

Unto the Third and Fourth Generations

What happens when Adventist family systems pass on generational baggage.

by Madelynn Jones-Haldeman

Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me (Matthew 10:34-37, NASB).

THE DAMAGE TO CHRISTIAN FAMILIES WROUGHT by misinterpretation of this saying of Jesus in Matthew is incalculable. The sword that Jesus proclaimed he came to bring is a metaphor for death. But to what does the death allude? What does this sentence mean? Did Jesus come to bring death to families? What is it about the family that Jesus' new teaching is against?

The first-century family represented a closed

system; the father set the boundaries controlling the lives, words, and actions of all other members of the family. To love one's neighbor meant to have solidarity only with one's extended family. To hate one's enemy meant no solidarity with anyone outside the large, extended family.

In Jesus' time, patterns of behavior were entrenched in families and were passed on generation after generation. The lives of the people were directed by racism, sexism, and classism—generational baggage. It is easy to understand why early Christians who joined the Christian family, with its mixture of races and classes, would be unacceptable to the father of a natural family. Christians who risked breaking away from their natural fathers to belong to the church family sometimes risked death.

The sad fact about baggage is that a behavior can get passed on, its justification forgotten. In time it becomes acceptable family tradition. In contrast, Jesus focused on the differentiation of the self from the closed

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family system, and atonement, oneness, or solidarity with the whole human race. Christians who believe that the word *self* belongs to the group of words designated as “four-letter words” certainly miss one of the most basic teaching of Jesus.

In other words, in matters of atonement and solidarity with others, the Christian cannot be controlled by any other human being. Therefore, the expression “to hate someone” must be understood as a person avoiding solidarity. For followers of Jesus, even solidarity with one’s family cannot be enjoyed at the expense of solidarity with all human beings.

The Family as a System

Within the past 50 years a new way to look at the family has emerged. Rather than seeing each member of the family as “motivated by his or her own particular psychological mechanisms and conflicts,”¹ family systems theory “emphasizes the function an individual’s behavior has in the broader context of the relationship process.”² This means simply that what motivates a person does not reside solely within the individual alone but rather is found within the entire relationship system. At least, some aspects of the behavior of the individual can be explained “in the

context of the function of that behavior in the emotional system.”³

Family members can carry the unresolved conflicts and patterns of behavior from their parents, indeed from many preceding generations, and pass them down to their children. This generational baggage intrudes into the lives of the entire family, each one carrying parts or all of it into their nuclear family. In this way, individuals continue with their spouses and children the “dances” of their parents and grandparents. Even though the issues vary, each generation manages its anxiety in ways similar to how its parents managed.

To be a self and yet to be part of a group (such as a family or a church), without losing or erasing the self, is the balancing out each person must achieve. Jesus’ teaching about expressing the self in association with people not acceptable to the natural family is certainly an example of this balancing act. First-century Christians who connected with not only their natural families but also with others could be regarded by their relatives as disrespectful or selfish. To avoid passing the generational baggage of racism and classism from one generation to the next could entail actions regarded by relatives as violating the traditions and teachings of one’s parents.

To act for the self should not be confused with egocentricity. The person who views

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himself or herself as a victim in the family of origin is preoccupied with self in sick and dysfunctional ways. A vengeful attitude pervades some of these victims. Like the Ancient Mariner, they must tell everyone their story over and over again.

To tell people who consider themselves victims to stop thinking of themselves and start thinking of others does not solve their problem. We have been too quick to offer such advice as the biblical answer to all problems. Victims must learn to reclaim their lost "selves" before they can possibly learn the fine art of "togetherness." To be a self and act for the self is to choose. Such a choice stops behaviors and attitudes that victimize.

Adjusting the balance of individuality and togetherness is usually learned in one's family of origin. Most of one's social, emotional, and physical dysfunctions stem from an imbalance in these two primary factors. One gains a picture of the self from the oral communication, body language, and physical touch of adults and siblings in the home. If family members emphasize acting and speaking according to family rules, such as keeping family matters completely private, individuality may

be erased at the expense of the group.

