



Surviving Congregational Leadership: A Theology of Family Systems

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IN RECENT DECADES, FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY HAS EXERTED A MAJOR AND SALU-
tary influence on congregational ministry. On the one hand, family systems
categories offer an insightful look at the relational tendencies of those who serve in
pastoral ministry. Each of us operates according to deeply ingrained patterns of re-
lating to other people that we acquired in our family of origin. Developing a geno-
gram can provide fresh understanding of our most troubled relationships with
others.¹ On the other hand, family systems theory has been fruitfully applied as a
tool for examining entire congregations.² Each individual and family within a con-
gregation operates on the basis of its own family constellation. Moreover, the con-

¹Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

²Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1993).

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The concepts of family systems theory correspond strikingly to some basic Christian doctrines. Christian theology grounds family systems categories in the very activity of God in the world.

gregation itself is a complex system consisting of the relational web of those persons and families that constitute it. It is an important insight for a pastor to realize that much conflict in a congregation should not be taken personally but instead derives from unresolved emotional projections based on the respective families of origin.

I. BASIC CONCEPTS

The fundamental categories of family systems theory serve as a survival kit for pastoral ministry in the congregation.³ Rather than focusing on the psyche of a troubled individual, the point of orientation becomes *the entire family as a system of relationships* out of which this person functions. This approach is not introspective but analytical of the relational patterns that develop over time among family members. The ways we learn to relate to our parents, grandparents, and siblings have lasting power over how we relate to those we encounter beyond the formal family system. Each congregation is a complex system of family systems, constituted by the plethora of relationships that define the life of that congregation. Just as individuals are shaped by the family of origin issues (f.o.o.i.)⁴ they carry from home, congregations develop unique identities based on the particular ways they come to relate to one another, especially as they process anxiety.

In considering the entirety of a family or congregational system, one must learn to pay attention to the *extended family field*. Every system extends beyond the visible players who are actively involved in the present moment to include those persons from the past and those living at a distance who continue to exert influence on what is currently happening. Emotional systems are acutely influenced by the “ghosts” of the past. Previous generations continue to dictate how we act in the present: “We’ve never done it that way before.” When you talk to me, there’s a profound way in which your parents are also speaking through you and my parents through me. It is particularly vital in family systems thinking to attend to the places in the system where there are individuals emotionally cut off from others. These broken relationships usually affect our health and behavior far more than we ever realize.

Homeostasis characterizes every family or congregational system. Systems tend always to stay the same. There are reasons why things are the way they are. A system does not acquire a certain balance by accident. Rather, each system attains its definition through a long process of relational exchanges that lead it to function according to certain patterns. We should not be surprised by the fact that change is always resisted. That is the very nature of emotional systems. Even when the patterns are destructive, they are preferable to the untried. This particular rule should

³See Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985), especially 19-39.

⁴I find it humorous to describe the family of origin issues that plague each of us as “fooi” (pronounced “phooey”).

give congregational leaders a strong measure of equanimity in dealing with entrenched systems. One will need to commit for the long haul if lasting change is to be attained.

In relating to a family or congregational system, it is necessary to recognize how a certain individual becomes designated and labeled as an *identified patient*. Wherever anxiety exists within a given system, certain individuals become identified as the cause of the problem. If only the identified patient could be fixed, so it appears, then everything would get better. For example, in a family with a troubled marriage, a child begins to act out in destructive fashion and becomes the identified patient. Similarly, in a congregation, certain persons get labeled as “alligators” or “clergy killers.”⁵ Such labels have a polarizing effect on congregational life. This is not to say there are not problematic persons in families or congregations whose influence needs to be curtailed. It does mean, however, that the root problem is never adequately understood merely by focusing on individuals. In systems thinking, the misbehavior of any individual member is related to the anxiety that exists within the entire system. A “problematic” child should raise questions about the health of the entire system, particularly about the role of the parents. The behavior of a troubled parishioner should raise questions about both the well-being of that person’s family and the function that inordinate attention to that person’s behavior serves in the congregational system, for example, in diverting attention away from other issues.

