the individual in the context of the body of Christ. The emotionally healthy mother or father of a family system seeks to increase their level of differentiation and take the necessary steps to facilitate that increase through imitation of Christ or spiritual formation. Healthy parenting in the family systems starts with the individual parent for the benefit of the members of the system. As this process continues, parents are better prepared to function as the modelers of a differentiated selves to their children. This creates the best environment for proper parenting.

### **Theology of Parenting**

Theologically, human parenting has its antecedents in the biblical concept of the fatherhood of God.<sup>66</sup> Both the mother and father bear the same responsibility for fulfilling what is represented by the fatherhood of God: for example, both nurture and

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<sup>64</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Bowen, 539.

<sup>66</sup> Myron Raymond Chartier, "A Theology of Parenting: An Incarnational Model," *American Baptist Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1984): 75. <https://web-a-ebshost-com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d83e4a19-d349-4f3a-8b9c-616a710087c1%40sdc-v-sessmgr01>

responsibility, compassion and chastisement.<sup>67</sup> Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (New English Translation 2). The word “train” (*chanak* in Hebrew) in this proverb is not some heavy-handed teaching as in a “transmissive content transfer, unilateral behavior modification, or breaking the child’s will, instead, it should be construed as initiating or introducing the child to the path or way of the Lord as a part of the family of God.”<sup>68</sup> The idea is to train a child in the way of wisdom found in the book of Proverbs, not the way of man (Prov. 14:12). This “way” is further described in the gospel of John as personified in none other than Jesus Christ Himself (John 14:6). Scripture teaches the parent not to be just a transmitter of a moral standard of living but also to be an example to the child; to *be* parents, not merely to be engaged in the task of parenting. For example, in Ephesians Paul instructs parents not to “exasperate” their children, but to deserve their children’s obedience.<sup>69</sup> As they train their child in the way of Jesus Christ, they must teach them to “live as Jesus did” (1 John 1:26). Teachers or parents are to be readily accessible so that their children may experience or witness the lessons that are fully animated by the parents in real-life situations.<sup>70</sup> Parents who model living after the way of Jesus Christ show their children what a self-differentiated person looks like.

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<sup>67</sup> Chartier, 75.

<sup>68</sup> S. S. Kang, “Out of the Ivory Tower and into the Playroom: A Case of Being Parents in God’s Household,” *Christian Education Journal* 15, no. 1 (2018): 75. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0739891318759722>

<sup>69</sup> Bruce, *Ephesians*, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Kang, 69.

Children are sinners. They are born under the effects of Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12) and can choose to disobey their parents' standards. In the Christian home, as the child grows under the instruction of God-fearing parents, they will come to a point in their lives when they become aware of their sin and guilt before God. It is an age when they truly understand they need to be forgiven. This point in the development of a child is sometimes referred to the "age of accountability."<sup>71</sup> The parent's task is to help the child understand God's standard, the effects of sin and its consequences.

Children are also made in the image of God; every child is born with ability and potential.<sup>72</sup> Every child is fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). Parenting is "a role which persons must assume and fulfill, in responsibility to a divine command as a necessary means for the development of children in the image and likeness of God into their own humanity."<sup>73</sup> Part of that responsibility is a parent's keen awareness of their own sinfulness, fallibility, and need of grace.<sup>74</sup> In other words, they must be keenly aware of their level of undifferentiation in their family system.

### **Conclusion**

The concepts of nuclear family emotional system and self-differentiation as described in FST can help the pastor and parent navigate the relationship anxiety in home and congregation. Many narratives in the Old and New Testaments recount relational

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<sup>71</sup> Erickson, 581.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce Narramore, "Parent Leadership Styles and Biblical Anthropology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135, no. 540 (1978): 353. <https://web-b-ebscohost.com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=c0a0cdd0-7115-4fea-abc4-032595877194%40sessionmgr103>

<sup>73</sup> Chartier, 75.

<sup>74</sup> Narramore, 356.



interactions that can be described by the concepts of FST. Characters triangle with others, they have conflict, they show healthy differentiation and unhealthy differentiation. As the pastor or parent becomes more familiar with Bowen's concepts, they enhance their ability to teach and lead in their family context. The individual Christian understands through FST that as they become more mature in their relationship in Christ, they can help to lower the level of anxiety in their family systems. Jesus Christ the Son of God exemplifies everything good that family systems theory assesses as being what needs to go right in a family system. The Christian looks to the example of Jesus Christ as he goes through trials and difficulty in relationships.

## CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Introduction

Before Bowen's family systems theory can be understood from a biblical perspective and utilized by parents and pastors, one must become accustomed to a systems way of thinking. Roberta Gilbert (a student of Bowen's at Georgetown) describes this task as a "retraining" of the brain.<sup>75</sup> Those who are raised in the west are trained at an early age to think in terms of cause and effect. Due to the prevalence of linear thinking in so many areas of learning, it takes a consistent disciplined approach to apply systems thinking to our relationships. Thinking systems for most people, is a different and unfamiliar way of thinking.

Many of Bowen's contemporaries saw family pathologies in the Freudian way of thinking, one of linear causation as described above. Cause-and-effect thinking in human relationships says that A causes B; the pathology moves in one direction. This way of thinking about a family sees the problem within the person of the patient being treated.<sup>76</sup> However, in family systems theory in its most basic form the anxiety travels in both directions—between husband and wife, wife and child or child and husband, and every other combination found in the nuclear family relationships. There is no one person to blame for high anxiety in the family because each person in the family contributes to the

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<sup>75</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Kerr, xv.

level of family anxiety. Bowen developed his theory as he was able to observe whole families who had schizophrenic children in an inpatient study at the National Institute for Mental Health. Over a period of five years, he was able to observe how the entire family was involved in the emotional process.

Dr. Bowen had developed his eight interlocking concepts in his family systems theory by the time he published his last comprehensive theory paper in 1976.<sup>77</sup> Those concepts were; differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and societal regression.<sup>78</sup> The eight concepts are interlocking, each depending on and connected to the others. Of those eight core concepts, this project focused on two: the nuclear family emotional system and the concept of differentiation of self.

### **Nuclear Family Emotional System**

The essence of the nuclear family emotional system concept is that each member of the family contributes to its emotional state; whatever affects one affects each one in the system.<sup>79</sup> This is the foundational concept on which the other concepts are built.<sup>80</sup> As the concept is examined further, some foundational processes must be described in order to better understand the nuclear family functioning.

Within FST there are two principle variables of process to explain the level of functioning within the nuclear family system: self-differentiation (which will be

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<sup>77</sup> Kerr, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Kerr, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 5.

described later) and chronic anxiety.<sup>81</sup> They are referred to as variables because they significantly affect all the other processes in FST.<sup>82</sup>

### *Anxiety*

Anxiety is the response of an organism to a threat, real or perceived. Most intense emotions can be referred to as anxiety.<sup>83</sup> Bowen's theory does not view anxiety as a psychiatric disorder, but rather as a natural process that happens in most living organisms.<sup>84</sup> "What psychiatry textbooks label as 'anxiety disorders' are but one of many symptomatic manifestations of an overactive anxiety system."<sup>85</sup> There are two types of anxiety that FST considers as it observes the family system: chronic and acute.

### **Acute Anxiety**

Gilbert describes acute anxiety as a reaction to the stressors that humans encounter on a daily basis, such as fender benders, stock market swings, or workplace threats.<sup>86</sup> "Acute anxiety generally occurs in response to real threats and is time limited. and people can usually adapt to acute anxiety fairly successfully."<sup>87</sup> When the acute anxiety continues and the family system does not adapt or return to relational equilibrium, the anxiety becomes chronic.

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<sup>81</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 112.

<sup>82</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 109.

<sup>83</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Kerr, 108.

<sup>85</sup> Kerr, 108.

<sup>86</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 7.

<sup>87</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 113.

## Chronic Anxiety

Chronic anxiety is a response to an imagined threat and is not time limited. “The response to the imagined threats is not experienced as time limited because such threats are accompanied by more uncertainty about when they will end and it is always present in the background of an individual.”<sup>88</sup> It is influenced by many things but is not caused by any one thing. Kerr comments about the possible source of chronic anxiety:

It appears that people can be “programmed” on biological and psychological levels to have certain levels of anxiety. The exact way in which a chronic anxiety is programmed into the individual is not well defined but based on the physiological aspect of anxiety, ... the programming may occur in the womb.<sup>89</sup>

The level of an individual’s chronic anxiety is related to two processes that are not under the individual’s control: (1) poorly differentiated relationship interactions in the relationship system in response to a stress or stressors in one or more members that raise the chronic anxiety in the system, and (2) the person’s functioning position in the system.<sup>90</sup>

The concept of “multigenerational emotional process” in Bowen’s theory describes the passing down of chronic anxiety through generations. Identifying the anxiety transmitted through one’s family of origin is an important step toward self-differentiation in the individual’s current family. To help in the process of differentiation in the family system, past generations of the family might be studied with special focus on topics pertinent to the causes of the anxiety. These areas of research may include

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<sup>88</sup> Kerr, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 233.

<sup>90</sup> Kerr, 110.

deaths, reproduction issues, money, religion, divorce, substance abuse, or any others that might be related to the current source of the anxiety. One specific method to research the issues prevalent in the nuclear family is through family diagramming. Family diagrams are an outgrowth of FST and are often a helpful way for families to identify the anxiety or emotional reactivity that has governed past generations of the nuclear family emotional system.<sup>91</sup> A family diagram is a means to visually identify patterns of dysfunction; it also functions as a tool for families to help them think about how past generations have handled difficult events or relationships. Family diagrams usually reveal the patterns of dysfunction and anxiety progressing from generation to generation. As they pass into the next generations, dysfunction and anxiety increase in intensity unless steps toward differentiation and adaptation are taken by the current generation. Family diagrams trace the ebb and flow of emotional process through the generations.<sup>92</sup> Though everyone experiences anxiety, the difference between people in the amount of chronic anxiety they experience appears to be based primarily in learned responses [from the family of origin].<sup>93</sup>

Bowen's theory [further] distinguishes between two kinds of chronic anxiety, internalized anxiety—which manifests in one or more locations of the body (inflamed bowel) or mind (hallucination) of an individual—and externalized anxiety, which an

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<sup>91</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 306.

<sup>92</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 306.

<sup>93</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 113.

individual acts out in one way or another (gambling, drinking, extra-marital affairs) in the relationship system.<sup>94</sup>

### *Physiology of Anxiety*

Bowen wanted his theory to be rooted in biological evolution. He did not want the theory to be thought of as a philosophy but wanted it to be firmly anchored in evolution and the emotional system.<sup>95</sup> There is a physiological aspect to internalized anxiety that takes place in most mammals. When subjected to stressors, mammals react in predictable ways. Gilbert describes the biological response to acute anxiety:

As soon as danger is perceived, adrenalin or epinephrine is secreted from the medulla (inner cells) of the adrenal gland (about the size of a large lima bean, sitting atop the kidney—thus ad-renal or epi-nephrine.) The hormone epinephrine increases the heartbeat, the blood pressure, sweating and gives the urge to flee, fight or freeze in place. (Interestingly, some species under stress will begin to caretake.) So, the adrenalin, or acute anxiety response makes it possible for the organism to react appropriately to imminent danger.<sup>96</sup>

Chronic anxiety also triggers a chemical process within the adrenal gland, which Gilbert describes as follows:

This time the outer cells of the adrenal gland, or “cortex” are involved, secreting the cortical steroid hormones such as cortisol. Those hormones (there are several) have so many effects that we are probably just beginning to understand a few of them. They also set into motion “cascades” of other hormonal secretions and effects in literally hundreds of interactions. Among others, effects of the cortical steroids are thus anti-allergic and anti-inflammatory. They may represent the body’s attempt to heal continuing cellular damage from the many effects of the chronic anxiety.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Kerr, 108.

<sup>95</sup> Kerr, 69.

<sup>96</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 8.

The effects of the increased flow of adrenaline can produce several more serious consequences. As chronic anxiety continues, “adrenaline keeps the system moving at a high speed, and deterioration [of the heart] occurs at a faster rate.”<sup>98</sup> The list of physiological symptoms of anxiety is extensive. Archibald Hart lists some of the “most important” as headaches, dizziness, insomnia, fatigue, trembling, dry mouth, vague aches and pains, excessive perspiration, heartburn, ringing in the ears, flushing, pounding heart, tense muscles, and palpitations.<sup>99</sup> Displaying symptoms does not always mean the individual is suffering from anxiety. Symptoms might be a result of an illness such as an ear infection that causes dizziness, for example. Hart lists three variables to take into account when assessing the cause of physical symptoms. (1) The number of symptoms you recognize (and whether or not they can be attributed to other causes). (2) The length of time you have experienced the symptoms. (3) Their intensity.<sup>100</sup> Bowen’s theory states that heightened chronic anxiety in a family system triggers the development of physical, emotional, or social symptoms in a family member.<sup>101</sup> Because of the close connection between these symptoms, Michael Kerr has recently proposed the addition of a potential ninth concept (mentioned in chapter two) in Bowen’s Family System Theory which he calls a “unidisease” concept. This concept describes the link between chronic anxiety in a family system and the psychological and physiological processes of individual family members. This concept would bring the family system approach to bear whether the

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<sup>98</sup> Archibald Hart, *Adrenaline and Stress: The Exciting New Breakthrough That Helps You Overcome Stress Damage* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 25.

<sup>99</sup> Hart, 48.

<sup>100</sup> Hart, 49.

<sup>101</sup> Kerr, 297.



symptoms are physical, mental, or behavioral.<sup>102</sup> As the pastor or parent begins to identify the anxiety in his family system, the physiological aspects of anxiety must be considered as well. It will benefit the pastor and parent to have a basic understanding of how physical illnesses can often be traced to anxiety in the system.

