

Interpersonal Skills

20 February 2024, 2-530pm

Class Description

God's Word works in people, through people. Ministry involves us bringing God's Word to bear on people's lives. This class aims to help students to relate well to the people they meet in ministry. We want to be aware what we bring to our interpersonal relationships. And we want to learn and grow in a gospel-shaped posture in how we relate to people.

Learning Goals

- To deepen students' appreciation and love for interpersonal Word ministry.
- To help students grow in self-awareness, so as to love and serve others well, including understanding and handling of their own stress.
- To give students a basic posture in relating to others, including those who are suffering, and those with difficult personalities.

Required Reading (before class)

- David Powlison, *X-Ray Questions in Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (P&R Publishing, 2003)
- Brown & Errington, *Bowen Family System Theory in Christian Ministry* (The Family Systems Practice & Institute, 2019), Pp. 280-287
- Alasdair Groves, *How Do We Think Biblically About Personality Tests?* (CCEF Podcast)
- C. John Miller, *Letters from Jack Miller: The Heart of a Servant Leader* (P&R Publishing, 2004). Pp.26-29, 267-270 (Note: Read in class)

Optional/Recommended Reading

- David Powlison, *What is 'Ministry of the Word?' in Speaking the Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (New Growth Press, 2005)
- Lane & Tripp, *How People Change* (New Growth Press, 2006)
- Groves, *9 Ways to Confront in Love: A Primer for the Timid* in JBC 31:1 (2017): 56-74
- Welch, *When People are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (P&R Publishing, 1997)
- Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebra Don't Get Ulcers: The Acclaimed Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2004)
- William P. Smith, "I've Had It with You!" Learning to Be Tender When People Are Tough in JBC 22:1 (2003)
- Welch, *Moving Toward People* <https://www.ccef.org/moving-toward-people/>
- Nancy Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew: About What Really Helps And What Really Hurts*, (Crossway, 2016.)

Response Paper

- Look through Powlison's X-ray questions. Pick a couple of questions and reflect on how this growth in self-awareness helps you prepare well to relate to others.

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THE HEART OF A SERVANT LEADER

Discovering Our True Motivation:

God's Glory or Our Self-Interest?

To a young missionary couple who is unsure whether they should stay on a mission field.



September, 1984

Dear Jim and Anne,

Warm greetings to both of you in the Lord Jesus Christ! You have been much in our prayers over the past two years. Too, you are in our hearts as we have prayed for you during this time of re-examination of your role. . . . I was a bit concerned that you might quickly return without thinking through the issues of your call—or lack of call to that land. But your correspondence to Charles [another pastor who had been mentoring Jim and Anne] has been encouraging to me.

In what way? Mainly in your growth in self-knowledge and honesty. One evidence of the Spirit's presence in our lives is our seeing where we really are and admitting it to others. One cannot make progress in life or ministry without being a forthright and forthcoming person. Probably each one of us has tons of kinky motives and loads of self-deception—or at least we do until we begin to ask the Holy Spirit to search us out. So, I am really pleased at your openness with Charles and encourage you to continue in it. That is of the Holy Spirit, I do believe. I was pleased as I reflected upon it that you made your innermost thoughts known to him. Believe me, we don't love you the less for that. We accept you just as you are, just as we want you to accept us just as we are.

I am in accord with what Charles has written to you. He is a wise brother, and I have full confidence in him. Would I add anything to his advice? Perhaps a thought or two along the lines mentioned above. It's vital that you not stay to please Charles, or me, or anyone else. That would please us, but the crucial thing to get hold of is your own identity and call. You can make decisions only out of that kind of grip on reality. So don't stay just to please us, but only because you believe the Lord of the church wants you there to do something for him.