The emergence of an identified patient within a system serves as a prime example of one type of *emotional triangle*. An emotional triangle is created wherever the emotional anxiety that exists between two persons gets focused on a third person or issue. This is a primary way systems avoid change. Instead of recognizing what you and I are contributing to a given problem, we start to focus on a third person or issue that shifts attention away from ourselves to the other. Scapegoating is one of our favorite human activities, from gossip to blaming. Pastors are primary targets for triangulation by those in troubled relationships. This can be a serious impediment to pastoral ministry for those who fail to recognize what is happening but also a great opportunity to become a catalyst for new ways of relating. The danger is that pastors often fail to recognize how their own unresolved emotional issues become manipulated by those who seek to lure them into an emotional triangle.

The final concepts needing introduction are *self-differentiation* and *non-anxious presence*. According to family systems thinking, the ultimate goal for any individual member of a system is to remain self-differentiated. 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. This

⁵See G. Lloyd Rediger, *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations under Attack* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

means one must remain connected with others without becoming enmeshed in their own emotional agendas. Both of these characteristics are crucial to solid leadership. It is vital that one sincerely care about others, yet not care to the extent that one's own happiness becomes dependent on how others respond to that caring. At the same time, one must be free to take clear stands on issues regardless of how others will react to whatever position is taken. Self-differentiation is a balancing act that Friedman has stated none of us ever achieve more than 70% of the time. Most are operating at a far less optimal level. When one attains the goal of self-differentiation, caring yet free to be a self, then one becomes a non-anxious presence within that system. One is able to remain non-anxious in the face of the anxiety of others.

The basic concepts of family systems thinking are not many in number. But clear understanding of these seven concepts has major consequences for understanding the functioning of human groups, including one's approach to leadership and conflict. Consistent application of these categories can lead to deep insight into one's own behavior as well as that of others.

II. FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND THEOLOGY

The major formulators of family systems thinking have given only cursory attention to the interface with theology.⁶ Friedman did some initial work on the relationship of family systems theory and process theology that resulted in a video lecture on the subject.⁷ The questions I seek to address in the remainder of this article are twofold: What are the contours of a theological approach that takes seriously the concepts of family systems theory? How would family systems theory need to be reconsidered if it were to take seriously theological insight? We will approach these questions by taking up several theological loci and examine the implications for the basic concepts of family systems thought.⁸

God. Family systems theory methodologically brackets out the question of God. Recent theological proposals about the nature of God as Trinity, however, can provide a fascinating foundation for considering the ultimate ground of a systems approach. The persons of the Trinity constitute a single system. The oneness of God must be comprehended as a community of the three divine persons. Each of the persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is self-differentiated from the others. Yet none of the three can be comprehended apart from the unity of the entire system. Among the persons of the Trinity, there exists a *perichoresis*.

Perichoresis means being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. No

⁶One fine contribution is by David William Anderson, "Luther on the Christian Home: A Family Theory Critique" (Th.D. Dissertation, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1990).

⁷Edwin H. Friedman, *Family Process and Process Theology: Basic New Concepts*, videotape (Washington, DC: Alban Institute).

⁸I am deeply grateful to four colleagues in the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for consultation and wisdom on this project: Victoria Brundage, Greg Gaskamp, Michael Kerr, and Gordon Peterson.

person exists by him/herself or is referred to him/herself; this would produce number and therefore division within God. Rather, to be a divine person is to be *by nature* in relation to other persons. Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self out into the other.⁹

This brief description of the trinitarian relations gives expression to a creative and dynamic understanding of God that preserves both the unity of the system and the distinction of the persons. To understand God as Trinity is to posit a God who brings into existence a unified creation consisting of a complex network of relationships. The correspondence between contemporary reflection on the nature of the Triune God and the world of relationships in family systems theory is striking.