### *Patterns of Emotional Reactions*

When a family member becomes stressed everyone feels anxious, and that anxiety moves through the family causing the system to move towards fusion. A move towards family fusion is an emotional reaction to counteract a feeling of isolation and danger. This movement takes the form of four well-known patterns or postures. Like many of the processes in FST they are simply a natural, automatic function of an emotional reaction. Rather than calmly thinking through the possibilities, members of the family system react.<sup>103</sup> The four patterns or postures are triangles, conflict, distance, and overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity.<sup>104</sup> These typical patterns do not become a problem in a system if used briefly and rotated in their use. But they do become problematic when one of them becomes the only outlet for anxiety to the point where no one knows how to get out of the rut.<sup>105</sup> Having connected these four patterns in the biblical narrative in chapter 2, this chapter now discusses the particular attributes of each posture.

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<sup>102</sup> Kerr, 321.

<sup>103</sup> Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, 110.

<sup>104</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 11.

<sup>105</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 11.

## Triangles

Bowen observed that the most stable relationship system was a relational triangle. In FST the concept of relationship triangles is a crucial component, so much so that they appear in Bowen's theory five times and are derived from the first concept of nuclear family emotional system.<sup>106</sup> Like many of the concepts and observations in FST, triangles in and of themselves are not bad and they are not good; they are just a function of any relationship system. Triangles are formed by a relationship dyad as a way to relieve the stress that inevitably accompanies any two-person relationship. The inherent instability in any intimate dyad relationship is sufficient to render all families vulnerable to some degree of dysfunction at some points in time.<sup>107</sup> Kerr theorized that a two-person relationship is unstable because it has been clinically observed is that humans have a profound need for emotional closeness but are averse to too much of it. "A threat to closeness triggers feelings of rejection; a threat of too much closeness triggers feelings of being intruded upon, overwhelmed, and out of control."<sup>108</sup> These feelings then activate the stress response and, if prolonged, generate chronic anxiety. The ability to manage these feelings is dependent on how well differentiated one is from their relationship system. The purpose of the triangle is to maintain the equilibrium in the relationships involved. Another word for relational equilibrium used in FST is *homeostasis*. The term homeostasis is also used in biological systems to describe the organism's ability and need to maintain balance or stability. It is often maintained in the family organism at the

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<sup>106</sup> Gilbert, 43.

<sup>107</sup> Kerr, 13.

<sup>108</sup> Kerr, 13.

expense of some of its parts. The process is automatic and is evidence of people's powerful impact on one another.<sup>109</sup>

The formation of a triangle is seen as a solution by the people who form it. "Solution" is a relative term because someone pays a price for the triangle—two people gain at the expense of a third person. Triangles involve two people agreeing that the cause of their tension is not their own immaturity, but rather a third person. In a family, that person who pays the price is often a child. In the triangle there are usually two "insiders" and one "outsider." A common pattern is one in which the mother and child form the close twosome (insiders) and the father is the outsider. "Though the emotional forces may shift around in the triangle minute to minute, it will always come to rest with each person in the same position."<sup>110</sup> There are ways to compartmentalize anxiety in one part of the relational system so that anxiety impairs as few people as possible. When a triangle becomes overloaded one of the members of the triangle will involve a fourth person, creating interlocking triangles. Bowen first described the complexity that can build up:

A four-person system is four primary triangles, a five-person system is nine primary triangles, etc. This progression multiplies rapidly as systems get larger. In addition, there are a variety of secondary triangles when two or more may band together for one corner of a triangle for one emotional issue, while the configuration shifts on another issue.<sup>111</sup>

In a family system that functions in the lower part of the scale of differentiation, there are usually many interconnected triangles as the individual self is fused into the

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<sup>109</sup> Kerr, 129.

<sup>110</sup> Bowen, 479.

<sup>111</sup> Bowen, 479.

group. In such a situation anxiety travels through the interlocking triangles, forming polarized subgroups. As subgroups are formed, the system becomes polarized by factions that hold a “we-they” belief system. In the systems way of thinking it is important to remember that it is not the beliefs in each particular subgroup that cause this polarization or tension; rather it is a function of anxiety and is created by the high levels of undifferentiation.<sup>112</sup>

### **Conflict**

Conflict—also called marital conflict by Bowen—results when neither person is willing to give in on a major issue. Conflict also occurs when the one who has been giving in or adapting refuses to continue.<sup>113</sup> In conflict, blame is projected onto others and personal responsibility is put aside. John Paul Lederach writes that “conflict [is] composed of three elements: people, process, and problems.”<sup>114</sup> Ken Sande describes three responses to conflict: escape, attack, or peacemaking.<sup>115</sup> In an extreme form of the attack response in the family, conflict can deteriorate into physical violence and abuse.<sup>116</sup> Each system has a quantitative amount of undifferentiation which is determined by the

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<sup>112</sup> Kerr, 14.

<sup>113</sup> Bowen, 476.

<sup>114</sup> John Paul Lederach, “Understanding Conflict: The Experience, Structure, and Dynamics of Conflict,” *Conciliation Quarterly* (Summer 1987): 2.

<sup>115</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker Publishing Group, 2004), 22.

<sup>116</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 14.

degree of differentiation in the spouses. The undifferentiation usually amasses on one spouse, and conflict absorbs large quantities of the undifferentiation.<sup>117</sup>

### **Distance**

As the conflict intensifies an individual will cope by creating distance between themselves and the individual with whom they are in conflict. Bowen described emotional distance as the “most universal mechanism” to deal with conflict. He believed it was present in all marriages to some degree and in a high percentage of marriages to a major degree.<sup>118</sup> In its extreme form distancing becomes cutoff, which is one of the eight concepts in FST. When an individual distances themselves from a conflict with someone they will decrease communication or stop communicating altogether. From the outside looking in it would appear that the conflict has diminished and the two are disconnected. However, distanced persons think about each other a great deal, and they are still emotionally bound to the problem.<sup>119</sup> Distancing works better for one than the other; one partner experiences the distance as insulation from the other partner’s distress while the other partner feels blocked from reconnecting with the distanced partner. It is in the posture of distancing that one or both partners will bring a third person into the conflict, thus creating the triangle. Bowen described distance as inevitably accompanying each of the patterns.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Bowen, 476.

<sup>118</sup> Bowen, 377.

<sup>119</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 16.

<sup>120</sup> Kerr, 24.

### **Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity**

Interdependent functioning is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, if a husband breaks an ankle the wife modifies her schedule to help the recovery of the husband by taking over some of his functions. When the ankle heals, they should return to their old roles. In this situation the husband underfunctions and the wife overfunctions. However, this pattern becomes a problem when the chronic anxiety increases the emotional reactivity, and the pattern continues become a driver in the relationship. Originally called “dysfunction in one spouse” overfunctioning/ underfunctioning reciprocity describes partners trying to make one self out of two.<sup>121</sup> Each one does some adapting to the other, and it is usual for each to believe that he or she gives in more than the other.

### *Self-Differentiation*

The second principle variable of the process that explains the level of functioning within the family system is self-differentiation. Of the eight concepts in FST, seven are concerned with describing the characteristics of the family or group. “The scale of differentiation of self is the only concept that considers the individual functioning within the family system.”<sup>122</sup> It is the fundamental concept for individuals to gain the ability to maintain healthy interactions with their family system. Every human being enters the world completely dependent on others for their well-being. Terry Hargrave and Franz Pfitzer believe that every human is looking for and needs two essential constructs in

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<sup>121</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 16.

<sup>122</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 26.

relationships: love and trustworthiness.<sup>123</sup> “Family systems theory assumes the existence of an instinctually rooted life-force (differentiation or individuality) in every human being that propels the developing child to grow to be an emotionally separate person.”<sup>124</sup> Receiving love and finding trustworthiness are the results of a family system that can maintain higher levels of differentiation. The contributing factors that determine the extent to which one can emotionally separate (self-differentiate) from their family depends on two variables: the degree to which a person’s parents achieved emotional separation from their parents, and the characteristics of a person’s relationship with their parents, siblings, and important relatives.<sup>125</sup> In the family context there is a constant tension between togetherness and individuality. The polarization of these two forces can occur as anxiety increases unchecked. FST describes the extreme togetherness force as “emotional fusion.” When this occurs, the individual gives up herself to the group. The greater degree of no-self (undifferentiation), the greater the emotional fusion into a common self with others in the family system. Bowen calls this “undifferentiated ego mass.”<sup>126</sup> He theorized that there is some degree of fusion in close relationships, and some degree of undifferentiated ego mass at every level of the scale below 100.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Terry D Hargrave and Franz Pfitzer, *Restoration Therapy: Understanding and Guiding Healing in Marriage and Family Therapy*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 29.

<sup>124</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 95.

<sup>125</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 95.

<sup>126</sup> Bowen, 476.

<sup>127</sup> Bowen, 474.

The other extreme that occurs is “emotional cutoff.” It occurs when one does not maintain emotional connection in relationship with others.<sup>128</sup> This posture can sometimes be mistaken for differentiation. However, the difference between the person who is genuinely differentiating and the one who is separating through cutoff is that a reasonably differentiated person is capable of genuine concern for others and maintains relationships, whereas emotional cutoff deals with anxiety by dissolving relationships. Regarding those looking to become more differentiated in their family relationship system, Nessian describes two characteristics of a differentiated person: “First, one must remain a self. This means one must be able to take clear stances within the system without becoming emotionally dependent on how others react. Second, at the same time, one must genuinely care about the other members of the system.”<sup>129</sup>

### **Differentiation of Self Scale**

Bowen developed a scale to measure all levels of human functioning, called the “differentiation of self scale.” The scale starts with “zero” as the lowest level of functioning representing no self, and 100 at the theoretic highest level reserved for the perfect human who has achieved complete emotional maturity. The importance of the scale is primarily theoretical; it is not useful for exact assessment because of the difficulty of assessing an individual’s level of differentiation (due to the amount information about their family system that is needed). Bowen observed that an individual’s level of differentiation was dynamic. It could go up simply by receiving a compliment from a

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<sup>128</sup> Majerus and Sandage, 42.

<sup>129</sup> Nessian, 392.



family member or down in a high stress situation like a death in the family. Therefore, one must apply the scale over a long period of time (weeks, months, even years) to get a stable result. The scale was intended to be a “way of presenting or calling attention to the fact of variation in human emotional functioning and a basis for it.”<sup>130</sup> To put it simply, the scale defines an individual’s adaptability to stress.<sup>131</sup> It attempts to classify the balance between an individual’s emotional functioning and intellectual functioning. Those who are in the lower half of the scale (0-25) “live in a feeling-controlled world, in which feelings and subjectivity are dominant over the objective reasoning processes most of the time.”<sup>132</sup> They are often cut off from their families, which makes it difficult for them to help themselves move up the scale because they have no relative to work with on their relationship. People in the upper range of the scale (50-75) increasingly have the capacity to define their convictions as opposed to their opinions, yet still remain sensitive to the opinions of others and sometimes make decisions based on feelings in order to avoid the disapproval of others. Bowen theorized that only a small percentage of the population functioned above 60 on the scale. In his most recent work, Kerr states that the distribution of basic levels of differentiation throughout the human population follows the well-known bell curve. Ten percent of the population functions in the 50-75 range and 20 percent of the population functions in the 0-25 range, leaving 70 percent functioning in

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<sup>130</sup> Kerr, 59.

<sup>131</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 97.

<sup>132</sup> Bowen, 473.

the 25-50 range.<sup>133</sup> This means that 90 percent of the population is below 50 out of a possible 100 on the scale.

### **Solid Self**

The solid self is the concept of a human intellectual system that endows us with the capacity to think, reason, and reflect. The solid self is the part of a human that is made up of firmly held convictions, principles, and beliefs. These beliefs are developed slowly over the life of an individual. They are the beliefs that cannot be changed by coercion or persuasion, and are described in terms of “I” position stances such as “these are my beliefs and convictions, this is who I am.” Bowen believed that this solid self could withstand the pressure from the emotional/ feeling system to compromise convictions and beliefs.<sup>134</sup> The solid self does not change appreciably after a person leaves home; however, Bowen did believe it was possible (but difficult) to change the solid self once a person leaves home as an adult. He believed the solid self could only be changed from within the self, through a structured, theory-guided effort.<sup>135</sup> In FST, the solid self is what stands opposed to the “pseudo self.”

### **Pseudo Self**

Where the solid self is the firmly held beliefs that rarely change in a lifetime, the pseudo self is a negotiable relationship system. This means that a person will change a belief or principle in the face of emotional pressure. A hallmark of the pseudo self is

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<sup>133</sup> Kerr, 60.

<sup>134</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 103.

<sup>135</sup> Kerr, 52.

people pretending to be something they are not. They may feel stronger (or weaker) than they really are, or they may feel less or more attractive than they really are. Another manifestation of the pseudo self is quick reactions to others' points of view. If someone has an opposing viewpoint on a given subject, it is thought of as untenable and is contradicted. "Oppositional behavior provides the illusion of an emotional boundary," but in reality, the opposition is based in the pseudo self.<sup>136</sup> Generally speaking, people live in the pseudo self most of the time. It is the immature, automatic, thoughtless reactivity in humans. The pseudo self "lets in the anxiety from the system and functions on the 'self' borrowed from others, conversely giving up self to other persons in the system."<sup>137</sup> Principles and precepts learned from the family of origin guide the pseudo self to some extent—precepts such as racist stereotypes, and blind acceptance of political and religious beliefs. Bowen describes it this way:

[Precepts are] made up of a mass of heterogeneous facts, beliefs and principles acquired through the relationship system in the prevailing emotion. These include facts learned because one is supposed to know them, and beliefs borrowed from others or accepted in order to enhance one's position in relationship to others.<sup>138</sup>

Many of these beliefs that guide the pseudo self are outside of awareness and would not necessarily be labeled as beliefs that we consciously hold. What primarily guides the pseudo self then is the relationship system itself. The foundation for the pseudo self is emotions. In the pseudo self, emotions influence the cognitive processes that generate the beliefs and biases of the individual. Kerr summarizes this concept of

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<sup>136</sup> Kerr, 51.

<sup>137</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 37.

<sup>138</sup> Bowen, 473.

pseudo self as follows: “the need for attention, acceptance, and meeting perceived expectations is so powerful in human beings that the feeling system bypasses or overwhelms the important process of cognitive dissonance in rational thinking.”<sup>139</sup> In other words, humans need attention and acceptance so badly that they are willing to engage in one line of thought at home and another line of thought in another group. On the differentiation of self scale it follows that the lower on the scale one functions the more the pseudo self-controls emotional reactions, and the higher on the scale the more the solid self-governs the functioning in the relationship system.

