

Chapter 16

GRAPPLING WITH BOWEN THEORY IN MINISTRY

An Interview with Simon Flinders and Paul Grimmond

Lauren Errington

I had the privilege of meeting with two seasoned ministers to reflect on how they have found grappling with Bowen theory and its application to their ministries a challenging and enriching endeavour over the years. This conversation gives a flavour of their careful scriptural critique, personal reflections and the usefulness of their continued meeting together to understand and apply Bowen theory in their relationships and ministries. I am grateful for the generosity of Simon Flinders, Senior Minister at Northbridge Anglican Church in Sydney, and Paul Grimmond, Dean of Students at Moore College in Sydney, for their participation in this interview.

Lauren Errington (Interviewer): Thanks for being willing to participate in this conversation today. To begin with, I was wondering how you both first encountered Bowen theory?

Paul Grimmond: I have spent most of the last 16 years in university ministry with students, and I was two years out of [Moore] College when I took over as the senior person in charge of a large university ministry at the University of New South Wales. I did this for the next five and a half years until I got completely burnt out. As I got to this point, one of the things that became apparent was that I needed to do some work on my marriage. At the time, Jenny Brown introduced me to Bowen theory as a conceptual framework to think about my personal engagement with burnout. In particular, it was a framework for thinking through relationships and pastoral work. I then started to use it in the team I was responsible for, and I helped trainees think about it in their university ministry. It has also been extremely useful in thinking about my new role at Moore College which is a different organisation and system to where I have been before.

Simon Flinders: I came to Bowen theory in the reverse order to Paul. I first encountered Bowen theory in the context of ministry, then personally. I have spent 17 years as a minister in different parishes, the last eight at Northbridge, and now as the Senior Minister. I first came

Bowen 2/6

RY IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

across Bowen theory when I was working at a church where Jenny Brown and Peter Frith were congregation members. I learnt some of the vocabulary, and from there did some further reading on the theory. Three years ago I joined a reading group for people thinking about Bowen theory in ministry, which has continued to meet after the formal group finished up. It's been very stimulating to chat to others about the theory and application in a ministry context. More reading on Bowen theory sparked interest in my own family of origin, which I have since started to explore and found helpful in personal application for my life, and family, and health.

Lauren: It sounds like one of the things you have both found helpful is thinking about systems and its application to workplaces too—do you think this has helped you transition in different roles?

Paul: That's hard to answer, because I understood my previous work system better and had a long history of relationships there. I have a shorter history of relationships in my new role at Moore College and am still finding my feet in the system. What I am aware of, though, is that my personal inclinations carry across to new systems, and Bowen theory has helped me to be aware of this.

Simon: I have done most of my thinking about Bowen theory as a senior minister, but what I have found helpful is having a colleague familiar with the theory too. The women's pastor at my church has also found Bowen theory to be useful, and it is helpful to be able to share the same language as we reflect on what we are observing and encountering at church.

Lauren: Both of you have mentioned the family of origin work you have done in your thinking over the years. I wonder if you could say more about this and how it might have helped you tune in to your own patterns of functioning in ministry relationships?

Paul: My process of experiencing burnout was a massive moment for me. It was public, visible, and high profile. At the time I would have said it was due to external circumstances being overwhelming for me, but I have since realised that I had anxiety and depression. Understanding Bowen theory has helped me to see that the system was big and complicated. What was helpful, and awful, was recognising personal things about myself and realising I functioned in a way that was unhelpful for me and the organisation.

Lauren: Can you give an example of this?

Paul: Yes, so for example I avoid conflict, and part of this is that I have a somatic response to pre-empting conflict and so avoid it. I began to understand that I have had this sort of response since I was young, particularly with my mum. When mum was upset, I felt responsible. In ministry, the effect of this meant I got more tired and had strong reactions to particular people in ministry and would avoid tackling those. This helped me avoid conflict, but didn't help the organisation as a whole. At another level, understanding my own family of origin and my functioning in relationships, such as not wanting to express frustrations in my marriage and how this contributed to our patterns of communication, helped me understand how I contributed to situations. So in particular, I was challenged to speak up even if it brought anxiety to the system I was a part of, in family or work relationships.

Lauren: It's interesting that you've observed the same patterns, what Bowen would call distancing I think, in your own growing up and in your ministry relationships. I'm curious about what you notice now about your anxiety?

