

# INTRODUCTION

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This collection of papers seeks to apply a biblical worldview to Bowen family systems theory and its application in church ministry contexts. Dr Murray Bowen's family systems theory has garnered interest from clergy for some decades, especially since the publication of Rabbi Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Friedman, 1985). Numerous organisations have emerged in the USA who consult to church workers, drawing from Bowen theory. Many books have been published that apply systems thinking to the functioning of congregations and to pastoral leadership.<sup>1</sup> One can assume that the premise of these publications is that Bowen theory is relevant across divergent theological and denominational positions, as it refers to relationship process rather than the content of belief. While applications of Bowen theory to the church do refer to the Bible in passing, the literature is sparse in considering Bowen theory through the lens of biblical truth—starting with the view that “All Scripture is God-breathed

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Friedman (1999, 2006), Richardson (1996, 2005), Galindo (2004, 2009), Steinke (2006), Gilbert (2006, 2009), Marcuson (2009), Herrington et al. (2003, 2016).

and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The authors in this book all subscribe to this authoritative view of Scripture as well as being scholars and appliers of Bowen theory to church contexts. The papers presented do not attempt to provide a thoroughly rigorous critique of Bowen theory through a biblical lens, however they do represent thinking and application of Bowen theory that engages critically with the Bible’s view of the human condition. The aim is to raise many questions about the usefulness of Bowen theory to the Christian church, as opposed to providing definitive conclusions. It is hoped that these papers will provide rich fodder for continued grappling with Bowen theory as it relates to Christian ministry and biblical truth.

## **Bowen theory and its central concepts<sup>2</sup>**

Before outlining what to expect from this publication it is appropriate to give an overview of Murray Bowen’s family systems theory. It might be tempting to skip over a description of the theory; however the effort to make sense of the basis of Bowen’s framework will enhance the reading of the applications and critiques contained in this book. Bowen was a US army physician during World War II who became interested in psychiatry after seeing the varying effects of trauma on soldiers. Observing variation in human functioning in the face of life challenge was part of what fuelled his research orientation. He originally trained in Freud’s psychoanalysis but departed from this theory as he observed that human difficulties went beyond unresolved issues in the individual’s psyche and was, rather, embedded in each person’s

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<sup>2</sup> Sections of this outline of theory are taken from the book *Growing Yourself Up* (Brown, 2012, 2017, pp. 47-48). For a more rigorous understanding of this theory, a reading of core texts is recommended (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 1990; Kerr, 2019).

family system. In researching whole families at the US National Institute of Mental Health in the 1950s, Bowen noticed patterns of managing anxiety in families that were similar to the instinctive ways other species dealt with threats in (or to) their herds and packs. In this way it is a natural systems theory that has developed out of field research of the human in families and groups in the same way that a natural scientist observes the activity of a troop of chimpanzees or the cellular behaviour in a particular organ. Bowen was strongly influenced by the writing of Charles Darwin in seeing the way species and groups make adaptations to their environments that have ramifications for survival.

### **Anxiety, the engine room of reactive patterns in relationships**

Bowen's theory is constructed around eight concepts and some important notions about types of anxiety and emotional (instinctually embedded) process. All of the relationship patterns described by Bowen are mechanisms for us as humans to manage the anxieties of life and relationships. Hence the understanding of systems anxiety is pivotal in Bowen's theory. Bowen theory is built around the notion of *two counter-balancing relationship forces*: the *togetherness force* that seeks attachment and the *separateness force* that seeks autonomy. Both are viewed as essential for human survival as a social mammal. A balance of being connected to others while also being sufficiently separate to function as an individual is core to a person's development. The challenge to balance these forces is what fuels tension in relationships. For example, the perception of another's efforts towards more autonomous functioning can easily trigger separation anxiety. Conversely the sustained push for more connection can trigger a sense of suffocation in another. This flow of anxiety renders any two-person relationship as somewhat unstable. From such instability humans have developed mechanisms that deflect or absorb their experience of tension in relationships. The concepts

that Bowen describes in his theory are all connected to our human management of this relational insecurity.