### **Sabotage**

One of the functions of a relationship system divided into subgroups is the reaction to any member who tries to become more differentiated from the group. The “defector” is labeled as a traitor and shunned, or their efforts to become better differentiated are sabotaged. Sabotage often brings to mind a certain hostility, but sabotage in the relationship system is often a mindless, automatic reaction. The desire to feel at one with others or to be affiliated with a group trumps reasonable thinking. As an individual takes more responsibility for themselves, the group senses betrayal and reacts emotionally. Friedman writes, “it is simply not possible to succeed at the effort of leadership through self-differentiation without triggering reactivity.”<sup>140</sup> In fact, Friedman goes so far as to say that “self-differentiation always triggers sabotage.”<sup>141</sup> One of the

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<sup>139</sup> Kerr, 52.

<sup>140</sup> Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, chapter 8, section on sabotage.

<sup>141</sup> Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, chapter 8, section on sabotage.

“laws” of triangles described by Friedman supports this idea of sabotage and homeostasis. Friedman states, “attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent.”<sup>142</sup>

### **Christian Parenting and Family Systems Theory**

#### *New Generation of Parents and Children*

The goal of this project was to incorporate the understanding of emotional processes in a relationship system described in FST into the processes of parenting as well as the spiritual formation (disciple-making) of the individual and then to develop a set of principles for equipping Christian parents in the church. Further, the primary focus of the project was on the families with children who are still living in the home. Many of those children are part of a new age group called “Generation Z” who were born between 1997 and 2010.<sup>143</sup> The priorities and beliefs of the current generation of children are different from those of the previous generation. The children of Generation Z have access to a world of information through readily available technology that generation X did not. For example, James Emery White writes that 92 percent of Generation Z report going online daily, 25 percent report being online “constantly,” and 91 percent go to bed with their phones.<sup>144</sup> One of the marks of Generation Z is that they are being raised by

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<sup>142</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 36.

<sup>143</sup> Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

<sup>144</sup> James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 43.

Generation X—a generation that was warned repeatedly not to become helicopter parents (always hovering over their children).<sup>145</sup> The result of the hands-off approach of the current generation of parents is that they are raising self-directed children. Despite the seemingly opposite parenting goals of these two generations, questions about emotional processes in families that FST attempts to answer remain the same in any generation despite differing parenting philosophies. FST is interested in the “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” and “how” of emotional systems function. The question of “why” is not a useful one to ask because it opens the way out of the facts and into people’s interpretations of the facts. The values and beliefs of a generation should not change the way the concepts of FST are utilized in a family system. The concepts of how one differentiates themselves from their family system and how individuals react to anxiety and stress are not influenced by the changing beliefs or values in the different generations that emerge over time. Rather, FST observes how families process anxiety and how they adapt and differentiate.

One of the formal concepts in FST is called Emotional Process in Society (also called Societal Regression). “It means the society is more or less anxious, orderly, and organized at different times in history.”<sup>146</sup> At times of societal regression (global pandemic lockdowns, racial protests and riots, and presidential campaigns) families are affected by the increase in societal anxiety. The societal regression trickles down into the individuals and families. The regression does not change the basic processes of how

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<sup>145</sup> White, 51.

<sup>146</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children: Guiding Principles for Parents in a Troubled World* (New York, Chichester: Wiley, 1999), 15.

anxiety passes through the family triangles, but it does increase the intensity and frequency of acute anxiety or daily stressors.

*Parent Stressors in Early Childhood*

Parents of young children have increased stress when they are required to focus more of their energy on caring for their children and have less time and energy to focus on themselves or their marriage. It is common for couple relationship quality to decline during early stages of parenthood as the demands of raising a toddler and the role strain of parenthood can impact romantic relationships.<sup>147</sup> Berryhill and others studied the effects of infants with so-called “negative emotionality” on the stress level of parents. They found that parents who perceive their infant as having higher levels of negative emotionality tend to have more parenting stress through the toddler years, and lower couple relationship quality during the preschool years.<sup>148</sup> Another factor that contributes to the emotional adjustment of the child—studied by Rebecca Y. M. Cheung and others—is the level of involvement of the father in matters of positive parenting or discipline over and above the mother’s involvement.<sup>149</sup> Their findings confirm the concepts in FST regarding the interconnectedness of the family system. They found that

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<sup>147</sup> M. Blake Berryhill, Kristy L. Soloski, Jared A. Durtschi, and Rebekah Reyes Adams, “Family Process: Early Child Emotionality, Parenting Stress, and Couple Relationship Quality,” *Personal Relationships* 23, no. 1 (2016): 23. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/per.12109>

<sup>148</sup> Berryhill et al., 39.

<sup>149</sup> Rebecca Y. M. Cheung, Courtney Boise, E. M. Cummings, and Patrick T. Davies, “Mothers’ and Fathers’ Roles in Child Adjustment: Parenting Practices and Mothers’ Emotion Socialization as Predictors,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 27, no. 12 (2018): 4033. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1214-1>

fathers with consistent discipline and positive parenting behavior had influence on the child's positive development.<sup>150</sup>

*Educational Symptoms of the Family Process*

When a child enters school age and exhibits negative behavior or shows signs of slowed learning, the school officials will test the child for learning or behavioral disabilities. They will try to understand the symptoms through a linear form of causality. However, FST views the symptoms as a response to the anxiety in the family system. Though there are many reasons why a child may not do well in school, most of them have to do with family anxiety.<sup>151</sup> A high level of anxiety in the family will greatly inhibit the ability of the child in the classroom. The anxiety in the home replicates itself in the school setting. If the relationships are disorderly at home, then they will be disorderly at school. "If children experience conflict and distance between the adults at home, they will usually carry those relationship patterns and that anxiety with them when they try to form relationships outside the home."<sup>152</sup> As a child struggles in school or in the home, the teachers and counselors may give a diagnosis of a behavior disorder such as ADD or ADHD, and then prescribe some medication to deal with the symptoms. The problem that can arise with this approach is that the list of general behaviors associated with ADHD are similar to those associated with the anxiety. The concepts and observations of FST seek to focus on the root cause of anxious behavior which begins in the marriage

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<sup>150</sup> Cheung, 4033.

<sup>151</sup> Gilbert, *Connecting*, 25.

<sup>152</sup> Gilbert, 27.



relationship and expands to the rest of the family members, and not just the symptoms of the identified patient.

### *Identified Patient*

As parents and teachers focus on the child's behavior as the "problem" they are focusing on a symptom of something far more complex found within the family structure. Family therapists will usually define the problem child as the "identified patient." "The concept of the identified patient, as stated earlier, is that the family member with the obvious symptom is to be seen not as the "sick one" but as the one in whom the family's stress or pathology has surfaced.<sup>153</sup> In a child it could take the form of behavioral problems or school failure, and in a spouse, it could be alcoholism, obesity, or illness. "Other children in the family may experience anxiety or pain due to stress in the parents' relationship, but the system's pathology is more strongly evidenced in the identified patient's disruptive behavior."<sup>154</sup> Why one child is given the focus over another is a topic of study. It could be any number of unusual behavioral or physical characteristics that cause one child to stand out.<sup>155</sup> Family therapy uses the phrase "identified patient" to avoid isolating any one person in the system. "In a family emotional system, when an unresolved problem is isolated in one of its members and fixed there by diagnosis, it enables the rest of the family to 'purify' itself by locating the source of its 'disease' in the

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<sup>153</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 19.

<sup>154</sup> James A. Polyson, Randall Herrema, and Victor Barrow, "The Identified Patient in Family Therapy and Jesus Christ: A Limited Analogy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 16, no. 4 (1988): 341. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1177%2F009164718801600405>

<sup>155</sup> Polyson, Randall Herrema, and Victor Barrow, 341.

disease of the identified patient.”<sup>156</sup> When an individual is seen as the one causing the problems in a family relationship system, family systems theory will view those problems as a symptom of anxiety in the system that has culminated in one individual.

### *Trauma*

In families with high levels of undifferentiation and dysfunction, abuse and trauma can occur that add another aspect to identifying emotional reactivity. This project does not address the complex processes that occur as a result of abuse and trauma in the nuclear family. However, because of the constant increase in highly dysfunctional families where abuse and trauma occur, it is helpful to briefly describe how FST might address the topic. The question of where abuse fits in the nuclear family emotional system can be found in the extremes of fusion and cutoff. In both extremes, abuse often is present. For example, one family member may react to a child or partner with violence while the other parent reacts with emotional distance rather than intervene with appropriate action.<sup>157</sup> One of the critiques of Bowen’s theory by his peers was that by focusing on the whole family system as one unit, the therapist “may effectively remove responsibility for the violence that ultimately lies with the perpetrator.”<sup>158</sup> Family System Theory’s goal is to direct the trauma survivor toward a path of self-differentiation where they are able to eventually manage their emotional reactivity to their abusive family. An

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<sup>156</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 20.

<sup>157</sup> Linda MacKay, “Trauma and Bowen Family Systems Theory: Working with Adults Who Were Abused as Children,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 33, no. 3 (2012): 236. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/aft.2012.28>

<sup>158</sup> McKay, 236.

FST trained therapist can help the survivor of abuse through the difficult work of increasing their level of functioning and set them free to think for themselves.

### **Spiritual Formation**

The goal of this project was to incorporate the understanding of emotional processes in a relationship system described in FST into the processes of parenting as well as the spiritual formation of the individual and then to develop a set of principles for equipping Christian parents in the church. Dallas Willard was one of the leaders in the modern evangelical movement on the subject of spiritual formation. He describes it as follows:

Spirituality and spiritual formation are whole life matters. A “spiritual life” for the human consists in that range of activities in which, being brought to spiritual birth through God’s initiative through the Word, he or she cooperatively interacts with God and with the spiritual order, ... The result is a new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers.<sup>159</sup>

According to Willard, spiritual formation is the process of shaping our spirit—which he equates with the human will, and heart—to be conformed with the spirit of Christ. Brian and Jeremy Labosier wrote that “spiritual formation requires equipping the whole person for ministry, ... and a relational approach to learning.”<sup>160</sup> family systems theory in its basic form describes human interactions with the people in their “family” system as they attempt to become a more differentiated individual. Becoming differentiated is interacting with others with the right balance of individuality and togetherness with those in the family system. Spiritual formation is the process of the

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<sup>159</sup> Willard, *Omission*, 49.

<sup>160</sup> Brian Labosier and Jeremy Labosier, “A Thirty-Year Experiment in Teaching Spiritual Formation: Twelve Lessons We Learned,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 11, no. 2 (2018): 132. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0739891318759722>

individual—in partnership with the Spirit of God—to change those dysfunctional emotional reactions into acts that Jesus Himself would do. Likewise, the concept of self-differentiation is performed by the individual. Inasmuch as anxiety and emotional reactions are based in the physiology of the human body and produce physical responses, spiritual formation too has connections to the physical body. James K. A. Smith points out that “we are shaped by material bodily practices that aim or point our [emotions] to ultimate visions of human flourishing.”<sup>161</sup> This “ultimate flourishing” is the daily living in the kingdom of God. Bowen emphasized thinking over feeling and over emotions. Smith takes it a step further, stating, “Human persons are not primarily thinking things, or even believing things, but rather imaginative, desiring animals who are defined fundamentally by love.”<sup>162</sup> For the Christian to be spiritually formed as Scripture instructs, there is a certain amount of discipline of the body as well as the inward spirit (will or heart) that must take place. Bowen based his theory on biological evolution, stating that everything in the human interaction can be explained by the natural sciences. However, Christians believe that the physical human frame was designed for interaction with the spiritual realm, and that interaction can only be resumed at the initiative of God.<sup>163</sup> Willard wrote that the spiritual aspect of humans is “a homogeneous aspect, part and parcel of the biological (and therefore social) nature of most human beings.”<sup>164</sup> He

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<sup>161</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 132.

<sup>162</sup> Smith, 133.

<sup>163</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 77.

<sup>164</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 78.

saw Christ as the example to show humans how to bring the body from opposition to support of the new life Christ gives His followers, the Holy Spirit living in Christians. The act of differentiating oneself from the family system is a process of thinking as opposed to being directed by one's feelings or reacting emotionally. Self-differentiation is a process of systematic and purposeful behavior changes that bring about healthier interactions. For the Christian, becoming differentiated is to be Christlike; to live in His faith and practice, systematically and progressively rearranging their affairs to that end.<sup>165</sup> In this way, the processes described in FST—and particularly the concept of self-differentiation—support and enhance the spiritual formation described by Willard.

### **Conclusion**

Bowen and Kerr have contributed much to the understanding of emotional family functioning. Their Family System Theory can be a profound tool for parents and pastors as they function in their respective roles in families and congregations. Likewise, Willard has brought much of the rich tradition of spiritual formation to the modern evangelical community. Both Bowen and Kerr attempted to research the concepts of FST in their personal families to help bring theory to a real-life application. Bowen maintained skepticism about the individual's ability to become differentiated to any significant degree based on his own "disappointing" attempts to differentiate from his family.<sup>166</sup> Willard, on the other hand, had confidence that a person could certainly live a life of spiritual maturity and Christlike behavior. He contended that a conversational

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<sup>165</sup> Willard, *The Great Omission*, 7.

<sup>166</sup> Bowen, 496.

relationship with God was possible for anyone who sought it.<sup>167</sup> What Bowen called “differentiation of self”, Christian spirituality understands as a renovation of the heart.<sup>168</sup> Kerr believed that the greater one’s capacity to observe and understand the emotional processes one’s relationship system, the greater one’s capacity to discriminate between thinking and feeling, and the ability to recognize the influence of anxiety in the family system were the crucial ingredients on the path to self-differentiation.<sup>169</sup> When the principles of Spiritual formation—experienced as the present-tense progressive sanctification of the Christian—are utilized in the context of FST and its principles are understood, the parent will have the resources to affect change in their own systems. When a parent is equipped with the understanding of the foundational concepts and principles of FST in conjunction with biblical sanctification, the chances for improvement in the form of differentiation increases dramatically. These changes do not take place in isolation but in relationships. One of the questions this project attempted to answer is, to what degree do parents and pastors understand the influence of their family systems on both family interactions and spiritual growth? Are parents able to observe the reactions to anxiety in their family members or themselves? This project assessed that awareness level through the field research of Christian parents. The researcher considered how they function within their family systems, and how much awareness they had of the family anxiety and emotional reactions in their system.

