

# ***SELF-DIFFERENTIATION AND THE CHRISTIAN LEADER***

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*Self-differentiation has its origins in the application of systems theory to family therapy by Murray Bowen in the 1950s and 1960s. It is the ability to be an individual (or self) while at the same time being connected with others. Every person is either more or less differentiated and this affects his or her ability to deal with the anxiety and tension caused by the two basic needs of individuality and togetherness. The Jewish rabbi Edwin Freidman was the first to apply Family Systems theory to congregational life, and many others who have also made applications of various aspects of family systems to how congregations function as families have followed him. Self-differentiation is especially important for leaders because they exert the most influence on the group. The self-differentiated leader is able to be objective, non-reactive and self-determining while at the same being part of the group even when the group is experiencing emotional chaos and high levels of anxiety. These characteristics of objectivity, non-reactivity and self-determination are consistent with biblical qualities of leadership but must be grounded in an active and personal relationship with God. This paper will define and describe self-differentiation from its origins in family systems theory and its application to congregational life. The primary characteristics of self-differentiation will be identified, expounded and assessed in terms of their application to Christian leadership.*

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## **The Origins of Self-Differentiation**

The term self-differentiation<sup>1</sup> was originally used by Murray Bowen and is one component of Family Systems Theory. Family systems theory is the application of general systems theory<sup>2</sup> to family therapy and includes the following: (1) a focus on the emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Authors often just use the term differentiation but because this can relate to a number of different fields (e.g. maths, science) in order to provide context it is more commonly referred to as self-differentiation or differentiation of self.

<sup>2</sup> "Systems theory is an interdisciplinary field which studies the organisation and interdependence of relationships and systems. Systems theory was founded by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, William Ross Ashby and others in the 1950s on principles from ontology, philosophy of science, physics, biology and engineering." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_theory)

process rather than symptoms, (2) seeing effects as parts of structures rather than the result of lineal cause, (3) eliminating symptoms by modifying structure rather than changing the individual part, and (4) predicting the functioning of a part or individual based on its position in the system.

Bowen's application of systems theory to family therapy includes concepts such as: anxiety, togetherness (homeostasis), family of origin, triangling, over-functioning, projection, emotional cut-off, and (the focus of this paper), differentiation of self.<sup>3</sup> Edwin Freidman was the first person to apply Family Systems Theory to the congregational context and his application has provided the springboard for others to continue to identify the connections between Family Systems Theory and congregational life. Bowen defines self-differentiation as "holding separateness and closeness in balance."<sup>4</sup> Friedman similarly says self-differentiation is "the capacity to be an 'I' while remaining connected."<sup>5</sup>

### **Self-Differentiation as a Tension**

Many authors also define self-differentiation as it relates to the tension present between individuality and relational connectedness.<sup>6</sup> Self-differentiation is the ability to hold in tension the two emotional forces that exist in relationships: being separate and being together.<sup>7</sup> The drive to be alone or separate originates in

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<sup>3</sup> For a concise summary of Bowen Family Theory see Julienne Heras, "A Clinical Application of Bowen Family Systems Theory," [http://www.dreamworld.org/sfc/a\\_clinical\\_application\\_of\\_bowen\\_.htm](http://www.dreamworld.org/sfc/a_clinical_application_of_bowen_.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Michael E. Keer and Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation: The Role of the Family as an Emotional Unit that Governs Individual Behaviour and Development* (Norton, 1988), 97, cited in Edwin Freidman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guildford Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Freidman, 27.

<sup>6</sup> "Being Separate Together," Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1993), 11; "The ability to know who we are apart from others," Jim R. Herrington, Robert Creech and Trisha Taylor, *The Leaders Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), 18; "Be in charge of self when others are trying to make us different," Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 87; "Taking an 'I' stand and staying in touch," Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1999), 94; "Being an individual while remaining part of the group," Paul R. Stevens, "Analogy or Homology? An Investigation of the Congruency of Systems Theory and Biblical Theology in Pastoral Leadership," *The Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22:3 (Fall 1994): 173-181.

<sup>7</sup> Freidman defines these two forces as "being self" and "being connected." Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guildford Press, 1985), 230.

the basic personal need for independence and is connected to our distinctiveness or differentiation from others. The drive to be together or close originates in the basic relational need for connection with others, which is motivated by our similarities and shared experiences. The tension created by these two forces produces anxiety. If the anxiety is not managed, a person is drawn towards either of the two extremes identified with these forces: being separate or being close.