Bowen described two different types of anxiety experienced by humans, and these reside in our family and other significant systems. The first is *acute anxiety*: that is the response to a real adverse event. Humans can usually find sufficient resources over time to recover from such challenges, as long as the adversities are not unrelenting. The second is *chronic anxiety*: this presents complex and longer-term challenges for us in relationships. Chronic anxiety is an exaggerated sense of potential threat that generates a continued sensitivity to and scanning for the presence of the feared outcome. Bowen proposed that this “what if” chronic anxiety is the engine room of anxious patterns in relationships: conflict, distance, over and underfunctioning, triangling, and projecting onto a vulnerable family member (e.g., a child). Chronic anxiety is seen as being largely generated by perceived threats to important relationships. Such perceived threats are understood in the context of the two life forces of being close and having emotional space. The degree of chronic anxiety flowing back and forth is a key contributor to symptom development in a relationship or in a member of the anxious system. Higher chronic anxiety equates to lower differentiation of self/maturity. Chronic anxiety, which is present to varying degrees in all families, is also the driver of over-dependent relationships which in turn can lead to distancing in an effort to manage the relational intensity.

An important observation behind Bowen theory is that the family functions as a single emotional unit. While anxiety and tension is part of each individual’s physiological response it also belongs to the family as a single emotional unit. The family is viewed as a collection of interdependent members who each affect the functioning of others.

The following is a brief overview of Bowen theory's eight concepts. Bowen's concept of the *triangle* describes the way a three-person system can contain tension by spreading it around three relationships. The triangle enables two people to divert their insecurities to a focus on a third. This triangle focus can be a rescuing, blaming, or mediating focus. Other people are easily drawn into responding to the triangle through side-taking or blaming. Hence interlocking triangles are easily formed in any group.

Bowen's cornerstone concept of *differentiation of self* describes the human challenge to balance the need for connection with the need for autonomy. All humans are on a continuum of differentiation (or maturity) in that they vary in capacity to self-regulate and maintain connection with important others in the face of tension. Alternatives to well-differentiated relationships are *fusion*, which sacrifices autonomous functioning for the sake of harmony, and *cutoff*, which sacrifices connection for the sake of independence. Emotional cutoff is when the sensitivities between one generation and the next are managed through breaking away. Distance is used to manage tension between parents and adult children, which in turn intensifies the fusion in replacement relationships.

*Nuclear family emotional process* describes the patterns for managing stress and immaturity (undifferentiation) in a one-generational family. The patterns of over- and underfunctioning, conflict, and distance in a marriage, and over-investment in a child are all predictable ways that family members contain the stressful overload of life relationships. These patterns can become stuck in place and in time lead to the emergence of symptoms in a marriage, a spouse, and/or a child.

The *family projection process* is one of the patterns of adaptation mentioned above where parents' insecurities are detoured through

a focus on the next generation (focusing on one or more children). Bowen saw the importance of this process in understanding how different degrees of maturity are transmitted from one generation to the next. The *multigenerational transmission process* is the way in which each child moves into adult life with varied degrees of relationship sensitivity. This is linked to how much relationship intensity they were a part of with their parents.

Bowen drew upon Walter Toman's research (Toman, 1992) on family sibling position to see how this impacts the patterns of relationship involved in establishing a marriage and family. This concept is much more complex than simple profiles of eldest, middle, and youngest. It looks at the interplay of marriage partners' sibling profiles with the way they attach and parent their children. Bowen's final concept, *societal emotional process*, identified ways that family patterns play out in society with each influencing the other.

Bowen theory doesn't focus on mental illness but on the challenges of being human in the relationships which affect us all. The therapy that comes from the theory aims to reduce chronic anxiety in a system and to assist people to lift out of fusion and reactivity in order to grow more into maturity (differentiation of self). A system lens means that a change in one member will necessitate adjustments in others. Hence the efforts of one can improve the functioning of the entire system. It is a complex theory to grasp, as it focuses on the big-picture patterns of a system rather than the narrower view of what causes difficulties for one individual.