When the conflict between individuality and togetherness within the family remains unresolved, one person sometimes expresses the dysfunctionality of the whole family system. A spouse or child may adopt aber-

rant behavior or become seriously ill. The family often feels that if the problem person could be fixed up, the family would be all right. This narrow focusing restricts responsibility for a dysfunctional family onto one person. A systems view suggests that all members of a family have played some part in contributing to the family's dysfunction.

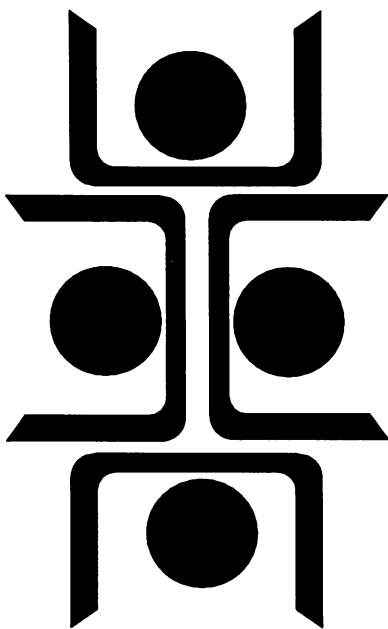
When generational baggage is passed down from one generation of parents to the next, it may be expressed in one spouse, open conflict between parents, or the anxious focusing of the parents on one or more of their children. Often one of the parents takes sides with a child against the others in the family. Sometimes the mother joins the children in opposing the father. This is known as a triangle, and often is carried into the next generation. Many homes have triangles formed around an alcohol or drug problem, conflicts over religion, an illness, or some physical dysfunction.

A dysfunctional family can persist from one generation to another. The family, in the name of togetherness, can employ the tactics of cajoling or threatening (in either a religious or secular nature), or creating guilt. The family can keep an individual so stuck in generational patterns that she or he becomes one more link in a family's chain of dysfunctionality.

Adventism and the Family System

Sometimes families mired for generations in dysfunctional patterns join the Adventist Church. In this new family—the church—all the unresolved conflicts within the family of origin are repeated; only the names and the vocabulary differ. The conflict between individuality and togetherness finds a new front within the church.

Whatever problems and conflicts the parishioners fail to resolve in their families of



origin are played out in the church family. Squabbling, distancing, shaming, over-functioning, triangling, playing the "sick" member, and a host of other dysfunctional behaviors are constantly present in the family of God. As a church, we take no responsibility for these behaviors. We assume that if the person with the problem really practiced his or her Christianity (got changed), the church would be all right. Such an attitudinal posture makes certain that our baggage will become the baggage of our children, and of our church.

If, as family systems theory suggests, most of us repeat our parents' unresolved conflicts with their parents and siblings, what hope is there for us? Many Adventist Christians believe that the answer is having a spiritual

life: praying, celebrating worship, observing church ordinances. Other Adventists respond by trying to leave their family. But neither response empowers us to escape our dysfunctional families. To discard the family is to refuse to learn.

To free ourselves of generational baggage, it is vital that we remain connected to our family of origin. Many have not yet learned that the family of origin is both the source and the arena for resolving our conflict and anxiety. If we are not to pass generational baggage on to the next generation we must learn how to pass it back. Our Christian conscience is repulsed by the idea of passing it on, but to pass it back, we must recognize how we remain connected to the family.

An honest look at the Adventist Church

suggests that many of us do not know how to have connectedness with our nuclear families of origin and still maintain our individuality. We typically sacrifice our individuality because we believe it is Christian to have peace at any price. But if togetherness is fostered at the expense of individual needs, it causes an imbalance in the family system. The individuals within the family then absorb the physical, mental, and psychological disturbances afflicting the family as a system.