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<sup>167</sup> Dallas Willard and Jan Johnson, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 222.

<sup>168</sup> Creech, *Map for Ministry*, 86.

<sup>169</sup> Kerr, 168.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT PROCESSES AND RESEARCH

### **Introduction**

The problem this project addressed was evangelical Christian parent's lack of understanding of the anxiety and emotional reactivity in the family system as described by Bowen's family systems theory (FST) as they relate to parenting children. The researcher first focused on the biblical and theological connections to Bowen's family systems theory to provide a foundation on which to build a set of principles for parents or pastors. The researcher examined the biblical record and allowed the connections between FST and Scripture to emerge organically through the research and study.

Second, a review of the literature related to FST was examined. Murray Bowen and Michael Kerr have introduced, developed, and refined each of the concepts of FST and along with Roberta Gilbert provide a core understanding of the theory. Bowen and Kerr are two of the leading voices on the subject of the family systems theory and have contributed many years of continuing research and writing about it.

Literature pertaining to Christian parenting was also reviewed, particularly as related to FST, focusing on the concepts of the nuclear family and self-differentiation. According to Bowen's theory, the husband and wife are key factors in passing anxiety in the family. The project sought literature regarding spiritual formation and how it connects with and parallels FST.

## Data Collection

A family system is complex, and many factors influence the processes that take place within the system. This project recognized the many dimensional layers revealed in FST and portrayed the concepts in their multi-faceted forms as they interact in a family system.<sup>170</sup> The field research was qualitative in nature, consisting of interviews of parents and the dissemination of an anonymous online survey. The survey was given as a means to gather data on a larger scale to attempt to reveal patterns of thinking that were consistent among the participants. The interviews provided a more in-depth look into the relationship system and gave the researcher the ability to follow up with the participants when more information was needed. The research method was a phenomenological study. A phenomenological study attempts to understand people's perceptions and perspectives relative to a particular situation.<sup>171</sup> This method is "swept up in a spell of wonder about phenomena as they appear, show, present, or give themselves to us."<sup>172</sup> Specifically, the researcher used a hermeneutical phenomenology to acquire the data. This method of study places an emphasis on the interpretation of the experience of the topic—in this case, the family relationship system. The hermeneutical approach is oriented towards a lived experience and interpreting the "texts of life."<sup>173</sup> Creswell describes the way in which a researcher approaches a topic in the hermeneutical

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<sup>170</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 251.

<sup>171</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 255.

<sup>172</sup> Max Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), 26.

<sup>173</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 151.



approach. “In the process, they reflect on essential themes, what constitutes the nature of this lived experience. They write a description of the phenomenon, maintaining a strong relation to the topic of inquiry and balancing the parts of the writing to the whole.”<sup>174</sup>

As the researcher conducted interviews with the participants, the data gathered (answers to the questions) was interpreted by the researcher as it related to and interacted with the “real life” scenarios described by the participants. Since the data gathered in this type of methodology often is subject to a specific person’s own interpretation, use of a hermeneutical approach is preferred.

Both of the field research tools (online survey and interviews) attempted to first, assess the participants’ level of awareness of the interconnectedness of their family system. Second, to assess how well the participants were able to differentiate themselves from the family system during periods of stress.

#### *Personal Interviews*

Five interviews were conducted with the purpose of assessing the participants’ awareness of the anxiety in their family relationship system, and to observe the awareness of the participants’ reaction to the anxiety. The researcher had four criteria for choosing interview participants: (1) they resided in the Midwest, (2) they were professing evangelical Christians, (3) they had traditional families, and (4) they were available for face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face but not necessarily “in person.” Three of the interviews were conducted in person and two via a live video application. Three of the interviews were conducted within one nuclear family. The

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<sup>174</sup> Creswell and Poth, 151.

family consists of a husband and wife who are the parents of two adult male biological children. Both male children are married, and both have children who are pre-kindergarten. The older son has two children, and the younger son has one child. The researcher has a close relationship with the family and has had opportunity to observe the family functioning over a period of 24 years during some key nodal events including births, deaths, marriages, and children moving out of state. The researcher interviewed the mother and father, the oldest son and his wife, and the younger son and his wife. Bowen believed that it was “essential to have a coherent family theory to guide efforts to manage oneself differently in the family.”<sup>175</sup> According to Kerr and Bowen the observation of one’s own family was the key for testing the theory’s accuracy. Both Bowen and Kerr have done extensive research within their own families of origin and have shared those results in their writing. Michael Kerr records the result of the study of his own family system in the epilogue of his recent book “Bowen Theory’s Secrets. Bowen did not believe that studying one’s own family caused a bias in the research but in fact was an important part of helping his students to become better clinicians. The researcher saw the benefit of interviewing members of his own family due to the years of observation of those families in an informal setting. Though those informal observations could not be used and analyzed as formal research, the data obtained through the recollection of certain past events added to the researcher’s understanding of the participants’ answers to the questions in the interview process.

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<sup>175</sup> Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory’s Secrets*, 332.

The fourth and fifth interviews were conducted with two families who attend the researcher's church. One family (H4 and W4) consists of a husband and wife and three children—one fifteen years, one thirteen, and one eleven. The other (H5 and W5) consists of a husband and wife and three college age children. The interviews were conducted with the husband and wife together, and each lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. The researcher made an audio recording of each interview with the permission of the interviewees. To keep a consistent line of questioning, an interview outline was created. As Vyhmeister writes, "interviews with a purpose, an outline and a recording system will give good information."<sup>176</sup>

### **Interview Process**

In designing the interview questions the researcher sought to answer two broad, general questions: What have the individuals experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What context or situations have typically affected their experiences?<sup>177</sup> Each semi-structured interview began with a brief overview of Bowen's family systems theory. In the middle of the interview, the researcher took 5 to 7 minutes to give a broad overview of the concepts of the nuclear family emotional system, the Scale of Self-Differentiation, and relational triangles. The purpose was to observe the participant's level of awareness of their family anxiety before and after hearing about the basic theory concepts. The researcher believed that providing the couples with a basic foundation of the theory would help them to better identify the emotional processes in their family systems. The

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<sup>176</sup> Nancy J. Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 41.

<sup>177</sup> Creswell and Poth, 153.

researcher then asked each spouse to reflect on their own family of origin and describe the family reactions to stress, relating how they perceived the process as an adult looking back. Next, the researcher moved the line of questioning to the topic of the couple's current family. The couples were asked to describe their perspective of their family system, each spouse relating how the other reacts to stressors, how their children respond to the stressors, and the similarities between those processes to processes in their family of origin. One goal of the interviews was to observe the participants' awareness or lack of awareness of the reactivity in their family of origin and in their current family. Another goal was to evaluate the participant's understanding of the connection between their family of origin and their present family's reactivity. As each interview progressed, the researcher observed a growing understanding in the participants of FST concepts of nuclear family emotional system and self-differentiation.

#### *Online Survey*

Data was also gathered from an anonymous twenty-five question online survey created and disseminated through Qualtrics XM online survey creation tool. Questions one through four gathered personal information from the participant including gender, marital status, and number and ages of children. The next ten questions asked the participant to describe how their family members related to each other. The participant was asked to put themselves in the mindset of an impartial observer. The survey asked the respondent to ask themselves the question, "if I were outside looking in, how would I describe my family?" The researcher designed questions that would guide the survey participant to think critically about how their family interacted with each other, and

hopefully assess those interactions impartially<sup>178</sup>. The final block of questions asked the participant how they described themselves as they function in their family system. These questions were designed by the researcher to guide the survey participant to look impartially at themselves and how they contribute the passing of anxiety in their family system.

The questions were a mixture of multiple choice, Likert scale (measuring attitude and opinions), and “true/false” questions. The questions focused on how the respondent assessed their own contribution to the anxiety of the family, spousal agreement on parenting, and the importance of the marriage compared to the children’s happiness. The questions also attempted to assess the level of family fusion by asking about boundaries between the family members and focusing on the parent/child relationship system.

#### *Outliers*

Qualitative data are inevitably messy data; “the more complex the phenomenon being studied, the more diversity one is likely to see.”<sup>179</sup> The online surveys were taken between February 13 and May 6, 2020. During that time, an unprecedented shutdown of schools, businesses, and churches took place due to the Covid-19 virus that caused a major disruption in the normal activities of most families. The online survey was not designed to take into account any variables that may have emerged as a result of that massive shift in family interactions due to social restrictions. During the shutdown and the resultant economic downturn, increased societal reactivity could have affected the way individuals answered compared to those who took the survey before the lockdown.

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<sup>178</sup> See “appendix A” for a list of the survey questions.

<sup>179</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 296.

### **Data Analysis**

The next step in the research was organizing the data gathered from the interviews and online survey results. This process involved a preliminary read-through of the data, coding (categorizing) and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation.<sup>180</sup> Codes represent the following types of information:

- Expected information that the researcher hoped to find.
- Surprising information that the researcher did not expect to find.
- Information that was conceptually interesting or unusual for the researcher, the participants.<sup>181</sup>

Data gathered from the surveys was reviewed and organized into a graphic report to help the researcher better visualize the emergence of specific patterns. Data gathered from the personal interviews was reviewed in search of meanings and emerging patterns.

Leedy and Ormrod offer several strategies for finding meaning in data.

- Quantifying frequencies or probabilities of certain noteworthy characteristics or events.
- Making comparisons or drawing contrasts within the data.
- Connecting findings to one or more existing theories.
- Developing a new, coherent theory to account for the findings.
- Using metaphors to capture key phenomena or dynamics.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Creswell and Poth, 301.

<sup>181</sup> Creswell and Poth, 317.

<sup>182</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 296.

### **Summary**

From a broad perspective, the data revealed a general unawareness of the anxiety present in most families. In the anonymous survey, the responses indicated that the respondents were unaware of the influence of the family of origin, as well as their own contribution to family anxiety and reactions. Responses from the survey also revealed potential blind spots in those who participated that caused them to view the family in an overly optimistic light. The personal interviews also showed a lack of systems thinking and a default response that showed a linear understanding of the movement of anxiety. These conclusions will be further examined in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### **Introduction**

The field research for this project consisted of an anonymous online survey and five personal interviews of parents at varying stages of life. Of those five interviews, three were conducted within one family unit consisting of two adult male siblings (H2 and H3) with young children and their wives (W2 and W3), and the adult siblings' parents (H1 and W1). The fourth and fifth interviews were conducted with two married couples with children varying in ages between middle school and college age. H1 and W1 are the parents of H2 and H3 who were also interviewed for this project. The researcher was able to interview an entire family unit and examine the various aspects of a specific system from the perspectives of the parents and adult children in that system. H1 and W1 provided a perspective of their family system as well as a perspective of H2 and H3 as they functioned as children in their family system. H2 and H3 also added their perspectives as adult children of H1 and W1.

Bowen proposed that the therapeutic system was based on being able to observe accurately the part the self plays in the emotional reactivity in the system.<sup>183</sup> Based on that principle, the research was designed with two goals in mind: first, to assess each participant's emotional reactivity within their own family system and second, to assess each participant's ability to observe their family system intellectually and not

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<sup>183</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 480.



emotionally. In other words, to assess their level of differentiation from their family system. The data gathered through the original research revealed two principles. First, several characteristics of the FST concepts of nuclear family emotional system and Self-Differentiation were observed during the field research of the families studied. Second, those FST concepts could be taught to parents as tools used to equip them to enhance their parenting and increase their levels of differentiation. The researcher is a full-time lead pastor in an evangelical church and has a vested interest in the results of the field research, as it could be a beneficial addition to the curriculum in the church the researcher serves.

### **Online Survey Qualitative Data**

The survey questions of were grouped into three “blocks” (see Appendix). The first block asked biographical questions regarding gender, marital status, and ages of children (Tables 1, 2, and 3). The second block asked each participant to describe their family from the perspective of an outsider observing the family’s emotional interactions. The questions in the third block asked each participant to describe themselves in the first person in certain situations as they functioned in their family.

The survey was disseminated via email and sent to parents listed in two different databases, which resulted in 56 total survey participants. The goal of the survey was to obtain a broad understanding of the sampling group’s perceptions about their family system. The average time spent by participants responding to the survey questions was 4 minutes and 48 seconds. The first database accessed was parents of students at Lincoln Christian School located in Lincoln, Nebraska. Lincoln Christian School is a pre-K

through twelfth grade Christian school with an enrollment of over 700 students.<sup>184</sup> The link to the survey was included in the March 13, 2020 issue of the all-school digital newsletter, which also included a brief explanation of the survey. This newsletter went out in the same week that the Lincoln city schools closed due to the Covid-19 precautions. The researcher believes that this was a factor in a lower number of responses to the survey.

The second database used to disseminate the survey was parents of children who attend Capitol City Christian Church, also located in Lincoln, Nebraska. The number of parents who received the email through this database is unknown. However, the potential number based on church attendance was estimated by the researcher to be near 100 potential respondents. Due to the anonymity of the survey, it is unknown how many responded from each database.

As the researcher began to analyze the data, the first theme to emerge was that the respondents were predominantly female (85 %). The implications of this fact are discussed in chapter six. The second theme that emerged from the first block of questions was that 40 percent of the respondents (22 of 56) had four or more children. That percentage increased to 60 percent when respondents with three children were added. In other words, 34 of 56 respondents had three or more children.

Table 1: Q1. What is your gender? (N=56)

Female	Male
85%	15%

Table 2: Q2. What is your marital status? (N= 56)

Married	Divorced	Single
85%	7.5%	7.5%

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<sup>184</sup> <http://www.lincolnchristian.org/admissions>, accessed September 22, 2020.