Paul: I used to react to my somatic response; now I use it as a sign that I am uncomfortable in a relationship. Then I ask—what can I do to react better? This includes trying to think, and to get enough distance to think. I am thankful to God that I can say that my experience of anxiety has changed over time, and that I can function better in situations that used to overwhelm me. As I look back over the past ten years, I think I experience anxiety less deeply but I still can't overcome the initial reaction to conflict. I am also aware of the sinfulness attached to some of those drives in me—particularly in wanting to please people. I have had to let the gospel challenge me in that my job is not to keep people happy, and part of that is learning to give people space to come to their own conclusions.

Simon: What Paul has been saying has really resonated with me, the idea that we need to work on self and recognise what we contribute to the system and relationships. It is a big mental shift to be content to work on that, just to work on myself rather than try and change others. The application of that to ministry is that it is helpful to remember that problems aren't all "out there."

Lauren: Simon, what is it about your own reflections on your family of origin that have helped

you in your ministry relationships?

Simon: I am a self-confessed overfunctioner. In my family, I think my sibling position contributes to this as I am the eldest of two, and both my parents were also the functional eldest in their families. When I was a teenager my parents divorced. I stayed with my mum and found myself being thought of by others as the “man of the house.” I think all of these things have led to patterns of overfunctioning and feeling responsible for things that were not my own. But it’s been quite confronting for me to realise that I function differently in my family than in my ministry. I observed that in my family I was good at offering practical support, but was a bit allergic to offering emotional support. In ministry it is the opposite, I am very emotionally connected to people in the congregation.

Lauren: It is really interesting that your experience is not that relationship patterns translate directly from your family of origin into the church relationship system, but in fact they can appear to be the opposite forms of overfunctioning.

Simon: This has been the most helpful part of family of origin coaching for me—working out my principles and where I am, or am not, living them out. I find I’m more able to do this in ministry, but in my family of origin I often don’t operate in line with my principles. I’m now teasing out more about what gets in the way of that, what causes me to be reactive in family rather than acting on my principles.

Lauren: Something you’ve both talked about in your experiences with Bowen theory is the process of understanding yourselves more and, in particular, the way you function in relationships. Something I often come across when talking with people about Bowen theory is the concern that self-awareness is a navel gazing exercise, and inherently selfish. I wonder what your thoughts are on the attention to self in Bowen theory?

Simon: I think that sort of response has a shallow understanding of the theory. In my experience, a higher level of self-awareness allows for more capacity to love the others that God has entrusted to my care. Five years ago I thought I had a good grasp on how my family shaped me as a person, but a Roberta Gilbert book helped me to see that more self-understanding from my family of origin actually means I am more able to help others. This has underlined for me the principle that more awareness of self is important in ministry.

For me, it has shifted work on the self from “psychological curiosity” to an “act of love.” I was a sceptic at first about Bowen’s focus on family of origin work, but I now have impetus to do more work, even on previous generations in my family.

Paul: At Bible college [as a student] I was anxious about the concept of self-awareness, but I think understanding the concept has been a revolution to me. I am more and more persuaded that self-awareness is fundamental, because if you don’t understand yourself, you are just shifted around and reactive to the system around you. This is now so important that I’ve been part of a team at [Moore] College seeking to embed self-awareness in the Ministry and Mission course to help students grow in their skills for self-awareness, wanting people to act from conviction rather than coercion.

Simon: That’s so important because the fruit of poor self-awareness can be very damaging. A lack of self-awareness can be disastrous to senior ministers and the systems they are involved in.

Lauren: The idea that developing a sense of self is about being clear about one’s own convictions, rather than being coerced by the system, is a helpful way to describe that value. I’m curious to ask both of you what helps you to stick to your own relational principles along the way?

Simon: Primarily being immersed in the word of God. Secondly, and I’m intentional about it being second, is having conversations with people who understand the language and concepts of Bowen theory, such as with Paul, or my colleague, or our reading group.

Paul: For me, reading the Scriptures and working hard at them has helped establish core principles. What Bowen theory showed me over time, was that there was a gap between my core principles, and how I enacted my self and my relationships. Now, I realise this might sound a bit dangerous to some people, but what it’s given me is a language and a way of engaging with Scripture at a deeper level, if I can put it like that. What Bowen theory showed me was that in reading the Bible there are some principles I have held more tightly and more unconsciously than others, which has affected the way I relate to people. It’s the awareness of systems thinking that has helped me realise that I have been privileging certain aspects of biblical reality over other biblical principles. In other words, I have come

Bowen 6/6

ORY IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

to see how my anxious sensitivities have reduced my capacity to wisely apply my Bible-based life principles.

Lauren: Can you give us an example of what you mean by that?