Now I do not think such a disclosure of His will is gained on the cheap. It requires prayer and fasting and some earnest and painful heart-searching. When I do this, I ask the Holy Spirit

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to search out my innermost heart motives. Guess what I often discover? That my motives are usually mixed. Especially I am likely to discover I am not doing things for God's glory and out of delight and fellowship with Him, but out of half-concealed self-interest and self-glorying. I do not mean that no heavenly motives go into the mix of my inward thoughts, but often because I can detect some good motives in myself, I feel that this is the last and only word. Don't believe it about me or Charles or yourselves. The scriptural emphasis on our encounter with the flesh needs to be taken seriously. I am thinking of some of the underscoring of things like "ambitions" in Galatians 5. It's there in all of us and cannot be ignored.

So especially ask yourself: what is my concern for the glory of God in my life? How much am I led by concern for my own comfort and feeling of well-being? Do I witness out of enjoyment of God? Do I love people—not just on the mission field, but people? Am I willing to imitate the Good Shepherd and die for them? Do I really know the power of the Holy Spirit as I daringly witness? Do I really confront the lost with heaven and hell? Am I repenting regularly?

Once you wrestle over a period of time with these questions, you can much more easily decide whether you should be [on this field] for a longer period of time. Take great care not to be hasty. "He that is hasty in spirit exalts folly." But it just may not be God's will for you to be there as long as we might like. But the reason must be related to His purpose for your life. You might decide that your calling is not to be there because of a revelation of Christ's will to you. This is not to say at all that I am encouraging you to come home sooner, but to get you to put the matter of your whole personal relationship to the Father before God and to decide based upon a clear dependence upon Him in the light of your careful evaluation of your gifts, calling, motives, etc. In other words, to quote my dear wife Rose Marie, "It's important not to decide hastily like an orphan in flight, but like a son who knows the Father's unconditional love."

I think I also need to apologize to you both for my failure to help you more. Actually, here at New Life we see that we have been far too casual in some of our training and preparation for ministry. I don't say this to run ourselves down or because I am guilt-ridden about it. I am not at all, but I think the "flesh" in me kept me back from giving better leadership to you and your ministry. So forgive me please.

Let me assure you how much more seriously we are beginning to take this whole enterprise. All of us here are seeing it as a much more demanding undertaking than hitherto. We also see how much we needed to have much more prayer behind it. Let me counsel you, too, to pray much more. Pray and keep praying and then pray some more.

3 26 You are in our hearts. Very much so.

Most warmly in Christ,

Jack

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THE HEART OF A SERVANT LEADER

Knowing the Gospel Means We Can Face Our Sins

To a young woman who struggles with alcoholism and sexual sins.

—*amc*—

April, 1989

Dear Sharon,

Most cordial greetings to you in Christ! I am writing from Kenya! Here we have been ministering, preaching, and writing. Rose Marie is just back from Uganda, where she spoke several times and met with the missionary women in Ft. Portal. I am working on a book for non-Christians; she is working on an autobiography.

It has taken me a long time, but at last I am getting off a long overdue letter to you. My apologies for the long delay. I could think of a number of excuses, but I think the main reason is my not being sure what to say. Now I realize that may sound strange. Usually I have much to say! But my heart burden has been to help you, and my mind has not been clear as to how. Now I think it is clearer to me what the Lord wants me to share with you. I think it came to me as I was helping Rose Marie work on her book.

In it she makes the point that it is important to know your family roots and the sin patterns you have inherited. Actually the book could help you more than I can. But anyway she says that sin patterns get repeated from generation to generation, taking different forms but always reflecting inherited attitudes of pride, independence, self-deception, lust, love of control, etc.

Her next point is that people really can't stand to look closely at themselves and these patterns unless they understand justification by faith and union with Christ. According to her, it's pretty easy to say, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner," and be thinking only of external actions while ignoring the darkness of the human heart. But if you want to look more deeply, begin by studying the gospel of the cross, know the meaning of Christ's atonement for you personally, and you will be able to take the deeper look.

This deeper look can then lead to a more thoroughgoing repentance and a hearty confidence through the Spirit that I am not an orphan, but a living son of the heavenly Father through faith.