## **Bowen theory and the process of change**

Bowen posited that the change process is about working to be a bit more differentiated in relationships. This process requires observing one's *self* in relationships and identifying patterns driven by

fusion with others. Exploring one's family of origin can assist with greater awareness of what we have inherited in terms of patterns of managing anxiety as well as gaining a more objective view of family members. It is critical to point out that awareness alone does not result in improved functioning in relationships. Change occurs in very small steps of practising being more autonomous while in meaningful connection with others. It is an active and long-term research project in a person's life. An underlying principle is that all family members (or members of a relationship system such as a ministry team) play a part in all that goes on in the group. It is not useful to try to change another, however it is possible to change the part that one's self plays. A change in one person necessitates compensatory changes in others which may promote improved functioning for the whole group. Bowen writes:

The modification of self requires that the person be sure of self on all life principles that involve him [her] self and his [her] family, to have the courage to act on his [her] convictions, and to devote primary attention to becoming the most responsible person. (Bowen, 1978, p. 449)

It is interesting to note the centrality of a person becoming surer of their personal beliefs in the process of differentiation. Bowen does not discuss what these beliefs might be but emphasises the importance of a person developing core beliefs gradually from within rather than quickly adopting them from others in the group.

The therapy approach in Bowen theory is called *coaching*, given that it is based on collaborative investigation of a person's relationship patterns rather than providing a healing corrective relationship. The coach works to stay out of side-taking triangles with the person they are assisting. They place the focus on descriptions of interactions in real life and not on what is happening in the "therapeutic relationship".

## **Bowen theory applied to non-family systems**

Bowen theory has been applied beyond families since its earliest disseminations. In particular the theory has been extended to work systems with Bowen writing about his observations of his research staff team's reactivities in 1965 and his own anxious patterns as a lead administrator in 1972 (Bowen, 1978, pp.131-133, 461-465). While patterns of managing anxiety are more generationally entrenched in family groups, the same patterns will be evident (perhaps less intensely<sup>3</sup>) in any group of people that regularly interact. It is worth noting in relation to work groups and congregations that while an individual may bring their family reactivity to the group, the manner in which members of the group respond to the individual will affect the extent of turbulence to the group as a whole. This systems thinking means that no individual can be viewed as "toxic" to the group, given the vital contributing factor of another's capacity to be in less anxious contact with, and define self to, the sensitive individual.

## **Bowen theory, secular psychology, and the Bible**

Broadly speaking, Bowen theory has a natural application to the church with its big picture view of a system or body of interconnections—where every member affects others' functioning. The church as a body is a central idea in the apostle Paul's letters and this lends itself well to thinking of the church as an interdependent system: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12). The key to systems thinking is to consider how every person impacts others in a constantly moving reciprocal

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<sup>3</sup> Bowen (1978) writes: "Basic relationship patterns developed for adapting to the parental family in childhood are used in all other relationships throughout life. The basic patterns in social and work relationships are identical to relationship patterns in the family, except in intensity... However there are exceptions to this in which the intensity of relationships in work systems approximates the intensity in the original family" (p.462)



dynamic. It is a paradigm shift from individual, cause-and-effect thinking. The core implication is that change occurs through a person's effort on themselves and the problematic impacts they have on the overall health of the group—whether that be through distancing, reactive conflict, side-taking, or taking on too much or too little responsibility. This is expressed clearly by Richardson:

Rather than asking the question, 'How can I change the church?' Bowen family systems theory suggests that the minister should ask, 'What do I need to work on to improve my functioning within the emotional system of the church so that I can better represent the Gospel?' (Richardson, 2005, p. 401)

The quest to appraise a secular psychological theory through a biblical worldview is complicated with a diversity of approaches appearing in the field. These include: the integrations view, levels of explanation view, Christian psychology view, transformational psychology view, and a biblical counselling view (Johnson, ed., 2000, 2010). This collection of papers does not endeavour to work uniformly within any of these views. Readers will most likely find themselves considering the efficacy of each chapter's approach to a biblical perspective of Bowen theory. An example of a well-developed framework for examining a theory through a biblical lens is found in the writing of David Powlison from the current stage of the biblical counselling movement. Powlison writes:

First, read the Bible for the humanity portrayed, as well as for the divinity revealed, and above all for the interaction between the two. Though myriads of significant details about individuals and social groups are not contained within the Bible, learning to think the way Jesus thinks will rightly align all that you learn from other sources. (Powlison, 2010, p. 254)

In engaging Powlison's approach I (Jenny) have found the following series of questions that he utilises to be valuable for thinking Christianly about any extra-biblical knowledge (Powlison, 2003)<sup>4</sup>:

- At what level does the theory capture the human condition?
- What valuable extra-biblical information does the theory provide?
- How does the theory interpret the information it deems important?
- What does the theory "blinker out"? How would a biblical worldview fill in what's missing?
- What interventions for change emanate from the theory's interpretations?
- What does the Bible have to say about change?