Sadly, in many Adventist homes, parents

refuse to take any responsibility for the unacceptable behavior of their children. We lament and pray for our "lost" children, but we never look at our family system to see what problems keep getting passed on from generation to generation. A

"genogram" would allow us to recognize patterns of behavior by parents in their treatment of children through the generations: shame, ridicule, humiliation, and downright cruelty.

Redeeming the Adventist Family

The Adventist Church will eventually have to wrestle with generational baggage, for the simple reason that we cannot escape it. Our families must be taken seriously. They provide each of us with a fairly accurate resource for knowing ourselves better; to know the patterns that bind the self in a quagmire of guilt and shame, in inappropriate

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responses, and in addictions of many kinds. The wonder of it all is that in helping ourselves to see all of these patterns and to take steps to get “unstuck,” the entire family is moved to a higher level of functioning. Just as we must take into consideration the context of a given text in the Scriptures to understand its proper meaning, so also we must get our personal “context” in order to understand ourselves.

Though interesting, a collection of data concerning our families will not by itself change us. However, the larger pattern of our generations, with their idiosyncratic ways of reacting to life, provides a different way to think about others than the usual blaming and criticizing. Change is impossible as long as we get stuck blaming others. We will repeat the dance, over and over again. Regardless of how devoted we are to the cause of God, if we focus only on another family member’s deficiency, it is impossible for us to see our own part in the system. Becoming a Christian is not to be equated with blocking out our families, our position in our families, our family patterns of behavior, and our family’s belief system.

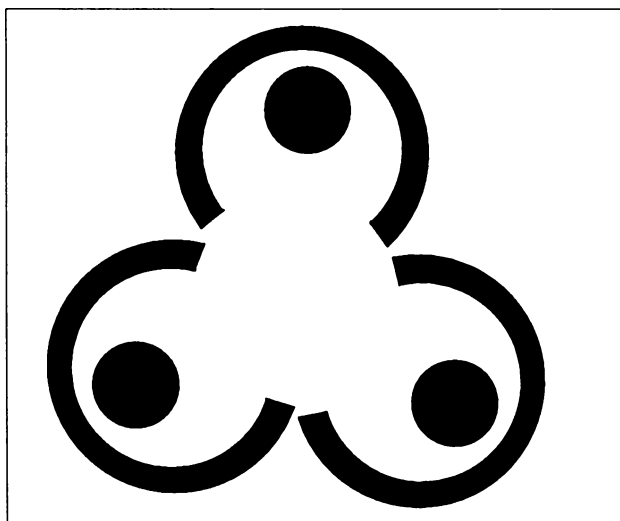
The greatest gift parents can give a child is passing on less generational baggage than was handed down to them. Parents can best

empower their children by taking steps to resolve the issues in their own families of origin—resolving problems that they inherited from previous generations.

Of course, reconciliation is not some passive acquiescence to evil. It certainly can mean taking a bold stand in one’s relationships, stating what can be tolerated and what cannot. The example, in Matthew, of Jesus refusing to be molded by his mother and brothers (all of whom knew better) into the “correct messianic figure” (Matthew 12:46-50) is a constant reminder that each person must determine her or his destiny in accordance with her or his God-given gifts. This is how a self develops that cannot be bought or sold. For many, to have a self and to act for the self is to be selfish and unaccountably sinful. But when Jesus suggested to the disciples on the mountaintop (Matthew 5:24) that religious ritual does not take priority over resolving relationships, he was most certainly suggesting that the self is to take steps for the self.

Let us be brave enough to look at the family patterns that have been bequeathed to us. Let us learn what to do to change ourselves, not others. Certainly, God is on the side of change.

We can be confident that whenever we ask for wisdom regarding our part in a dysfunctional home or church, our prayers will be answered. We all need to learn how to relate in appropriate and healthy ways to our families of origin, our present nuclear families, and our Adventist Church family.



¹ Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988, p. viii.

² Ibid., p. 49.

³ Ibid., p. 49.