Creation. Family systems theory resonates with a view of creation as an ongoing and continuous process. God creates a world that exists in a dynamic process of complex and interdependent levels, organized into a variety of systems. Matter itself does not consist of inert, individual pieces of stuff. On the micro-level, atoms are systems of quanta energy, interacting with one another in complex patterns. On the macro-level, the universe is a dynamic system of stars and planets, black holes and quasars, evolving through time beginning with the Big Bang. Evolution has proceeded by the emergence of ever more highly complex levels: out of the inorganic come successively the organic, eukaryotes, plant species, animal species, and human consciousness. The science of ecology teaches that life itself is a web of diverse species among which exists a high level of interdependence. All human life, for example, is affected by the destruction of rain forests: the depletion of this major source of oxygen combined with an increase in greenhouse gases from pollution impacts the condition of the atmosphere, leading to global warming. Consistent with the nature of creation, human beings interact in terms of emotional systems according to complex patterns deriving both from genetic inheritance and intergenerational learning.

At every level, creation involves a dynamic interaction between freedom (the principle of innovation) and order (the principle of preservation). Evolution is driven forward by the principle of innovation. For example, genes combine in original combinations to create unique phenotypes, and mutations can lead to dramatic innovation. Systems emerge and attain homeostasis according to the principle of preservation. For example, certain plant and animal species attain a degree of stability that renders them identifiable for thousands of years. The creative power of the biblical God is also revealed to operate according to these principles. In Gen 1, God creates by making order out of chaos (the principle of preservation). However, when order becomes sclerotic (as with slavery in Egypt), God also creates by making chaos out of order (the principle of innovation). What is observed about the nature of creation in the natural world also holds for family systems theory: ho-

⁹Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 271.

meostasis names the principle of preservation at work in emotional systems while the ability to remain self-differentiated functions as the principle of innovation in human relationships.

Anthropology. The distinguishing mark of the human being, according to Genesis, is that we are created in the *imago dei*, the image of God (1:26-27). This means that humans are made for a particular kind of relationship with God and with one another. There is a profound sense in which human beings are never individuals (as modernity would have it) but always persons, that is, those who by definition exist in relationship with others. From birth, human persons are dependent upon the care and nurture of others for both physical and emotional needs. Theologically, we are made for relationships of a particular character, expressed in mutual honor and respect. In relating to others the goal is to be neither overbearing (dominating) nor overdependent (submissive). According to the categories of family systems theory, one thrives by living in self-differentiated relationships: one cares for others without becoming “enmeshed,” that is, emotionally dependent on how those others react to one’s caring. Each one of us should remain free to be a self, yet connected to others in life-giving community. The correspondence between family systems thinking about the nature of the human and theological anthropology is especially close.

Sin. In theological understanding, the essence of sin is broken relationship. In Gen 3, dire consequences emanate when Adam and Eve break their relationship of trust with God. To be cut off from God results in becoming cut off from one another. They hide from God and place blame on others. In the next generation, Cain and Abel perpetuate the pattern of broken relationships, culminated in Cain’s murder of his brother. Relationships intended to serve life become broken and serve death. The doctrine of original sin derives from these texts.¹⁰ The sins of the ancestors are visited upon the succeeding generations (cf. Exod 20:5-6).

Family systems theory gives renewed significance to this understanding of human sin. Dysfunctional families are characterized by broken, death-dealing relationships. Indeed, patterns of dysfunction are inherited from generation to generation.¹¹ This is one of the most creative insights that a systems approach brings to the understanding of troubled families. Dysfunction or sin is not attributable only to isolated individuals but to the system of relationships in which we engage. Sin is not merely individual but systemic. The “principalities and powers” can overtake the good intentions of those within a group and lead to demonic distortions in a relational system.¹² The formulation of liberation theologians regarding structural sin thus finds its equivalent in family systems thought. Structural sin has dimen-

¹⁰See Jerry D. Korschmeier, *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (New York: Paulist, 1998).

¹¹See Rita DeMaria, Gerald Weeks, and Larry Hof, *Focused Genograms: Intergenerational Assessment of Individuals, Couples, and Families* (Castleton, NY: Hamilton, 1999).

¹²See Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

sions that transcend the good will of individual actors within the system. Homeostasis can be powerful in the case of a dysfunctional relational system.