At either extreme one is less objective about reality. The focus will either be on self and the personal subjective perspective or the person will be lost in the group and have no distinct or separate view of reality. Self-differentiation is the ability to maintain self-identity while remaining relationally connected and, in doing so, reduce the level of anxiety that this tension produces. Steinke defines the ideal of self-differentiation as the ability “to define self to others, stay in touch with them, and, even though there is tension between the two positions, manage whatever anxiety arises.”<sup>8</sup>

Kerr and Bowen use a scale of 0-100 to define the level of differentiation in an individual.<sup>9</sup> 0 represents a no-self, the person who is incapable of being an individual in a group. 100 represents the person who can choose to be an individual in a group and who does not foster or participate with the irresponsibility of others. Richardson uses the term “fused” to define the un-differentiated person and presents a scale from fusion to differentiation.<sup>10</sup> Both Bowen and Kerr and Richardson define differentiation in terms on one’s ability to distinguish between the intellectual (rational) and emotional (feeling) processes and the ability to choose whether one will be guided by feelings or thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

Fusion and differentiation refer to two processes in particular: internally, the degree to which a person can separate thinking and feeling, and bring greater objectivity to his or her own inevitably subjective stance; and interpersonally, the degree to which a person can be clear or more objective about the emotional separateness

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Steinke uses the terms “remote” and “entangled.” Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Kerr and Bowen, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Richardson, 81.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 2 for a helpful table from Steinke describing the differentiated and undifferentiated person

between self and other, knowing what is self and self's responsibility, and what is not.<sup>12</sup>

These two processes are congruent with the basic needs of separation and closeness. No person is completely fused or differentiated. Each person is either more or less differentiated. Bowen recognised that achieving 100 on the scale of differentiation was theoretically but not realistically possible.

This scale of fusion to differentiation is helpful in defining the levels of differentiation, however, the scale only relates to one half of the emotional tension – fusion or togetherness. The opposite tendency is equally problematic – distancing or emotional cut-off. Steinke presents an extended continuum ranging from clutching (fusion) to cut off (distancing).<sup>13</sup> He identifies two healthy centres of “defining self” and “touching others” which characterize the self-differentiated position. Steinke makes a clear distinction between the healthy state of distinction, that is, the awareness that we are different from others, and the unhealthy distancing which is a separation and disconnection from others. It is in the context of Table 1 (appearing at the end of this paper) that Friedman’s definition of self-differentiation as “the capacity to be an ‘I’ while remaining connected” is most clearly illustrated.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Characteristics of Self-Differentiation<sup>15</sup>**

The theoretical definition of self-differentiation is well summarised by Herrington as “the ability to remain connected in relationship to significant people in our lives and yet not have our reactions and behaviour determined by them.”<sup>16</sup> The behaviour of the self-differentiated person that Herrington refers to is evidenced by three distinct characteristics: they are objectivity, non-reactivity and self-definition.

### Objectivity

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<sup>12</sup> Richardson, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Friedman, 27.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 1 for Friedman’s list of the advantages of self-differentiated leadership.

<sup>16</sup> Herrington, Creech and Taylor, 18.

Objectivity is the ability to remain neutral, accurately to perceive reality, to maintain emotional detachment,<sup>17</sup> and to distinguish between thoughts and feelings even during times of extreme anxiety and pressure. Bowen points out that “a *differentiated self* is one who can maintain emotional objectivity, while in the midst of an emotional system in turmoil, yet at the same time actively relate to key people in the system.”<sup>18</sup> Objectivity enables the self-differentiated person to care effectively for hurting or anxious people without becoming emotionally enmeshed with their problems.

### Non-reactivity

The self-differentiated person is also non-reactive. When anxiety levels are high and relational connections are tested, the self-differentiated person is able to emit a calming, non-anxious and non-reactive presence.

One major sign of being better differentiated is when we can be present in the midst of an emotional system in turmoil and actively relate to key people in the system while calmly maintaining a sense of our own direction. It is relatively easy to appear to be differentiated when the system is calm; the test is being able to maintain a calmer sense of self when the emotional environment deteriorates and life becomes more chaotic.<sup>19</sup>

This ability to respond rather than react and to avoid becoming defensive allows the individual to think clearly and respond calmly and appropriately to the situation.

### Self Definition or Self Determination

The self-differentiated person is able to hold true to principles, values and convictions even in the midst of significant group pressure that is compelling the person to conform. The self-differentiated person is not influenced by the emotional anxiety of

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<sup>17</sup> Kerr and Bowen define emotional detachment as “the ability to be in emotional contact with a difficult, emotionally charged problem and not feel compelled to preach about what others ‘should’ do, not rush in to ‘fix’ the problem, and not pretend to be detached by emotionally insulating oneself.” Kerr and Bowen, 108.

<sup>18</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Richardson, 174.

others; but is able to maintain a principled position. They preserve their individuality and distinctiveness in a group but not in a way that is condescending or manipulative. In this way, self-differentiated people are able to contribute to the group while being true to themselves.