Table 3: Q3. What are the ages of your children? (choose all that apply) (N=56)

Preschool	Elementary	Middle school	High school	Adult
18%	30%	18%	21%	13%

### Online Survey Quantitative Data Analysis

#### *Question Block Two*

In block two of the survey, the questions were designed to assess the ability of the participants to observe the family functioning. The instructions for the second block of questions stated:

In the following questions, you will be asked to describe how your family relates to one another. Before you begin, put yourself in the mindset of an impartial observer. Imagine you are outside of your family (and yourself!) looking in. This mindset will help you describe your family (and yourself!) in a more objective light. Ask the question, “If I were outside looking in, how would I describe my family’s interactions in the questions below?”

The participants were asked to evaluate how their family handles adversity by answering true/false, and Likert scale multiple choice questions with five choices. The five available choices were either “never,” “sometimes,” “about half the time,” “most of the time,” and “always” or “strongly disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat agree,” and “strongly agree.” A higher percentage of the respondents (63%) indicated that they perceived that their family handled disagreement well (Q6). In answer to Q7, they indicated that “most of the time” (61%) the family anxiety revolved around recurring issues (spousal support, discipline of children, finances, etc.). This answer was three times greater than the next closest response (“sometimes”). The majority of respondents (56%) to question eight indicated that during times of minor disagreements they resolve it in a healthy manner “most of the time”. This is twice as much as the next closest choice (“about half the time”) and ten times greater than “sometimes.” The next question (Q9) attempted to assess how much of the “self” is invested in the family system, which can be indicator of the amount of differentiation in

the system. The question stated, “When someone in our family is under stress, it is important for them to calm down.” The answer choices were “strongly disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat agree,” and “strongly agree.” Twice as many participants (54%) answered “strongly agree” as those who answered, “somewhat agree” (26%). Conversely, six out of the 56 respondents answered, “neither agree or disagree,” three answered “somewhat agree,” and zero answered “strongly disagree.” In family systems theory, a higher degree of undifferentiation means that one would observe fewer individuals in the system and more of a fusion of selves. The natural reaction to a person in the system under stress is to do what it takes to calm them down. However, if their differentiation in the system is high, then the system would allow the person under stress—in this particular question the child—to be able to calm themselves down.

The survey also asked about the family of origin in question block two. The participants were asked to assess the influence of their family of origin when it came to conflict in their current family system. The Likert scale offered five choices between “never” and “always.” Q10 stated, “Our childhood upbringing (family of origin) influences the way we react to conflict.” The responses were 52 percent “most of the time” and 15 percent “always.” Question 15 then followed up with a true/false question that stated, “There are unresolved conflicts within our family of origin that still have an effect on relationships,” to which 60 percent answered “true.” family systems theory proposes that the family of origin is interconnected with the next generation. Bowen believed that if one could study 200 years of a family tree, “one could find between 64 to

128 families of origin, each of which has contributed to one's self."<sup>185</sup> Based on Bowen's assertions above, it is possible that those who answered "false" to Q9 may still have family of origin issues that they are not aware of or are choosing to disregard. If that is the case, this would support the researcher's argument that there is a lack of awareness of the concepts described in family systems theory, and particularly the connectedness of multiple generations.

The researcher gave special attention to questions that elicited extreme differences in the answers. Question 12 on the survey stated, "When conflict/disagreement arises we need time to think it through." The respondents overwhelmingly answered "true" (89%). One of the principles in FST is the contrast between thinking and feeling in response to the flow of anxiety in a family system. The participants seemed to believe that they respond to conflict or anxiety by thinking first. This may indicate that there is an understanding among those who responded that reacting emotionally is not the optimum way to approach anxiety. Q11 and Q13 also broached the topic of conflict in the family. Q11 stated, "We try to deal with conflict openly as it happens." Eighty percent of the respondents indicated that this was true for their family either "most of the time" (67%) or "always" (13%). Question 13 stated, "We like to deal with conflict/disagreement head on," and 73 percent answered that this was "true." Next, question 14 dealt with unresolved conflict, and the answers were split closely with 46 percent believing that there was unresolved conflict and 54 percent believing that there was not.

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<sup>185</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 492.

## Summary

The data gathered in question block two indicated that there was (1) a general awareness of the conflict in the family and according to the respondents' answers it was usually dealt with in a healthy manner when it happened. However, (2) awareness of what was perceived as “unresolved” conflict seemed to be less among those sampled. When it came to family of origin influence on the present family system, a significant percentage indicated that there was none.

### *Question Block Three*

The next block of questions in the online survey focused on the participants' view of themselves as they interacted within their system. The instructions for this section stated, “This next block of questions pertain to you personally. In other words, answer from your perspective.” The goal of this section was to attempt to assess a level of differentiation from the family system. Question 17 stated, “It is important that my spouse and I agree on our parenting decisions.” Bowen believed that the parental unified front—commonly believed to be a basic psychological principle—was actually a “most unsound” psychological principle.<sup>186</sup> He proposed that it was a symptom of a parent who is unsure about the relationship with her child.<sup>187</sup> In the online survey responses to Q17, 73 percent said they “strongly agree” with the statement “it is important that my spouse and I agree on our parenting decisions,” and 22 percent answered that they “somewhat agree” with that statement.

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<sup>186</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 497.

<sup>187</sup> This idea is examined further in Chapter 6.

The health of the husband/wife relationship is a key factor in FST. The levels of differentiation in the spouses affect the entire system. Question 18 stated, “I would put the health of my marriage above my children’s happiness.” The researcher found that 20 percent answered that they “somewhat disagree” or “disagree,” and 62 percent stated that they “agree” and “strongly agree.” The researcher discovered a high percentage who see the health of the husband/wife relationship as important. However, with the respondents being 85 percent female, the researcher questioned whether the answers might be lower with more male respondents. The survey further attempted to assess multi-generational influence among the respondents; Q19 asked, “I do NOT want to parent my children like I was parented in my childhood.” The responses were evenly divided among the choices (see Table 4), indicating to the researcher that by responding either on the agree side (42%) or the disagree side (45%), the respondents were aware of the influence of their family of origin, whether positive or negative.

Table 4: Q19. I do NOT want to parent my children like I was parented in my childhood (N=56)

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
16%	29%	13%	24%	18%

Question 20 further assessed the family togetherness experienced by the respondents. The question stated, “I would like our family to be closer to each other” and 82 percent answered on the “agree” side, with no responses on the “disagree” side. The next question (Q21) asked about the boundaries within the respondent’s family; 86 percent believed they had healthy boundaries and 14 percent believed they did not. Question 22 was designed to assess the undifferentiated ego mass within the family. The question stated, “The most important thing to me is my children’s happiness.” As in Q19, the responses were again balanced (see Table 5). Answers in the affirmative (“somewhat

agree” and “strongly agree”) indicated to the researcher that there is a higher level of undifferentiation within those families. Those who answered “neither agree nor disagree” may also represent a higher level of undifferentiation because they either have no opinion or may be unaware.

Table 5: Q22. The most important thing to me is my children’s happiness (N=56)

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
20%	22%	20%	29%	9%

Question 23 was designed to assess the participants’ awareness of their contributions to family anxiety. It states, “I am a contributor to family stress or conflict.” The respondents agreed they contributed 69 percent of the time. Respondents who answered “never,” “sometimes,” or “about half the time” were directed to a follow-up question that stated, “The person who contributes to the stress or conflict in our family the most is?” Of those who were directed to Q24, “my children” were believed to be the main contributor of stress (61%), and “my spouse” was 25 percent. The final question of block three stated, “I look for ways to improve my relationships.” The majority of respondents (97%) said they do look for ways to improve their relationships.

### **Summary**

Question block three asked the participants to consider their role in the family system. The majority of respondents believed that there needed to be agreement between husband and wife. The researcher has also observed and considered this principle within the researcher’s own marriage. The researcher has observed a strained relationship between the researcher’s own spouse and son resulting in the researcher’s wife’s strong belief in a “unified parental front.” The data also revealed lack of a definitive response regarding the happiness of the children as more important than the health of the marriage,



with a slight majority answering that they “somewhat agree.” In the researcher’s opinion this is another area that reveals higher levels of undifferentiation in the parents who responded. However, the responses may be weighted by the high percentage of females (85%) who participated in the online survey. Finally, the data showed that the respondents were able to see that they play a role in contributing to the anxiety in their families.

### **Personal Interview Data**

There were five interviews conducted with husbands (coded H1-4) and wives (coded W 1-4) from families with children of varying ages. The interviews were conducted with both the husband and wife present and ranged in duration from 45 to 55 minutes. The husbands were asked a question and then the wife was asked the same question. The wife was free to give input on the husband’s answers and vice versa. In each interview, the researcher used general “layman’s” terms when asking questions and did not use vocabulary specific to FST. Terms used in FST including “emotional reactivity” and “anxiety” can be misleading or confusing to someone who has not studied the theory. The researcher used terms such as “stress” instead of anxiety and avoided terms such as “functioning” and “emotional reactivity” when asking questions. Each participant understood that their responses would remain anonymous for the purposes of the project.

#### *Interview One: H1 and W1*

The first interview with husband H1 and wife W1 began with the researcher taking the first eight minutes to give a basic overview of the concepts of nuclear family emotional system and self-differentiation. The first set of questions focused on the family of origin. H1 explained that as the youngest child of five, he observed that “mom’s

primary role was to keep dad happy” and “you just kind of learned how to pacify dad to make him happy.” He observed that his mom often “set her needs aside to serve his dad.” He also described his mother hiding the “bad behavior” of some of his siblings from his dad. This type of reaction to anxiety is described in FST as overfunctioning underfunctioning reciprocity. The researcher then asked W1 to think about her childhood interaction in her family of origin. She was the first born of three girls and her father was a pastor. She recalled that her role in the family in her early life was to be seen and not heard, and that the image of the family was important especially to her mother. She used the word “bully” to describe the way her parents—particularly her mother—disciplined her. As she recalled her upbringing, she believed that her parents used her as an example to the people in their church ministry of “how to raise a perfect child”. Her mother overfunctioned with her and underfunctioned with her father. What she described in her family of origin and the early years of her life was the “undifferentiated ego mass” defined by FST as the amount “togetherness” within the system. W1 was able to discern in hindsight, her role within that system. W1 also was able to see back a further generation, similar patterns with her mother’s family of origin, as she believed her mother gave up her “self” to the family as she was growing up.

The next line of questioning for W1 related to her separation from her family of origin as an adult. She was able to see her family of origin from an outside perspective. She was able to separate herself through college classes that dealt with the psychology of the family, and by moving out of state early in her marriage to H1. She described an occasion when she was able to raise her level of differentiation by not allowing her son to go on an outing with her father “because of her son’s health.” Her father “pouted, and he

got mad,” and she felt the pull back into the family pattern, but she stood up to her father in that instance.

The researcher now turned the interview towards the couple’s present family. They described their effort to become better parents through a parenting small group. The researcher saw this as H1 and W1 attempting to further separate from their families of origin and be their own family. H1 made a conscious effort to separate from patterns learned from his family of origin, and he credited his Christian faith as the motivating factor. He recalled praying during a time of high anxiety, “this is not godly and not who I want to be.” They described one of their two children as “out there” and “fear-based” in his reactions; the other child internalized anxiety and released it in angry outbursts or by viewing pornography in the teenage years.

*Interviews Two and Three: H2, W2, H3, and W3*

The interviews were conducted via video chat and were approximately 45 minutes in duration. H2 and H3 are siblings, with H2 the older brother by five years. During the first part of the interview, the researcher provided the participants with a general overview of FST and the two concepts that were the focus of this project. The purpose of the overview was to provide a basic guide and for each participant as they described their family system. The first part of the interview with H2 focused on family of origin conflict. H2 was able to identify some recurring spousal conflicts around finances and around social interactions that he observed as young child. H2 described his reaction to those stressors as an opportunity to get things he wanted—“playing video games” or “using his phone.” H3, the younger brother, had a less clear recollection of the times of high anxiety. He recalled that his mother would distance herself by “watching TV.” W3

described her mother in similar terms as H3. Both H3 and W3 remarked that their mothers “never said sorry” but their fathers apologized regularly, which is an overfunction/underfunctioning pattern described by FST. As W2 described her family, she struggled to recognize or identify how her family of origin reacted to anxiety. However, after the researcher provided an overview of the four patterns that anxiety takes in relationships (triangling, conflict, distance, and overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity), W2 was quickly able to identify those patterns in her family. W2 observed that her older brother cut himself off from his family and moved to another state in response to anxiety between him and his father. W2 described her mother as the overfunctioner in the family and her father as the underfunctioner. The researcher then asked questions about H2 and H3’s present families. The data gathered by the researcher revealed that H2 was less aware of the functioning of anxiety than H3. H3 is studying to become a therapist and has done work to identify unhealthy patterns. The researcher observed that both H3 and W3 were more aware of the anxiety in their present family than H2 and W2. W3’s family of origin was described as having a high level of undifferentiation. The mother in W3’s family of origin was raised in an abusive home. W3 remarked that if not for the Holy Spirit working in her mom’s life “she would not be here right now.” W3 was the only participant to make reference to the work of the Holy Spirit as a means of growth and health. In her description of her mother’s family of origin, W3 described the separation of her mother from her family of origin as a supernatural “work of the Holy Spirit.” She observed that the anxiety in her family of origin often fell on an older brother, who reacted by “bullying the young brother” in the

family and eventually walked away from the family's Christian beliefs. W3 described him as "angry." The mother has cut off this brother and is presently estranged.

In the present family system, W3 still observes a greater level of undifferentiation with her mother, with whom she still underfunctions. H3 and W3 live geographically close to W3's parents, which provides more occasions for interactions. During the section in the interview that examined H2 and W2's present family there was an awareness of anxiety in their children, whom they described as having anxiety that surfaces in certain disobedient behavior. The researcher observed that H2 and W2 did not seem to see or observe a connection between their children's behavior and the anxiety that they create.