Salvation. If sin is manifested in broken relationships with God and others, salvation entails the restoration of these relationships. The Hebrew concept of *shalom*, sometimes translated as “peace,” might be more fully understood as “salvation.” Shalom conveys the hope of a world restored, where all broken relationships are reconciled with God, other persons, and the entire creation. Salvation means that the creation is returned to wholeness and all live in peace one with another.

The Triune God is actively at work in the world to bring what is separated back into wholesome relationship. The persons of the Trinity are active to reincorporate what has become estranged back into community. God as loving Parent, reconciling Christ, and unifying Spirit moves outward in an extension of perichoretic unity to draw all things into God’s system of life-giving relationships. God the Creator created a world that would abide in shalom. God the Son died on the cross in order to remove every obstacle that would prevent the creation from being restored. Because God forgives all sin by the death of Christ, we are free to forgive one another. God the Spirit is alive in the world to bring the reconciling power of God to healing effect in every creature. On a cosmic scale, God’s redemptive work is to bring into existence a totality of life-giving relationships, just as family systems theory aims at the attainment of a healthier set of relationships in a particular family or congregational system.

God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit works through triangles to accomplish salvific purposes. Wherever there is a broken relationship, God sends Christ embodied in Word and vitalized by the Spirit to form a redemptive triad. Christ works to mediate between those who are estranged from one another by becoming a bridge between them. When I look at the person of one who has offended me, I am to see only Christ and what Christ has done. When another looks at me as one who is alienated, that one is to see only Christ and what Christ has accomplished for our reconciliation. In a theological rendering of family systems concepts, Christ is constantly at work to become the third in every relationship that has been severed. The work of ministry in the church, whether by the baptized or pastors, is to bring Christ into broken relationships so that salvation may occur.

Atonement. One of the most profound reinterpretations of the doctrine of atonement has been stimulated by the thought of René Girard.¹³ Girard argues, on the basis of extensive historical and anthropological study, that the primary way human groups seek to relieve social stress and anxiety is through identifying and acting out against sacrificial victims. He names this behavior “scapegoating.” Whenever a society reaches a high level of anxiety, it identifies someone to blame. Part of the insidiousness of this phenomenon, however, is that those so engaged do not recognize their activity as a form of scapegoating. They genuinely believe their course of action to be justified. They see the victim(s) to be blameworthy. Thus the

¹³For an introduction, see James G. Williams, ed., *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

group coalesces in directing its aggression against the identified scapegoat. Upon the completion of the sacrifice of the victim(s), a modicum of peace is restored to the group. Eventually, however, anxiety returns and a new scapegoat must be located.

Girard sees in the Christian texts about the death of Jesus a breakthrough in understanding the scapegoat mechanism. He claims that in Christianity, for the first time in history, a tradition reveals for all to see how scapegoating functions. In Christian tradition Jesus is attested as blameless. This sacrificial lamb is without sin. Jesus did nothing to deserve crucifixion. Yet the Roman state at the behest of an angry, anxious mob executed him. Because the injustice of Jesus' death is so strikingly portrayed in the Christian gospels, Girard asserts that now the scapegoat mechanism can be understood for what it is: murder. Because on account of the death of Jesus we can now see how an innocent man can be killed to satisfy the desire of the masses, so we should be empowered to see how human groups still today function to identify and execute scapegoats.¹⁴

Girard's analysis offers a powerful new lens by which to interpret the death of Jesus and its atoning significance. Especially in a world of incredible and increasing violence, the crucifixion of Jesus helps us name and protest against other acts of scapegoating violence. Christians, above all others, should recognize Jesus as the *final* scapegoat. Wherever a group gravitates toward identifying a victim to blame for their problems, Christians should be the first to say, "Never again!" By his death on the cross, Jesus worked atonement by eliminating the need for any more victims. The Christian gospel makes this offer: If you need a scapegoat, recall the figure of Jesus on the cross. If you need a scapegoat, take it out on Jesus.