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ER: LETTERS FROM JACK MILLER

Take a specific sin like anger. You and I know its visible consequences. Everyone is shamed by how our anger has maimed others. But then take the deeper look. Why am I angry? What fuels it? Why do I forgive people, but later on end up taking it all back?

These are burning questions.

They also have a wonderfully simple answer in Scripture. In James 3 and 4, God says that we are angry because we are proud. We have pride in our own sinful nature, but we also have had models of pride in our family background. We have deeply ingrained attitudes of superiority inherited from a dark past. Our sinful nature responds to these inherited attitudes with enthusiasm. We have seen in our models attitudes of superiority, contempt for others, and patterns of pride coming to expression in bitterness or rage.

How do we overcome the pride? Our ancestors probably did not; how then can we expect to do so? Actually it's impossible. But that's where grace begins. When the Spirit works a healthy self-disgust, a hatred of my sins in my heart, then I pray honestly without a secret intention to remain unchanged.

Honesty, humble integrity, that's what moves God to run to our cry.

You see, we often pray and see little fruit because we are praying one thing but in our heart we have other plans.

Take the person addicted to drugs. He cannot get off them for the simple reason he does not want to get off them. The day he wants to get off them he does. But until he really wants to be changed he always has a secret intention in the heart not to go off the drugs. The rest is all talk.

So my suggestion is that you study James 3 and 4 closely and take a close look at your inner life, and at the same time study Galatians 2 and 3 to see the beauty of the love of God in the gospel.

Put it together by faith. Or better, let the Holy Spirit put it together for you as you cry out for divine intervention to work deeply in your life.

Please don't think I am speaking to you as an outsider. As a nonsinner. No, the reason I understand you is that God has given me some understanding of my own vile heart.

Do you remember the time you came to my home for prayer meeting several years ago and you and I sat on the couch? I questioned you about your inner life—but you were not listening.

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THE HEART OF A SERVANT LEADER

At least that was my impression. I believe I said that you did not know yourself very well. I tried to do it in love. Maybe it was done with some frustration too. Well, the reason I knew what your inner life was like came from a knowledge of my own desperately evil heart!

Let me be even more forthright. I think it is a lifelong process getting to know yourself. Paul said that when you get to know yourself you confess that you and every man are liars (Rom. 3). Now I am ashamed to confess how many deep lies there are in my heart. How is it now with you? Have you brought your innermost deceptions into the light? Are there still secrets in your heart?

Think once again of your visit to our home. As I sat on the couch with you I thought that lying was as natural to you as breathing. Do you remember how many times I asked you if you really meant what you were saying?

Now I understand that you believe that God has worked in your life, and the church has accepted your repentance. Praise God for that! I rejoice in it. But have you taken that close inner look at the roots of it all—the proud, independent unbelieving heart, a deceiving heart?

That's scary for me. To do that.

When I do that I know the engine does not need just a tuneup but a complete reworking.

I think such an inward look is possible if you know the power in the blood of Christ. It is the sole basis of God's justification of the ungodly. What a wonderful thing for God to do for us! Complete forgiveness.

Such a teaching cuts the root of our sin. Self-centered pride is the root, and to rest on free justification kills our pride. Why? because in our justification we must accept that nothing of righteousness comes from us, could come from us, and we are forced to acknowledge the shame of our sin. Only mercy and love can save us, and these come from God to the ungodly (Rom. 5:5–6).

But there is even more. We are always properly concerned to get sin out of ourselves. At least we should be. But we need something more foundational. We need to have the Lord transfer us out of sin. To bring us into a kingdom of righteousness, to kill us and resurrect us under a new lordship. We are not justified in our sin. No, justification carries along with it a death to sin and

What do you have to do to get this? Nothing. Just come undone and rest on what Jesus has done! Look, the gospel is a mighty power. See the Lamb. One look at Him takes away a universe of sin from the human heart. [The last page of this letter is lost.]

age 21

In Christ,
Jack Miller



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

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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.

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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

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E O R Y I N C H R I S T I A N M I N I S T R Y

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.

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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

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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