To be differentiated is to know and act on one's own mind, especially when our position is different from the group's. It means to know one's opinion, stand or stance without imposing expectations or demands on others. It is the ability to state clearly and calmly our position without suggesting (with "must," "should," or "ought" language) that others need to have the same position.<sup>20</sup>

Self-differentiated persons determine their own course in life; they are not swayed by the emotional anxiety of individuals or groups to maintain the comfortable, traditional position which itself is resistant to change.<sup>21</sup> They express their distinct individuality, while at the same time remaining connected and committed to the group.

## **Differentiation of Self and Christian Leadership**

The definition and description of self-differentiation provides the framework for a critical analysis of the relationship between self-differentiation and Christian leadership. On the whole, the concept of self-differentiation has strong corollaries with a biblical understanding of both the church and leadership, however, caution must be taken to interpret and apply these principles through the Christian lens.

## **The Church as the Body of Christ**

The relationship of systems theory and the metaphor of church as the body of Christ is the focus of Steinke's *Healthy Congregations* but the connection is also made by others including Stephens who identifies the basic tension of being separate and close in the description of the body of Christ. The apostle Paul says, "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all

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<sup>20</sup> Boers, 94.

<sup>21</sup> This natural force to maintain an interdependent and often unhealthy fixation on maintaining the traditional principles of the group is called Homoeostasis. See Friedman, 23-26.

the others” (Romans 12:5). Paul “holds in dynamic tension unity (togetherness) and the unique existence of each member (diversity).”<sup>22</sup> Everyone who is part of the body of Christ, a local congregation, should strive for this dynamic tension, which is self-differentiation, but it is especially important for the leader to maintain both individuality and connection.

A consistent conclusion in the discussion of self-differentiation and leadership is that leaders exert the most influence on the body or group.<sup>23</sup> The pastor or other identified leaders in the church have the most impact in determining the direction and health of the congregation. For Friedman, “the key to successful spiritual leadership, therefore, with success understood as moving people toward a goal, but also in terms of the survival of the family (and its leader), has more to do with the leader’s capacity for self-definition than with the ability to motivate others.”<sup>24</sup>

Leaders will inevitably receive the most criticism and will bear the brunt of anxious and emotional responses from the congregation. It is therefore, most crucial, that they have the ability to be non-reactive and deal with sabotage in a calm, non-anxious manner.

The capacity of members of the clergy to contain their own anxiety regarding congregational matters, both those not related to them, as well as those where they become the identified focus, may be the most significant capability in their arsenal. Not only can such capacity enable religious leaders to be more clear-headed about solutions and more adroit in triangles but, because of the systemic effect that a leader’s functioning always has on an entire organism, a non-anxious presence will modify anxiety throughout the entire congregation.<sup>25</sup>

## **Self Differentiation as Wisdom and Fusion as Foolishness**

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<sup>22</sup> Stevens, “Analogy or Homology?,” 174.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Kott, “Anxious Response to Change: The Leader’s Role in Calming the System,” <http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/conference/ltf2/papers/iiipstr.html>; Richardson, 177; Friedman, 211; Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 309; Boers, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Friedman, 221.

<sup>25</sup> Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, 82, quoting Freidman.

Richardson connects self-differentiation and the Biblical terms “wisdom” and “foolishness.” He equates wisdom with differentiation and foolishness with fusion. He defines wisdom as “a quality independent of a person’s intelligence quotient and educational degrees” and comments that “genuinely wise people tend to be better differentiated people; they have a more solid sense of self.”<sup>26</sup> The similarities of the attributes of wisdom and self-differentiation are evident but it is an overstatement to equate the two concepts as closely as Richardson does.

### **The Basis of Self Differentiation for the Christian Leader**

In Family Systems Theory, the source of self-differentiation and the ability to improve one’s level of differentiation rests with the individual. However, the Christian perspective looks beyond self to God, the creator, as the source of these qualities (2 Corinthians 3:5). Self-differentiation necessitates a focus on self through self-determination and self-definition. Care must be taken to ensure that the language of family systems is not adopted indiscriminately and therefore unconsciously making a statement that may undermine a position of dependence on God. An example of this is Boers’ remark that “a major achievement of differentiation is realising that one’s own happiness or contentment resides in oneself and not in the other.”<sup>27</sup> The emphasis here is to downplay the role of other people in determining our self-assurance but at the same time this leaves God out of the picture. A more Christian perspective is that we can be self-defined and self-determined but only as we base our definition and direction on our relationship with God.

Howe links self-determination with a humble dependence on God.

[Self differentiated leaders] possess a self-awareness and self-confidence which enables them to articulate a salvific vision convincingly, but without undue ego identification. They confront disagreements, criticisms, and even rejection without the kind of anxiety which generates either rigid defensiveness or concessions of principle for the sake of specious harmony and goodwill.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Richardson, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Boers, 97.

<sup>28</sup> Leroy T. Howe, “Self-Differentiation in Christian Perspective,” *Pastoral Psychology* 46 (1998): 353.