And an added question of Jenny's own:

- What is the partnership between the Holy Spirit and human obedience/effort in the work of change?

This sequence of questions has been useful in this author's writing in Chapter 3 on Bowen's family of origin approach. Other authors in the book ask key questions about the absence of notions of sin in Bowen theory and a process of change that leaves out the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. One notable area of Bowen theory which warrants further theological critique in the future is its deep reliance on evolutionary theory to shape its understanding of natural systems theory. As a theory that views the human as part of millions of years of evolutionary processes, Bowen theory does not give credence to the hand of an intelligent designer who has

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<sup>4</sup> This framework is taught in the course by D Powlison: "Theology and Secular Psychology", at Christian Counselling and Education Foundation, CCEF, Philadelphia, USA.

crowned the human as the pinnacle of creation—the concept of *imago Dei*:

Then God said, “Let us make [human]kind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”. (Gen 1:26)

Our view is that Bowen theory’s understanding of evolutionary processes of adaptation, plus the theory’s attention to what humans share with lower life forms, is an important contribution to understanding human relationship systems. Nevertheless, from a biblical perspective, a purely Darwinian lens diminishes the uniqueness of the human in creation. Bowen’s natural systems view of the human species, unsurprisingly, leaves out human responsibility and accountability to his/her creator. While the papers in this book do not take on this critique in any depth, it is necessary to flag that engaging with natural systems theory is an important area for Christians to grapple with in appraising this, and other, scientific and psychological theories.

## **Change: The work of the Holy Spirit and human responsibility**

Any theory that leaves out the activity of a sovereign God will present the process of change as the domain of human effort. From a biblical perspective, a very different view is presented of how people change: it is with God’s “activity imperative” *by His Spirit*. The question of what is in God’s domain and what remains the responsibility of each human creature in change efforts is a complex theological issue. Jerry Bridges’ concept of “dependent responsibility”, where each human is simultaneously completely dependent on God while also responsible for their own application of Scripture’s call to godly living, is an example

of such biblical examination (Bridges, 1983, 1996). Bridges writes, “Though the power for godly character comes from Christ, the responsibility for developing and displaying that character is ours” (Bridges, 1996, p.61). Salvation is gifted by grace alone while the Christian walk is mobilised by a thankful response to this gift.

As a Christian working in the secular psychology and social science fields, I (Jenny) have endeavoured to keep my biblical thinking and application authoritatively ahead of the thinking and application that is generated by secular theory, and in particular Bowen theory (given this is the theory I have been studying for over 25 years). In the recent edition of my secular publication on Bowen theory I write the following in my acknowledgments:

I don't view Bowen theory as my primary lens of understanding myself and others and my life's purpose. I seek to utilise my biblical Christian faith as the overriding compass in my life journey. I endeavour to filter all ideas through the lens of being dependent on my creator God and staying conscious of my tendency to arrogantly live as if I am capable of independently controlling my life. (Brown, 2017, p.277)

It has been a useful exercise in preparing for this collection of papers to collate a statement of my beliefs without drawing on anyone else's writing, and consider the question, How clear am I about the beliefs of my Christian faith and their implications for how I live in relationships?

## **Outline of this book**

The chapters that follow provide examples of biblical critique and application of Bowen theory to church contexts. They represent

many “works in progress”, both in learning Bowen theory and in applying a critical biblical lens to the theory. Our hope in bringing such a collection of papers together is that they provide a platform for clarification of aspects of Bowen’s broad theory about human interactions, and facilitate further investigation of how these sit within a biblical worldview. It is a lens that understands humans as God’s image bearers, who live the present and generational consequences of rejecting God, and a lens that sees humans and the creation as part of a big picture story of God’s rescue and redemption culminating in the life, death, resurrection, and future return of his Son Jesus Christ.