For example, H2 and W2 had recently experienced several "nodal" events. They moved to a new state and lived with H2's parents for several months. They had difficulty finding work after the move, a beloved grandmother passed away, they bought a new house, and their oldest daughter started preschool, all in a span of six months. H2 described to the researcher how the daughter acted during this period of transition. He described outbursts and physical tics in his daughter that had not been there before. These are behaviors that an FST-trained therapist might surmise as the child absorbing the anxiety of the parents. Whatever the diagnosis, the researcher observed that H2 did not perceive a connection between the many nodal events and the child's erratic behavior. As the researcher examined the data for themes, one that stood out was that the awareness of family connectedness was higher as the individuals looked back into the families of origin. Participants observed ways in which certain family members exhibited patterns of functioning that are described in FST even without an understanding of the theory. When the researcher gave the participants FST vocabulary and concepts by which they could

interpret behavior and functioning within their families, their awareness increased. The researcher received positive feedback from each interview participant when they began to examine their family after the FST concepts were explained to them. W1 commented “this is so cool” when she began to see her family through the lens of FST. The other participants were also able to identify FST concepts playing out within their family systems.

*Interview Four: H4 and W4*

The fourth personal interview was with H4 and W4. They are parents of three children ages 15, 13, and 11 years old. H4 and W4 both grew up in rural northern Minnesota and currently live there. The researcher began with a brief overview of the project but did not explain the concepts as was previously done in the other interviews. The purpose of waiting until midway through the interview was to assess the answers before and after the explanation of the relationship patterns in the concepts of nuclear family emotional system and the scale of self-differentiation. The interviews with H4 and W4 were more challenging. The researcher discovered that H4 and W4 had never taken much time to understand their family system; as a result, finding the right questions that sparked insight was initially difficult. However, as the interview progressed the understanding seemed to increase, and the answers were more insightful. The first questions were directed to H4 regarding his family of origin and his perspective of the family when “things weren’t going well.” H4 was not able to look back initially at how his family functioned. His wife then interjected with a story about H4’s mother. W4 described multiple conversations with H4’s mother regarding the anxiety she would have over her boys’ lack of discipline. The mother described how she would “get angry” before entering the home, as she expected the boys not to do what she had asked. H4

responded by indicating that he was able to put those memories “away in a box” and not think about them.

When asked about her family of origin, W4 relayed an anecdote about a stressful time in her parent’s marriage when older siblings were mentioning divorce. W4 described feeling a lot of fear of divorce at that time. She also described an incident when her dad “kicked her” as a form of discipline, not as part of a pattern of abuse but as a one-time event that had an influence into her adult life. W4 described how her dad would distance himself from the family during times of stress, yet also observed that “mom and dad can’t exist without each other.” W4 described sibling issues between herself and her younger brother. W4 was called “my boy” by her father because she was the youngest of three girls. When a younger brother came along, there was a triangle involving the father, W4, and the younger brother. H4 then described how in the family he was the one “in trouble” and the focus of mom and dad. In FST terms, H4 was the “identified patient.” W4 interjected that as an outsider, “she would not have guessed that.” H4 described how at present his brother has cut him off and “the relationship still has a lot of animosity today.” W4 interjected that H4’s mother “defends” his brother and considers him as the outsider.

In this interview, the researcher took a different approach waiting to give an overview of the concepts until mid-point in the interview. The result of this secondary experiment was that the researcher observed that the couple had greater challenges describing the emotional functioning in their family system before they had a basic understanding of FST than after.

The questions then moved toward their present family system. H4 and W4 described the way in which H4 had to separate from the family and described it as a “blowup” with H4’s father. The family expected H4 to maintain the same relationship with them even after he was married, which began to cause stress in the marriage between H4 and W4. They described the way in which the H4’s family used sabotage and manipulation to attempt to bring H4 back into the family system. When H4 and W4 described their present family system, the researcher could see the FST pattern of “child focus” as they reported how one of the children is the focus of much of the family’s conflict. H4 and W4 expressed their frustration over their currently struggles with their oldest child. However, as FST predicts, the problem is usually elsewhere than the identified patient. As they continued to recall the early years of marriage and parenting, they described a period of high anxiety in their marriage and families of origin. However, they did not make a connection between that and the present negative behavior of their oldest son.

*Interview Five: H5 and W5*

The final personal interview was with H5 and W5. The couple has three children ages 23, 21 and 18. The researcher again began the interview giving a basic overview of FST to assess how well the couple could identify reactivity patterns in their family system. The first line of questioning was focused on the family of origin of the couple. H5 grew up in a “messed up home” that was plagued by substance abuse. W5 grew up in a Christian family and was third born of four. The questions first explored their family of origin. H5 described his journey to separate from his family as a young adult. He described the point in which he made the decision to not be “involved in the crazy” in his family. As an adolescent he described how he internalized much of the anxiety from his



family and it would come out in bursts of anger. Next, W5 described her mother as never wanting to “put her father over the edge”, so she would often help her adult children without W5’s father knowing. W5 also described her sister leaving the family at age 16 and getting married to her 18-year-old husband. In each of these scenarios described by W5 and H5, the researcher observed that their thinking was linear in nature. FST would call for “systems thinking” where there is more connectedness.

The questions then moved to the present family. W5 and H5 were married while W5 was at college full time. All of their children were born while W5 was going to school full time and she was unable to spend the time she wanted to with them in those first years. That was something she said she regrets and made a concerted effort to be there for them in their later years. H5 and W5 both remarked that “their mission was the kids”, and both admitted that they did not have much time to spend with each other because of both work and focusing on their kids’ activities. They described that their relationship with H5’s parents has been distant for their entire marriage. The parents of H5 live on an Indian reservation and W5 described it as a place where she didn’t want the kids spending time. H5 and W5 have tried to maintain healthy separation from H5’s parents. W5’s parents live on the same street as H5 and W5 and are heavily involved in H5 and W5’s present family. The mother of W5 is described as generous but is sometimes taken advantage of by W5’s younger brother. W5 described a series of triangles between the mother, W5’s brother, and her brother’s estranged wife. The interactions often pull W5 into the relational triangles and she struggles to know how to separate herself from those triangles. H5 and W5 struggled to identify how their family was interconnected and described problems and conflict as linear.

### *Personal Interviews Summary*

The researcher observed that in each of the interviews, participants exhibited similar levels of awareness and unawareness. Most of the interviewees had similar backgrounds and similar family experiences in their families of origin. There were no descriptions of abuse or high levels of undifferentiation in their current families. However, two of the participants had what might be defined as abuse or neglect in the growing up years. Each participant claimed to be a practicing Christian who placed a high priority on becoming a mature Christian. Taking those factors into account, the researcher took note of the themes that emerged from the data.

First, the researcher was able to confirm the validity of the two concepts of FST examined in this project through the field research. The interviews revealed that the different patterns anxiety takes (as described in FST literature) were observed and described in different parts of the interviews. Though the researcher admits that the field research in this project is cursory, the data gathered was sufficient to validate the observations made by those who have written and researched family systems theory. Second, the researcher observed that as the interview participants were taught the basic ideas espoused by FST, they were then able to identify those basic ideas in their own family systems. Third, the interviewees had greater success observing the connection in their families of origin and less success observing the functioning in their present families, even with a basic understanding of the two FST concepts examined in this project.

### **Field Research Summary**

The problem addressed in this project is the lack of awareness of and instruction in the concepts of nuclear family emotional system and Differentiation of Self Scale

(found in family systems theory) in the local church as it relates to parenting children. The researcher's field research, both through the online surveys and personal interviews, confirmed to the researcher that indeed there is a lack of awareness in the parents studied in this project. In the online survey the researcher observed that the participants showed their lack of awareness when they answered questions relating to the influence of their family of origin and their spouse's family of origin. The data revealed a certain level of undifferentiation when participants answered the question about their child's happiness being more important than the health of the marriage. The data also revealed that they showed their awareness of conflicts in the family and their desire to resolve them in a healthy way.

The personal interviews revealed to the researcher that there is a need in the church and Christian community to be educated about family systems. The researcher observed a marked increase in engagement when the participants were given a basic overview of FST. The researcher also concluded that uniting the concepts of FST and spiritual formation would have a benefit to the church as it fulfills its mandate to "make disciples Matthew 28:19." Teaching the concepts of FST alone in the church would have value, but to teach concepts of FST as a supplement to instruction on the spiritual formation of the Christian would increase the effectiveness of discipleship more.

## CHAPTER SIX: PROJECT EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

### **Introduction**

This project sought to connect the concepts of family systems theory with scriptural doctrine and give the local church principles derived from this connection to teach to parents about their own family system. The researcher attempted this through a study of Scripture and biblical theology and provided examples of relationship patterns described within the biblical narrative. The researcher also examined the literature base dealing with FST, primarily studying the work of Murray Bowen, Michael Kerr, and Roberta Gilbert. Finally, original field research was conducted to assess the awareness in Christian parents of about the emotional functioning within their families, both past and present.

As the final part of this project, some strengths and weaknesses in the process of connecting Scripture and FST, and an examination of the literature base were identified. The strengths and weaknesses found in the field research design and implementation were also identified. The researcher considered the three areas of study and presented the findings from that study, producing a list of four principles for parents that will improve awareness of their family systems and themselves.

### **Scope of the Project—Strengths and Weaknesses**

#### *Strengths of the Project Scope*

The project narrowed its scope to examining two of the concepts of FST: nuclear family emotional systems and the scale of self-differentiation. This proved to be a

strength of the project design for two reasons. First, many of the principles within the concept of nuclear family emotional system are also found in the other six concepts. Though the project only focused on two concepts, through the natural process of the study, many of the principles found in the other six concepts of FST were included in the examination of the two concepts studied in this project. For instance, the two FST concepts of “triangles” and “cutoff” are described as a typical pattern that conflict takes within the concept of nuclear family emotional system. Additionally, the concept of multi-generational transmission process was included as a part of the online survey and in the personal interviews.

The second strength of the project was the concept of self-differentiation. This concept stands apart from the other concepts. Gilbert states that “seven of the eight concepts of the theory focus on the family or group and one—self-differentiation—focuses on the individual.”<sup>188</sup> A key strength found within the concept of self-differentiation is that the act of becoming more differentiated from the system is universally accessible. One can attempt to differentiate oneself from their family regardless of one’s level of emotional health. One’s attempts at self-differentiation are not dependent on other members of the family and are limited only by the levels of motivation and perseverance of the individual who attempts it.

Another strength observed by the researcher was the practicality of the concepts developed by Bowen. The “real-time” research he performed as he observed the emotional interactions of entire families in a clinical setting provides a practical

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<sup>188</sup> Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 26.

foundation for the concepts he developed. The researcher found that the concepts of FST possess a level of practicality that provides a pathway connecting to the biblical doctrine examined in this project. Bowen's theory also provides a path to real world applications in the church and home. The work of Bowen's colleagues Michael E. Kerr, Roberta Gilbert, and Edwin Friedman further reinforced this practicality. Their scholarly yet accessible additions to the literature stream bolstered the practicality of the project.

Another strength observed in the project was the clear connections to FST found in the writings in of the apostle Paul. Paul states, "[each part of the body] should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:25b-27). Again, in Romans Paul states, "so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:5). These are explicit teachings on the interconnectedness in the body of Christ, which correlates to the interconnectedness of a family system as described in FST.

Though the researcher felt that the limited information in the narrative of Jesus' life was a weakness, the narratives also proved to be a strength. Evangelical Christians believe that Jesus through his incarnation was fully God and fully human (Phil. 2). Therefore, Christians believe that he was the ultimate example of a true human being throughout his life. On the scale of self-differentiation (0-100), Bowen reserved 100 for the perfect human, one who was "perfect in all levels of emotional, cellular, and physiological functioning."<sup>189</sup> FST has no one to point to as an example of what a fully

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<sup>189</sup> Bowen, 474.

differentiated person would look like. Bowen could only anecdotally offer possibilities when he said,

I expected there might be some unusual figures in history, or possibly some living person who would fit in to the mid-90 range, ... but my impression is that 75 is a very high-level person and those above 60 constitute a small percentage of society.

Jesus then becomes for humankind the ultimate example of a self-differentiated person.

### *Weaknesses of the Project Design*

The researcher observed areas of weakness as the scope of the project began to take shape beyond the preliminary thesis proposal. The first weakness was found in field research. The results of the online survey revealed areas of interest that would benefit from follow-up examination of the participants, but because of the need for anonymity follow-up could not take place. For example, 85% of the participants were female. The researcher believed the project would have benefited from more male participation to provide a more balanced picture of the families represented. The second weakness in the online survey research was the difficulty in detecting potential bias in the survey answers. Survey question design is a complex task. The researcher did his best to design questions that guided the participants to think critically and impartially. The third weakness found in the field research was the limited timeframe. The researcher could have used more time to follow up with the families involved in the personal interviews. With each couple having been given a basic understanding of FST, the project would have benefited from another interview with the couples as they recalled their interactions. The interviews were helpful and informative in supporting the researcher's original problem statement;

however, additional follow-up after a period of time would have strengthened the research.

Another weakness was discovered in the examination of the biblical theological connections. The Bible was not written as an academic textbook. The Old Testament narratives in Scripture are not meant to be a case study in human relationships but as a story of God's redemption of humankind. This project applied the concepts of FST to the narratives of Jacob and Laban and Adam and Eve and others and made correlations between the two. The weakness in this process was that a certain level of assumption was necessary to make these connections because they are not explicit in the narratives. One must assume that the narrative accounts of the interactions between individuals were accurate, and that they described real-life conversations without redactions or embellishments by the authors. One must assume that Jacob and Rachel and Laban did act in emotional reactive ways (Gen. 30). The project also made assumptions about the narrative accounts of Jesus in the gospels. Scripture gives only a single description of Jesus as a child in this family system. Additionally, the teachings of Jesus described in the gospels do not tell the reader how to be differentiated from one's family or how to remain non-anxious in an anxious situation. The researcher made these inferences from the subtext of the narrative based on the concepts in family systems theory.

The final weakness in the project scope and implementation was the researcher's lack of experience in the area of field research. That lack of experience was evident in the design and implementation of the field research. Though the field research revealed helpful data for the project, the researcher's lack of experience proved to be an obstacle to reaching the project's full potential.