In family systems theory, an identified patient is the one who bears the blame for the malfunctioning of other parts of the system. The rising level of anxiety within the entire system leads to the emergence and identification of someone who manifests symptoms on behalf of the others (for example, a child who acts out at school). Homeostasis within the rest of the system can be sustained when attention shifts to focus on the identified patient. The correspondence between the role of an identified patient in family systems theory and the role of the scapegoat in theological understanding is striking. The phenomenon of an identified patient within a family can be understood as an instance of the human penchant for scapegoating on a larger scale.

Justification. What is the source from which one can draw to become a non-anxious presence? According to family systems theory, the primary answer to this question is that one attains sufficient insight into how one has learned to respond to others within one's own family of origin. Friedman remarked that the best one could possibly attain is to remain non-anxious 70% of the time. The vast majority of people are far more reactive than this, operating according to deeply established

¹⁴See the contemporary applications of Girard's work in Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

patterns about which they lack perspective. The way to non-anxious presence, however, begins and ends with examining one's own habitual ways of relating, mostly learned in childhood.

A theological answer to the question about the source of non-anxious presence is decisively different. While obtaining insight into one's own family system may be useful, there exists a transcendent source of non-anxiousness that is yet more profound. The ultimate ground of non-anxious presence, theologically considered, is the gospel. The Christian message of justification, that one is made right with God by God's grace alone through faith in Christ, is the final basis for genuine non-anxiousness.

While many in the church profess this faith in justification by grace, one of the most difficult things in the world is to trust that this message is true in one's own heart. Many pastors are quick to proclaim this gospel of grace to others, but remain stymied in trusting the selfsame message about their own lives. The cross of Christ introduces a source of forgiveness and reconciliation that is unsurpassable. While insight into one's own family system is extremely helpful, one cannot be empowered to non-anxiousness on this basis alone. Rather, one must come to trust a transcendent source of grace that is not contingent upon the transitory feelings of the day or one's own ability to make sense out of the past. In myriad ways, trusting that one has been justified by grace alone in Christ is at the heart of the matter for living non-anxiously.

Church. The church is the community that through baptism has been incorporated into a new way of relating to others. Christ becomes intentionally triangled into every relationship. Through word and sacrament, prayer and worship, the church remains centered in Christ. The gospel sets the baptized free for genuine caring—not in order to please or control other people but for the sake of the other's need.

Because of sin, the church fails to live out of its ultimate source of grace in Jesus Christ. Each new day the baptized must reclaim the promises of God, the identity according to which each is a forgiven child of God. Baptism is the entrance into a new family system, in which Christ is the head who affirms the gifts of each member. Christ is alive by the power of the Spirit continually to reorient the members of the church to relationships that promote salvation. The ministry of the church entails seeking to bring Christ as mediator into every broken relationship for the restoration of the entire creation.

This essay lays the groundwork for a theological interpretation of family systems theory. Family systems concepts are certainly valuable in their own right. They aim to be scientific in describing the nature of emotional processes based on key family relationships. In no way should this proposal detract from the important effort to gain insight into the functioning of particular family systems. Analyz-

ing family systems according to genograms is invaluable for gaining insight into human behavior.

The purpose of this essay has been twofold. First, I have sought to document the striking correspondence between the central concepts of family systems theory and some basic Christian doctrines. Both are heavily invested in the restoration of healthy, life-giving relationships. Second and most important, I have suggested that the framework of Christian theology grounds family systems categories in the very activity of God in the world.

When the church adopts theories from other disciplines, it assumes the danger of overlooking serious differences in perspective in order to stay relevant. What I hope to have demonstrated here is not only the usefulness of family systems theory for those engaged in congregational ministry but also how Christian theology deepens and expands the central insights of family systems concepts. The concepts of family systems are made even more profound when supplemented and deepened by Christian thought: to view the Triune God as the primary actor in seeking to restore health to relationships, to name broken relationships with God and others as the essence of sin, to interpret salvation as the restoration of all relationships to their original, life-giving purposes, and to understand the ultimate source of non-anxious presence to be discovered in the trust that one is justified by grace alone in Christ.

Seen from the perspective of Christian doctrine, the already valuable insights of family systems theory take on new and creative significance. This theological re-interpretation of family systems theory offers a framework both for comprehending and surviving the stresses of congregational leadership. ⊕