The book has two sections. The first section includes papers which are more theoretical in nature, considering the complex interplay between theology and Bowen theory, with authors critiquing several of the theory’s concepts. **Ruth Schroeter** begins this section with Chapter 1, observing that Bowen theory has a unique contribution to make in understanding and enhancing human relationships, and critiquing emotional immaturity and relational processes through a biblical lens of a broken world in which only God can restore the core problem of the relationship between humanity and God. **Anna Moss** further critiques Bowen theory’s concept of differentiation of self in Chapter 2 by asking the pertinent question of whether a focus on self can be unselfish, grappling with what a Christian view of self-awareness might entail through an examination of the biblical doctrines of humanity, sin, and forgiveness. In Chapter 3, **Jenny Brown** recognises the value of understanding one’s multigenerational family history, but cautions the use of such knowledge as merely an explanatory framework for human problems, and instead considers how such knowledge might be a catalyst to turn to God with a deeper understanding of our human weaknesses and immaturities. The church in Ephesus is conceptualised by **Peter Frith** as an anxious system in Chapter

4, in a detailed description of how Paul encourages Timothy to be more differentiated in his leadership of the church in 1 and 2 Timothy. And in Chapter 5, the final paper in this section, **Andrew Errington** addresses head-on the question of whether as Christians we ought to be skeptical about what a secular psychological theory has to offer, using ideas from the Bible's wisdom literature about how one might approach this issue.

The second section in the book contains a range of papers by authors who have been grappling with applying Bowen theory in various ministry contexts and have worked to articulate their own thinking and practical knowledge to contribute to the dialogue about the opportunities and challenges this raises. This section begins with four chapters that highlight the usefulness of Bowen theory in pastoral ministries. **Jenny Brown** introduces the theme of thinking about churches as anxious systems with Chapter 6, considering the difference between unity and togetherness and how working on relating to others, rather than reacting to others, is a key to healthy church communities. **Tara Stenhouse** then provides a thoughtful reflection on her journey from being a "rescuing" pastor to a "coaching" pastor in Chapter 7, and how relational principles from Bowen theory have guided her to be relationally connected with people without being overly responsible for them. The concept of triangles is illustrated by **Lauren Errington** in Chapter 8 who uses the example of the minister's spouse to describe the way anxiety is passed around relationships in the church relational system. And **Anna Moss** considers in Chapter 9 whether Bowen theory can help ministry leaders work in such demanding roles in a way that is more personally sustainable, thus potentially preventing burnout.

Working to manage one's own reactivity and engage well in relationships in families, workplaces, and communities that are

anxious is a challenge for everyone. The next few chapters in this section include reflections from those working in or with those in Christian ministries where anxieties are high, triangles multiply rapidly, and conflict escalates quickly. The biblical reflections **Craig Foster** offers in Chapter 10 alongside relational principles from Bowen theory in dealing with workplace conflict provide stimulating thinking about what a godly response to difficult relationships involves. In Chapter 11 **Vivian Grice** reflects on his unique role in providing “interventions” when required to Baptist churches in need of external support and how Bowen theory provides a way to observe and manage one’s own emotional reactivity in a situation and to work towards being a useful resource for the church. The case studies **Ken Morgan** offers in Chapter 12 are an example of the way a leadership coach grounded in Bowen theory can help ministry leaders work effectively in anxious communities, namely by working on one’s self and noticing the ripple effect a leader who is clear and consistent in their own values and principles can have on a system. As **Duncan Andrews** discusses in Chapter 13, such systemic thinking can particularly assist leaders of new church plants, where the stressors of church planting contribute to creating conditions that breed systemic anxiety amongst a new congregation.

Much of Bowen theory depends on individuals increasing their self-awareness through understanding how they participate and function in their own families and relationships, and working to manage one’s self differently. The last three chapters in this book are personal accounts of how this process has taken shape for the various contributors. In Chapter 14 **Margaret Wesley** describes how understanding her family of origin has contributed to understanding her own functioning, and raises the difficult question of how reacting to others shapes one’s own moral functioning. **Michael Crichton** then gives a personal account in Chapter 15, of the influence of Bowen theory on how he

responded to a family crisis when his daughter became unwell. And the final chapter, Chapter 16, highlights how understanding Bowen theory and grappling with it through a biblical lens is an ongoing conversation. **Lauren Errington's** interview with **Paul Grimmond** and **Simon Flinders** features their thinking about conviction versus coercion, compassion, biblical and relational principles, and the challenges that arise when trying to do things differently.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank each of these contributors—for working to turn their thinking and experience into papers that allow readers to engage with the opportunities and challenges that arise when applying Bowen theory to Christian ministry and thinking about the theory through a biblical lens. We hope our readers find this book as stimulating and challenging as we have in thinking about what it means to love and serve people, and we hope that it might contribute to more thinking about how we can best contribute to the building up of healthy and mature churches that bring honour to our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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