Paul: One of the values I held very deeply as a pastor was compassion. I think this was a significant contributing factor to my burnout. Because I held that as a core value, the way I cared for people meant I would immediately overcommit to try and look after them, no matter how senior in a ministry position I was in. This conviction was held firmly in place by what I believed about the gospel, and what it meant to be a Christian, but I realised over time that it had an effect on the system. I had 800-1000 people in the student ministry, and I was overcommitting to a few people. I had to ask, what biblical principles did I need to pay attention to as a leader? And how should this affect how I committed my time? I realised that I had privileged certain biblical truths over others, and needed to work out how to realign my actions according to my actual role, in ways that were healthier for me, for the system, and ultimately, for everyone who was involved in this ministry. So it has been a process of working out what biblical principles I hold, and how they fit together, not just in isolation.

Simon: I think one of the things that makes Paul such an attractive conversation partner about Bowen theory is that we have a mutual respect for each other and similar theological rigour. Over the years I have seen people with theories, including Bowen theory, run away with them and become less biblically grounded. I think we share a commitment to finding ways in which Bowen theory can provoke us to think about the Scriptures more deeply, not less.

Lauren: That's very helpful, and leads me to ask, as you keep the word of God central, how have you found systems theory fits best? Or on the other hand, where do tensions arise?

Simon: It's a huge question isn't it? I think a core observation about the theory is the emphasis on personal responsibility, and I think that's a snug fit with the biblical view, as the Scriptures ask me to take responsibility for myself before God. Bowen theory offers a lot of tools to help us do that. So that's quite significant for me. I find a lot of resonances with Bowen's focus on anxiety and the Scriptures. Not that I think that anxiety itself is a massive category in the Scriptures, but that I think it is related to lots of other theological

Chapter 2

WHAT'S TRUE OF EVERY BELIEVER YOU MEET?

What is true of yourself and every Christian you meet, according to Scripture? What can you be sure about your spouse, your roommate, your child, your friend—even a brother or sister in Christ who is at odds with you?

First, you can be sure that they *struggle with identity* at some level—which means they are implicitly or explicitly asking, “Who am I?” That is, “What is my core identity? How do I fundamentally conceive of myself? What do I highlight when I tell my story?” Because this identity question is tied to mission or calling, it also means they are asking, “What is my purpose? What should I be doing with my life? How should I be living in light of my basic identity? What difference does it make that I am a person in Christ?”

Second, you can be sure that they *struggle with evil*. This struggle

LOVING OTHERS AS GOD LOVES US

with evil expresses itself in two ways. They experience evil from without (suffering), which means they are asking, “How do I deal with evil done to me? How should I persevere amidst the hardships and sorrows of my life?” They also experience evil from within (sin), which means they are asking, “How do I deal with the evil inside of me? How do I deal with the reality that ‘when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand’ (Romans 7:21)? Why do I struggle to live out of my identity? How do I change?”

You and I, and every Christian we meet, wrestle with these questions about identity and evil. This has been true ever since Adam and Eve deviated from God’s original design for humanity. Thankfully, God brings a welcome sense of clarity to this complexity. Oliver Wendell Holmes is commonly attributed as having said, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” We all want truth that is simple and yet embraces the complex. Christians are blessed that God, in his Word, offers this to us. Scripture gives us basic—but not simplistic

Emlet 2/2

—categories for understanding our experiences as God’s redeemed image bearers.

HOW DOES GOD MOVE TOWARD HIS PEOPLE?

These categories become apparent as we observe in the Bible how God moves toward people. At a most foundational level, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ restores our identity as children of the living God (1 John 3:1–2) and he overcomes evil, whether in the form of suffering (Matthew 4:23–24; Acts 10:38) or sin (Romans 3:23–24; 8:3–4; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). But the story of redemption is much more fine-grained than simply asserting and proclaiming these foundational truths. As we look closer, we see that Scripture models ministry to God’s people in three distinct ways. This, in turn, helps us know how to move toward one another so that we’re not just guessing or completely flying by the seat of our pants. So, what does Scripture show us?

Scripture reveals that God ministers to his people as:

LOVING OTHERS AS GOD LOVES US

- *Saints* who need confirmation of their identity as children of God,
- *Sufferers* who need comfort in the midst of their affliction, and
- *Sinners* who need challenge to their sin in light of God’s redemptive mercies.¹

Saint, sufferer, and sinner. All three of these are simultaneously true of every Christian you meet. If this is the way God sees and loves his people, then we should do the same, using these broad biblical categories to guide our overall approach to the people in our lives. They are signposts for wise love. They help you to prioritize one-another ministry, whether it’s to your friend, husband, wife, roommate, child, coworker, or counselee.

WHAT ABOUT UNBELIEVERS?

These categories are true for every Christian, but what about unbelievers? Throughout this book, I’m going to focus primarily on relationships within the body of Christ, since I’m aiming this