Being objective, non-reactive and self-defining requires a person to gain a perspective beyond themselves and the group. For the Christian leader, this perspective is found in God. It is in the midst of the emotional chaos that we are comforted and reassured by the peace, hope and love of God. More importantly, when we withdraw and seek “solitude with God, we open ourselves to a perspective of the Holy Spirit. . . . As we quiet our inner selves through Christian meditation, we become more aware of the distinction between our emotions and our beliefs. It is from our relationship with God, our grounding in faith and a vision of Christlikeness that we are able to ‘do the right thing’.”<sup>29</sup>

Self-differentiation has a clear correlation with silence, solitude, prayer, fasting and meditation<sup>30</sup> but it is also consistent with Christian virtues such as contentment, godliness and faith. Moving beyond our personal goals and convictions, the self-differentiated Christian leader is grounded in a “faith that transcends beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and conformity with approved standards of behaviour.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The concept of self-differentiation as defined by Family Systems Theory and applied to the congregational context is particularly helpful. While some attempts to relate the terminology to biblical concepts is at times forced, it is clear that the key attributes of self-differentiation are consistent with godly leadership. The application of family systems theory to the church family is obvious and Friedman, Stephens, Steinke, and Herrington in particular have done a good job at identifying the points of connection. It is only the area of self-definition and self-determination that attention must be given to moving beyond the self and identifying God as the source of objectivity, non-reactivity and self-definition. It is the application of these principles that will enable the Christian leader to exert a godly and healthy influence on the church.

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<sup>29</sup> Herrington, Creech and Taylor, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Boers, 97; Herrington, Creech and Taylor, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Howe 360.

Appendix 1:

Advantages of Self-differentiated Leadership.<sup>32</sup>

- It fosters independence without encouraging polarization
- It allows interdependence without promoting cults
- It seeks to promote togetherness but not at the cost of progress
- It normalizes transition and is less susceptible to cut-offs
- It reverses the pull and drain of dependents who normally gain power from the expectation that their demand to be included at their price and pace will always be satisfied
- It makes the leader's job less complex, yet gives more leverage.
- It reduces enervating conflicts of wills (and triangles)
- It fosters less guilt among followers because of decreased interdependency
- It minimises the influence of the factors that contribute to burnout

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<sup>32</sup> Friedman, 249.

Appendix 2:

Descriptions of the Undifferentiated and the Differentiated Person<sup>33</sup>

<b>Undifferentiated</b>	<b>Differentiated</b>
Quickly offended, easily provoked, too sensitive, slow to recover	Self managing, shapes environment, resourceful
Reactive, instinctive, automatic	Responsive, intentional, thoughtful
Underhanded, covert, flourishes in the dark	Open, light-shedding, aware
Demanding, wilful, stubborn, resistant (especially to reason and love), unbending	Resilient, has sense of proportion
Think in black/white or yes/no, intolerant of ambiguity, seek final solution, want all or nothing	Have breadth of understanding, allow time for things to process
Blame, criticise, displace, fault finding, have poor discrimination	Take responsibility for self, learn when challenged, define self from within self
Uptight, serious, defensive	Relaxed, at ease, sensible
Competitive, either with or against, see life as a contest, contemptuous	Take turns, collaborate, stay in touch even when tension grows
Vague, non-specific, cloaked	Clear objective, purposeful
Create too much or too little space and one-sided solutions	Create space, options, and common goals

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<sup>33</sup> Steinke, 91-92.

**Table 1: Healthy and Unhealthy Functioning<sup>34</sup>**

<b>Cutting off</b>	<b>Defining Self</b>	<b>Touching Others</b>	<b>Clutching Others</b>
Reactive	Intentional	Spontaneous	Reactive
Automatic	Chosen	Playful	Automatic
Emotionally driven	Objectively aware	Emotionally expressive	Emotionally driven
Dependent	Responsible for self	Responsive to others	Dependent
Aggressive or defensive about keeping distance unaware of own need for others	Self-directed action Aware of self	Trusting exchange	Aggressive or defensive about embeddedness unaware of own need for self
Stiff, rigid boundaries	Flexible boundaries (able to reinstate after loosening them)	Boundaries lost in play, self forgetfulness	Soft, porous boundaries
Over-functioning to achieve self sufficiency	Functioning for self	Allowing others to function for themselves	Over-functioning to achieve togetherness
Minimal support, feedback, or encouragement from others	Self-respect	Respect for others, allows others to be themselves	Forces others to be like self or allows others to force oneself to be like them
Difference gained over against others	Defines self from within	Defines self to others	Differences are unacceptable; relationships are defined by sameness
Narrow goals	Clearly defined goals for self	Clearly def. relationship goals	Vague, nebulous goals

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<sup>34</sup> Steinke, 32.