### **Principles Derived from the Study**

The goal of this project was to incorporate the understanding of emotional processes in a relationship system described in FST into the processes of parenting as well as the spiritual formation of the individual, and then to develop a set of principles for equipping Christian parents in the church. The problem proposed by the researcher was a lack of awareness in Christian parents of interconnectedness within the family system. Based on the three areas of study, the researcher developed four principles for parents and churches to use as a resource for discipleship. These principles are: 1) A family is an interconnected emotional system in which each person contributes anxiety for good and for bad, yet family members are usually not aware of this connection; 2) Family systems pass anxiety to each member, causing varying levels of emotional reactivity among the members; 3) Defining the “self” is the best way to remain calm and non-reactive amid anxiety; 4) A Christian can begin to define the “self” and differentiate from the family through the process of sanctification, accomplished through the constant practice of spiritual formation.

#### *Principle One: Recognizing the Interconnectedness of the Family*

The first principle developed by this project states that a family is an interconnected emotional system in which each person contributes anxiety for good and for bad. The first step in raising the awareness of parents and pastors is the understanding that families are connected in a system and the people in that system pass anxiety to each other because of those connections. “When one person makes some basic changes, the whole system does.”<sup>190</sup> The apostle Paul described this connectedness in the body of

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<sup>190</sup> Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 61.

Christ in when he wrote, “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). Though he is addressing followers of Jesus Christ connected to one another by the Holy Spirit, Bowen’s theory confirms through observation and research that this biblical principle also applies to relationships between non-Christians as well. Thinking in terms of systems is often counterintuitive to the average person because they think in terms of the “individual” or “cause and effect” by habit and by teaching. Kerr states that cause and effect thinking is the “default mode.”<sup>191</sup> The data from the personal interviews in this study also confirmed how difficult it can be for an individual to think in terms of systems. In each of the interviews, the participants were evidently unaware of their own contributions to the reactions in their families. The researcher observed that the reactive behavior of the system was usually described as if the interviewee was unaffected by the anxiety and was not a participant in passing their anxiety to the other members. For example, in H3’s interview he described anxious behavior in his daughter but did not consider it a reaction to the major changes and transitions the family was in the middle of. If Kerr’s statement is true and systems thinking is not the default mode, then it will take perseverance to create a new habit of thinking in terms of functioning in a system.

*Principle Two: Passing Anxiety Within the System*

The second principle developed by this project states that all family systems pass anxiety back and forth to each other, causing varying levels of emotional reactivity among the members. The average person is likely to see anxious, reactive behavior as an individual event and ask, “why did she do that?” Family systems theory introduces a new

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<sup>191</sup> Kerr, *Bowen Theory’s Secrets*, 6.

paradigm for relating to the family system in which that same individual asks herself, “how might have I contributed to this event?” In this new paradigm, family members do not focus on one individual as a cause for the anxiety, but rather on how the entire family system contributes (as in the scenario between H3 and his daughter described above). Family systems theory defines anxiety as “an emotional/physiological response to a threat that may be real or perceived.”<sup>192</sup> When members of a family system can begin to view the system from a systems perspective, they will be better prepared to recognize how each member plays a part in passing anxiety through emotional reactivity to stressors. Anxiety in the family system is manifested in the four patterns that FST identifies. Gilbert describes the patterns as follows:

At some point, the people in the family will start one or more of the following behaviors, also called patterns or postures: They will argue and fight with each other (conflict), move away from each other (distance), get bossy and overbearing (overfunctioning), or react to overfunctioning by being docile and easily led (underfunctioning), or involve a third person in one-to-one interactions (focus on child, or triangling).<sup>193</sup>

These patterns or postures serve as a means to mitigate the anxiety in the family, but only temporarily. A foundational belief in FST is that there is no such thing as an emotional problem in just one person. Symptomatic people exist within a larger emotional context.<sup>194</sup> However, gaining the skill to recognize a system at work is a difficult one. In several of the interviews the researcher observed that even when the idea of “systems thinking” was introduced to the participants, they still reverted to a linear

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<sup>192</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 152.

<sup>193</sup> Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 79.

<sup>194</sup> Ronald W. Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 22.

way of thinking when they described the functioning in both their families of origin and their present families. The researcher observed that participants failed to see the part they may have played in their family' anxious or reactive behavior. During the early years of her marriage W5 described herself as “under tons of stress” from school, work, and a newborn child. She described how her daughter would cry and cry, but when she stayed with her mother she would calm down and sleep. W5 was able to see how her stress may have caused anxiety in her daughter.

A common pattern found all family systems is a relational triangle. It might be manifested in simply talking to someone about another person in the family. This is a way to avoid closeness with the person one confides in by focusing the conversation on another person. According to FST the triangle is the most basic building block in all relationships, and the larger the family the more interconnected triangles one finds. In the online survey, 34 out of 56 respondents reported having families with three or more children. A larger family with three or more children increases the number of stressors, and in turn the number of relational triangles and potential emotional reactivity in the system. The researcher's examination of the data from the personal interviews revealed scenarios in which parents formed triangles with their children, seemingly to avoid tension with their spouse. In other instances, a tense relationship between husband and wife manifested itself in the way one distanced themselves by triangling excessive work hours, or a leisure activity like watching many hours of television.

#### *Principle Three: Bringing Health Through Separation*

The third principle developed by this project states that defining the self is the best way to remain calm and non-reactive in the midst of anxiety. The second FST concept examined in this project is the scale of self-differentiation. Another way of

describing someone who ranks high on the scale of differentiation is that they have a strong self-identity. Richardson defines self-differentiation as “an ability to be closely connected with just about anyone we choose and still be a self.”<sup>195</sup> H5 grew up in a home where addiction and violence were the common reactions to anxiety. He described himself as often going “under the radar” in the home and having low self-esteem that was sometimes revealed through his own violent actions. However, despite growing up in that environment, H5 was able to make the decision to separate “from the craziness” as a young adult. He credits his decision to become a Christian as the key factor in successfully differentiating himself from his family of origin. One of the ideas put forward by this project is that the process of self-differentiation for the Christian is aided when they submit their “self” to Jesus Christ. When one becomes a Christian, they receive a new identity or as Paul writes, they are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Their new identity is in Christ and in his death and resurrection. The Christian can view his or her place in their earthly family through the lens of this new life.

When one attempts to differentiate from one’s family, he can encounter what Friedman calls “sabotage.”<sup>196</sup> Sabotage happens when the other family members seek to bring stability (homeostasis) back to the family system to get life back to the way it has always been. Looking back at H5’s family, his parents attempted to dissuade him from separating from the family when he became a Christian and he was condemned for his faith in Jesus, yet he resisted their pull. H5 (who is bi-racial) also recalled that at his

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<sup>195</sup> Richardson, 56.

<sup>196</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Chapter 8, Section on “The Question of Sabotage.” Kindle edition.

wedding, his mother and father and younger sister left the event abruptly when they perceived an offence against them which they attributed to racism. Their acts of sabotage surfaced as verbal manipulation and distancing. The Christian can expect that as he or she makes an attempt to separate from an undifferentiated family system, some forms of sabotage will be aimed at them. These acts are not usually deliberate, yet that doesn't make them less harmful. The apostle Paul wrote that there is no one who can condemn because Jesus Christ himself does not condemn his faithful follower (Rom. 8:34). The individual who is attempting to differentiate from their family can keep this promise in mind.

Defining one's self begins with looking at one's family of origin. "The family we grow up in is the most important emotional experience we have in life."<sup>197</sup> The research participants were asked to consider the influence that their family of origin has on their lives and some were able to identify that influence. Over half of online survey respondents (67%) believed that their family of origin influenced their present families. Those who participated in the interviews also saw the influence of their families of origin in their present families. However, an important omission by personal interview participants was identifying their own lack of understanding of how their families of origin had shaped how they interact in their present family.

Therapists trained in FST will often have their patients do family of origin work or a family diagram.<sup>198</sup> They will help clients look for patterns as they map out the facts

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<sup>197</sup> Richardson, 37.

<sup>198</sup> Michael E. Kerr provides an explanation of the family diagram in chapter 10 of *Family Evaluation*. See bibliography.

of past generations. Family diagrams will study things like family longevity, health, places of residence, income, reproductive history, marriages, divorces, education, and other important events. The individual then looks for themes from the past that connect to any present sources of reactivity. The study of one's family of origin is not confined to the therapist's office but can be done by anyone on their own. To define one's self means doing the work of understanding what others in past generations of the family have experienced. Richardson states, "I have never worked with a person who failed to profit from doing family of origin work."<sup>199</sup>

The FST concept of differentiation of self scale focuses on the individual, and helps that person define themselves in their family system. When that individual is also functioning in the role of parent, another level of awareness is needed. As mothers and fathers do the work of differentiation in their own lives, they also have a responsibility to help the children in their family system learn to do the same. It is not uncommon for parents to say they love their children, but feelings of love and affection, caring or sacrifice are not enough.<sup>200</sup> Families who possess all these qualities still produce children with problems. For parents who are seeking to raise their level of differentiation in their family, it is important to be reminded that FST is not a technique, but a set of principles. The concepts of FST are not meant to be a quick fix to better parenting, but to provide a picture of how things are. There are four aspects to being a parent that are congruent with family systems theory: (1) nurturance, (2) allowing appropriate independence, (3) limit

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<sup>199</sup> Richardson, 41.

<sup>200</sup> Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 127.

setting, and (4) value transmission.<sup>201</sup> The first two aspects are how parents set the foundation of individuality and togetherness in their child. They will help a child move down a path of healthy differentiation in her early years. The second two aspects relate to how a parent will define themselves within their family system. A key value that parents transmit to their children is the value of the marriage relationship. A cooperative relationship between the parents in which each parent functions as a self will aid in building a legacy that will continue into coming generations.

*Principle Four: Self-Differentiation and Spiritual Formation*

According to FST, self-differentiation is how one rises above the anxiety and regression in their family system. Kerr and Bowen define it as follows:

Complete differentiation exists in a person who has fully resolved the emotional attachment to his family. He has attained complete emotional maturity in the sense that his self is developed sufficiently that, whenever important to do so, he can be an individual in the group. He is responsible for himself and neither fosters nor participates in the irresponsibility of others.<sup>202</sup>

The fourth principle developed by this project states that a Christian can begin to define the “self” and differentiate from their family through the process of sanctification, accomplished by the constant practice of spiritual formation. This principle is the most complex and difficult to quantify because humans look at the outward appearance and God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

The clearest evidence of this found in the field research was in the interview of H5 and W5. H5 attributed his growth as a Christian to his ability to separate from his undifferentiated family of origin. The process of sanctification is a life-long process, and

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<sup>201</sup> Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 128.

<sup>202</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 9.



this fourth principle is difficult to fully quantify in a short period time allowed for the field research. The researcher also looked to the evidence observed in his own life experience with spiritual formation and its link to differentiation from his own family.

The pastor or teacher in the local church can incorporate this concept of self-differentiation into biblical teaching. First, they must look to Jesus Christ as the ultimate example of self-differentiation. The apostle John says, “Whoever claims to live in Christ must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). The Christian or disciple of Jesus Christ must strive to model their life using Jesus Christ as their human example. Willard writes that this process of spiritual formation involves three important aspects, each dependent on and connected to the others. First, the disciple of Jesus must accept the daily trials of life that come. Second, the disciple must live a life led by the Holy Spirit of God. Third, the disciple must commit to the practice the disciplines of the Christian life.<sup>203</sup> This formation process does not come as a natural result of regeneration; the Christian must “make every effort” (2 Pet. 1:5) to be conformed to the character of Christ. The obstacle to putting on that character is sin, and a symptom of sin is anxiety. Anxiety in the family system moves from individual to individual. Bowen did not believe in sin as it is defined here but believed that anxiety is a natural part of biological evolution. family systems theory is a scientific theory not interested in the theology of its principles or categories of right and wrong; it does not have a category for sin. FST sees human beings as either more or less “functional” in their family system, but that is an observation and not a judgment.<sup>204</sup> However, when making comparisons between FST and the theological

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<sup>203</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, 26-28.

<sup>204</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 126.

teachings of Scripture, it is possible to view it from both a scientific and hermeneutical standpoint and still maintain integrity as a preacher or teacher. Self-differentiation and Willard's idea of the process of spiritual transformation mutually interpret each other.<sup>205</sup> The Christian teacher therefore must take the Bowen's theory a step further and interpret and describe differentiation as a partnership with Jesus Christ. Whereas Bowen saw self-differentiation as an individual effort, the disciple of Jesus Christ understands the need for the partnership of the Holy Spirit of God to move towards maturity. Differentiation, according to Bowen is a working toward individuation.<sup>206</sup> Differentiation in the family system, according to the Bible, is done in the power of the Holy Spirit combined with the effort of the individual, and in the context of the body of Christ.

### **Differentiation Through the Spiritual Disciplines**

Differentiating from one's family is a difficult endeavor for anyone who attempts to do so. There are helpful tools available to the Christian to assist them as they move towards this goal of defining the self. These tools are often called the classical spiritual disciplines and include acts such as fasting, prayer, meditation, study, solitude, and silence. Spiritual disciplines are "activities of the mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order."<sup>207</sup> The spiritual disciplines prepare the disciple to respond to an anxious situation calmly and non-anxiously on a more consistent basis. Richard Foster describes

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<sup>205</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 82.

<sup>206</sup> Bowen, 539.

<sup>207</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 68.

the disciplines as a means to put the disciple on a path where the Spirit of God can do the work of spiritual formation.<sup>208</sup> biblically speaking, humans cannot bring about spiritual maturity without the empowering of the Spirit of God.

The goal of spiritual maturity is for the follower of Jesus to be transformed in such a way as to respond to the daily difficulties of life just as Jesus did, to live as he did by maintaining the basic self and also staying emotionally engaged in relationships with others and with Jesus Christ. A highly differentiated person in FST is described in similar terms. The shared connections between self-differentiation and spiritual maturity have several implications for the church. First, spiritual progress ought to be marked by an increased capacity to remain connected to others without participating in their reactivity, especially when anxiety is high.<sup>209</sup> This was the characteristic of Jesus, most notably when he was confronted the religious leaders. Second, “the proper practice of the spiritual disciplines ought to contribute to one’s capacity to live life with less anxiety, becoming less reactive to people and circumstances.”<sup>210</sup> The apostle Paul gave instruction on how to become less anxious by presenting our anxiety in prayer to God, who will give peace (shalom) and calm in our hearts and minds (Phil. 4:6,7). Family systems theory would describe this act as using thinking over feeling. Prayer is an act of faith not based on feeling, but on belief that is sure the prayer is heard and answered by God. Prayer then

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<sup>208</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 8.

<sup>209</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 86.

<sup>210</sup> Creech, *Family Systems*, 86.

is the opposite of anxiety.<sup>211</sup> Third, spiritual formation and differentiation are inherently done in the context of relationships. For the Christian, in addition to their immediate family, they also contribute to the relationships in the body of Christ. To put on the character of Christ means to allow oneself to be vulnerable to the relationships in the family system. Friedman believed that in order to bring emotional health to a system, one needed to stay connected while changing.<sup>212</sup> The work of differentiation and the work toward spiritual maturity is a lifelong undertaking that is not done in isolation. The strength of the concept of self-differentiation lies in its compatibility with spiritual formation.

### **Family Systems versus Theological Language**

Family systems theory at its base, is a scientific theory. Bowen contrasted FST with conventional systems theories by stating that FST, “carefully avoids ... automatic preoccupation with why it happened. This is one of the main differences between conventional and systems theory.”<sup>213</sup>

In a scientific theory the main questions asked are What? When? Where? and How? The question Why? is not a useful question to ask. “It opens the way out of the facts into people’s interpretations of the facts.”<sup>214</sup> In FST, one observes emotional reactivity and anxiety as it passes through the family system and is not necessarily interested in why the family members struggle with their regressive behavior. Rather, it

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<sup>211</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 175.

<sup>212</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, editor’s preface.

<sup>213</sup> Bowen, 261.

<sup>214</sup> Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 73.

sees the passing of emotions as a back-and-forth process.<sup>215</sup> The conventional psychoanalytic theories at the time when Bowen was developing his theory were pathology driven. Such a model will seek an answer to the question of why A caused B, then connect the reason to disorders or regressive behavior as the cause. The pastor or parent can explain the “why,” referencing what Scripture says about the doctrine of sin. The Christian teacher can give the ultimate source for the chronic anxiety in the world in the Christian doctrine of sin. Christian pastors, teachers, and parents can operate in the spiritual realm, which technically speaking is not subject to proof. The Christian is called to live their life by faith in the unseen (Rom. 1:17, 6:12). Christians are to count as true the fact of an unseen Holy Spirit that empowers, teaches, and guides the follower of Jesus Christ (John 14, 16) and works inside the family system. The Holy Spirit transforms the character and attitudes of the individuals in the family in ways that can be unseen yet profound. The Christian believes that all truth originates with God who created time and space (Gen. 1). FST and theology can coexist without one having to reject the other. Though FST may define terms like love, family, and togetherness from the Darwinian evolutionary viewpoint, the Christian may substitute the biblical definition or interpretation of those terms and still frame them within the observations of family systems theory. FST describes the human experience of living in relationships in terms of nuclear family emotional systems and self-differentiation.

Family systems theory assumes that human beings are a result of evolution and behave instinctually during times of anxiety. The Christian is in the privileged place of

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<sup>215</sup> Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 4.

knowing that men and women are not products of chance but made in the image of God. God exists in eternal relationship and has given humankind a model for how to function in relationship through Jesus Christ. Though sin has created a barrier in relationships, men and women can partner with the Spirit of God and participate in a family that belongs to a kingdom that is already here but not yet fully realized.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: PERSONAL REFLECTION

The journey through the Doctor of Ministry degree has been one of the biggest challenges of the researcher's life. When the researcher began the program, he had just closed the church that he and his wife planted 30 months earlier. The researcher took no salary and became bi-vocational, working in the commercial construction industry as a project supervisor. That experience in the working world was eye-opening. Pastoring a small church plant and working full-time was an amazing learning experience for the researcher. When the church had to be closed, it opened a door to go back to school and the Lord led the researcher to Bethel Seminary. The researcher's spouse was an important factor in making that decision and the researcher would not have considered it if his wife had not supported the decision. God confirmed the decision to start the program and he continued to open the doors so that in February of 2017 that journey began. At each level of the researcher's academic career, he had been challenged in ways that he did not plan on and he was grateful to God for it. At the beginning of the course work, the researcher was not in a ministry position, which was a burden that weighed on his mind. He spent many hours in prayer, refining his resume and searching for a new position to no avail. For one year the researcher continued to work in construction while attending classes, learning to write and study at the doctoral level. Then the Lord presented him with a ministry position as a children and family pastor, which he worked at for two years. Finally, after four years of searching for a lead pastor position, the Lord opened a ministry opportunity in Minnesota. During those years of study in the Doctor of Ministry

program, the researcher worked at three different jobs, moved to another state, and sent his four children off to college. The researcher thanks God for his provision, grace, gifting, and mercy during this process.

Over the last four years the researcher reflected on the things that he had learned through the process. First, he learned the challenge of academic writing and research at a doctoral level. Professor John Sanders and former professor Tim Senapatiratne gave the researcher his first taste of what a D. Min. paper requires. Those first assignments proved to be a large learning curve for the researcher. Second, the personal journey of self-care through Professor Frank Green's class was significant in the researcher's life. Professor Green introduced the researcher to family systems theory, which piqued his interest, and ultimately through course work and reading in other classes that examined FST, the researcher formed a proposal that culminated in this project. Third, the foundation of academic excellence required by the program has helped the researcher to become a better pastor. Using the writing skills acquired he has become a better communicator to his congregation. Using research skills, he has become a better student of the word of God and communicator of its principles. Finally, though it may seem an insignificant part of the process, the emphasis on citation has been an important lesson for the researcher. Having to be vigilant in citing sources in the writing and research has motivated the researcher to be wiser when speaking and writing in his ministry context. Every professor in Bethel's program instilled the idea of being careful about what is written and making sure it can be supported. The researcher has gained the valuable skill of meaning what he says in a way that keeps him accountable to those who came before. The researcher and those whom he serves will continue to benefit because of the skills acquired during the



four years of this program. Finally, the researcher learned the importance of continued scholarship. The researcher's desire to learn has been fanned into flame and he will continue learning, using the skills gained in the Doctor of Ministry program to become a lifelong student.

The scope of this project was born out of the ministry experiences of both the researcher and the researcher's spouse. The researcher has spent 21 years in full-time ministry, with experience working with all ages of children, youth, and adults. During the course of his ministry career, the researcher has served as a youth and children's pastor in four evangelical churches in Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota and as a program director in a denominational camp in Nebraska. The researcher also served as a lead pastor for four of those years. As the researcher observed the functioning of the families in his ministries, he noticed that similar patterns seemed to emerge. Though at the time the researcher was not familiar with Bowen's work, the researcher observed that many of the families he served in his ministry were struggling with similar issues. Through FST, the researcher saw the value that its concepts could provide for Christian parents. He also believed that the local church would be the place that could provide access to those learning the concepts. The project was designed to examine traditional families with a husband, wife, and children because they were who the researcher had spent the most time serving in ministry. However, the prevalence of non-traditional families in our society grows steadily and they are not uncommon in the local evangelical church.

### **Project Impact on the Researcher**

Over the course of project, the researcher has been impacted in three areas. The first in his functioning within his own family system. As the researcher studied the

concepts of the nuclear family emotional system and self-differentiation, he was better able to observe the functioning in his own family. The researcher was able to see when he was attempting to create relational triangles with his spouse and children during moments of higher anxiety in his family. He was able to see an observable effect on the rest of the family members. The concept of differentiating oneself from one's family system impacted the researcher as well. He was able to see himself reacting during times of higher anxiety and was able to make efforts to avoid giving up his self to the family system. The researcher saw that his efforts at differentiation made an impact on the family, as others decreased their reactions rather than joining in them.

The second area in which the project impacted the researcher was his ministry situation. He has seen increased in anxiety in his church members due to the current pandemic. As a leader in his church, the researcher has had to be purposeful in his reactions to those who want the elders of the church to respond to the virus in a certain way. The researcher has been able to share some basic principles and concepts with the Elders of his church, giving them tools for differentiating themselves. These tools, if taken to heart and applied in their responses, teach Elders to respond to anxious church members in a calm and non-anxious way. The concepts studied throughout this project and the field research conducted revealed to the researcher that there is a relatively untapped area of need in his current ministry context.

Finally, as the researcher examined the topic of spiritual disciplines as a means of self-differentiation, he was impacted by the power these classical methods have in the life of the Christian. The real key to making significant progress in self-differentiation is found in the process of spiritual formation. The idea that spiritual maturity leads to

greater self-identity found in Christ which in turn leads to significant self-differentiation was a powerful truth revealed to the researcher.

### **Areas for Further Examination**

As a pastor, the researcher has had opportunities to counsel families going through difficulties with their children. However, he has had limited training in understanding and addressing the needs of broken families with stepchildren and divorced parents. The researcher sees this as an opportunity for further research and study. In these types of families, patterns of high level undifferentiation are often passed down through the generations and have significant influence on the families of the present. The undifferentiation passed through the generations often results in a limited capacity for parents in the present to think systems when it comes to their own families. The optimal solution for these types of families is to attend family therapy facilitated by a therapist trained in FST. However, there are several reasons why attending therapy could be unrealistic in many cases. First, the financial aspect might keep families from attending therapy. They simply may not be able to afford the cost of the number of sessions needed to benefit the family. Second, a family cannot be forced to attend therapy; they must voluntarily choose to do so. Convincing a family to commit to multiple sessions might be difficult, especially if the levels of differentiation in the family were high. Third, though there is a network of therapists trained in FST, it is still relatively difficult to find someone who qualifies, especially outside of major metropolitan areas. These reasons might lead to further research of mixed marriage families in the church and would be beneficial for the pastor/counselor and for the parents in those families.

The researcher would also like to further examine the ramifications of growing up in a family where abuse was or is present. During the field research of this project, one of the individuals who participated in the personal interviews shared information about his abusive upbringing, and how with the Lord's help he was able to separate from his unhealthy family system. Families who deal with abuse in their family of origin are an increasingly growing phenomenon in the local church. It would benefit families and pastors to gain better understanding of how FST explains such situations. The research and literature on victims of abuse is vast, but it would be interesting to learn more about how FST and the doctrines of Scripture would speak to the topic.

Another research topic that would be of interest is digging deeper into the use of spiritual disciplines in the process of spiritual formation over the course of church history. This project made the connection between the processes of self-differentiation and spiritual formation and highlighted the use of the spiritual disciplines as a means to differentiate from a family system. The classic disciplines of the spiritual life have a long tradition in the history of the church. However, the researcher grew up in the evangelical church and was not taught that spiritual disciplines could or should be a part of the normal Christian life. In the mind of the researcher this was an oversight on the part of the churches he was associated with. The researcher would like to examine the history of the evangelical church and its divergence from some of the mainline church practices regarding spiritual formation, including the spiritual disciplines. Dallas Willard believed that we are meant to have a relationship with God that is conversational and practical.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Willard and Johnson, 18.

In order to cultivate that conversational relationship, Willard and Richard Foster among others would direct the Christian to the disciplines of the Christian life.

APPENDIX A: ONLINE SUREVEY CONTENT AND TEXT

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*Block One*

1. What is your gender?
2. Marital status.
3. How many children do you have?
4. My children are [infant – high school] (choose all that apply)

*Block Two*

Instructions: “In the following questions, you will be asked to **describe how your family relates to one another**. Before you begin, put yourself in the mindset of an impartial observer. Imagine you are outside of your family (and yourself!) looking in. This mindset will help you describe your family (and yourself!) in a more objective light. Ask the question ‘If I were outside looking in, how would I describe my family’s interactions in the questions below?’”

5. Our family handles disagreement well.
6. When things are not going well in our family, it is usually centered around recurring issues (i.e., spousal support, discipline of children, finances, time management, etc.)
7. During times of minor disagreement, we resolve it in a healthy manner.
8. When someone in our family is under stress, it is important for them to calm down.
9. Our childhood upbringing (family of origin) influences the way we react to conflict.
10. We try to deal with conflict openly as it happens.
11. When conflict/disagreement arises, we need time to think it through.
12. We like to deal with conflict/disagreement head on.
13. There are unresolved conflicts that remain in our family.
14. There are unresolved conflicts within our families of origin that still have an effect on relationships.

*Block Three*

Instructions: “This next block of questions pertains to you personally. In other words, answer from your perspective.”

15. It is important that my spouse and I agree on our parenting decisions.
16. I would put the health of my marriage above my children’s happiness.
17. I do NOT want to parent my children like I was parented in my childhood.
18. I would like our family to be closer to each other.
19. My family has healthy boundaries with each other.
20. The most important thing to me is my children’s happiness.
21. I am a contributor to family stress or conflict.
22. The person who contributes to the stress or conflict in our family the most is:
23. I look for ways to improve my relationships.



APPENDIX B: PERSONAL INTERVIEW OUTLINE

## APPENDIX B: PERSONAL INTERVIEW OUTLINE

- I. Interviewer gives brief overview of FST as it relates describes “nuclear family emotional system” and “self-differentiation”.
  - a. Patterns of anxiety; conflict, triangles, overfunctioning/ underfunctioning, distancing.
  
- II. Family of Origin exploration: Listen for key words or phrases that indicate levels of differentiation and anxiety in the family of origin.
  - a. Think about growing up, what was your family’s view of conflict/ stress?
  - b. How did each child relate to the individual parents, how different to other siblings?
  - c. What differences did you parents have dealing with conflict or stress?
  - d. Identified patient questions.
    - i. Which child, or recurring problem was the focus of the family’s anxiety?
  
- III. Personal Differentiation
  - a. How connected are you to your parents individually?
  - b. Triangles-Describe your family relationships.
    - i. Look for indications of triangled relationships.

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