

THE STUCK SYNDROME

ARTICLE 2: THE CONGREGATION AS A FAMILY SYSTEM

The Sato's married life is not good. Somehow, over the years, their marriage has grown cold and distant. They live together, but they do not enjoy each other. Of course, life had been so busy that they hardly noticed that slowly, imperceptibly, they were moving apart. Finally, one day, they wondered why in the world they had married at all. Now, they have little energy left to try. There is no affection and barely any motivation. Certainly, quitting seems so much easier. Does this sound familiar? It is a sad, but certainly common scenario. In marriage seminars, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, I have seen it, over and over again. There could be hundreds of reasons why this happens, and some situations are quite complicated. He would not do this, so she would not do that. She did do that, so he retaliated with something else. The gap of isolation grows larger day by day, month by month. I have found that there is a strange tendency when hearing the story either the husband or the wife. One is always depicted as the angel and the other as a demon, depending on whom you talk to of course. The fact is, the responsibility for the marriage rarely rests in the lap of only one. It is the result of a system that they create together. This is the exact thing goes on in the church. Churches just like homes are based on systems, some healthy and others not. And we should ignore the fact that a church without a reasonable amount of health is inept for the work of God, it is in the stuck syndrome.

In aiming for the health of both homes and churches an understanding of systems is very vital. The General Systems Theory has had immense impact in recent years in the realm of family therapy. It has also had a growing impact on the way the church is viewed. This cross over between family and church is quite obvious as the church is not only the "family of God", but also it is made up of many families. Thus, the same dynamics that are active in the home are active in the church. Just as there are dysfunctional homes, there are also dysfunctional churches, each with the potential of a variety of unhealthy patterns. The best way to understand this situation is with systems thinking.

Systems thinking is unlike the mechanistic way of thinking. It sees reality as organic, holistic, and dynamic. That means that more than looking at the parts of a system, it looks at the relationships between the parts. It is focused less on content and more on process. Often people or churches are stuck because they are focusing on only part of the problem or the symptom. A common ailment I have seen in recent years, that makes a good example, is the plague of insomnia. In our stress filled lives insomnia brings

many people to their knees. Generally, the person who cannot sleep, goes to a medical doctor and gets a prescription to help sleep. This may be good, but it such treatment alone sees the person only as a biological creature. “Eat right, exercise regularly, and take this medicine.” the doctor says. Now some other people might go a step further and get some psychological help. They may find a counselor who helps them to see how their thinking and feelings have had an impact on the inability to sleep. This treatment sees a person as a mental creature. But then, people are more than mere biological and mental entities. What about the spiritual influences? Could there perhaps be some demonic activity seeking to wear a person down? Likely, there is an element of all three of these and to only deal with one and neglect the others will be far less helpful. It may be hard to pin down which aspect first started the problem, whether it was biological, mental, or spiritual. But eventually they all became a part of the system and work off each other, strengthening each other.

To get a better idea of how systems thinking differs from the way we are used to looking at problems consider the following comparison.

Separate Thinking

Systems Thinking

Problem belongs to the individual

Problem belongs to the system

Problem with the part

Problem between the parts

Part explains the whole

Whole explains the part

Cause and effect

Co-causal

An important term in systems thinking is “identified patient”. This identified patient is the person who the family tries to change. They are viewed as the one with a problem. Churches have “IP’s” as well. We might reason that since the church as the Body of Christ then this problem person must be the tumor, but that is really not fair. The IP is not particularly sick, they are acting out the sickness of the system. Their action is a reaction to stress or pathology of the family or church. I once preached at a special evangelistic meeting where a pastor’s wife brought her son to hear me speak. The son was in high school but refusing to go to school. Of course, this very common problem would be an immense trial and embarrassment for the pastor’s home. In this situation, it seemed that the parents were trying to do something to make the boy straighten up. I wondered if the reason the mother and son were at the meeting was the parents hope the boy would be convicted of sin, or converted in some way when he heard my preaching. Perhaps my preaching was not good enough for there was no miraculous change for him that day, but I always wondered if this boy was merely an IP. Maybe he was not the real problem. Maybe the problem was in the home. Maybe a mere reaction to a home of

unhealthy stress. What was really going on? I may never know, but my prayer is that the family can honestly look at itself. We may want to get our kid straightened out, but in reality we may need to get our system straightened out. We do not achieve this by tossing out the “problem person” but rather by subtly and wisely make changes in the system

Of course our family systems and church systems will never be perfect. We are all growing. But a certain amount of health is required to be able to function and overflow to others. Otherwise we will slowly get more cold, more isolated, more opposed to each other, and no body can function that way. There is great hope for systems that are stuck in unhealthy patterns. I have seen some of the most hopeless marriages completely turn around. The reason for this can be understood via another premise in systems thinking, that being, small changes can lead to big changes. Because of the fact that systems are composed of parts all linked together, influencing one another, a small change in that system can have a chain reaction.

Let me return to the marriage seminar example. This very couple who has gotten so isolated and cold, who are ready to blame each other and rip their home and children apart with divorce can find a completely new marriage. This is not achieved by helping them understand all the terrible things they might have done to each other. It is not usually achieved by uncovering all the reasons that are rooted in their childhoods (though these are important things). It is rather achieved when a couple spends positive time together talking. Recalling good times. Thinking about good futures. At our FamilyLife conferences a husband might give his wife a flower. A couple might write each other love letters. One might say the words, “I’m sorry.” And the other say “I forgive you.” The conference sessions end before dinner on Saturday so each couple can go on a date. And very frequently something magical happens, a spark ignites, and many of the problems that seemed so insurmountable, melt, without ever being addressed. Sounds ridiculously simplistic? Well, I admit, we do give training on areas like conflict resolution, communication, and a variety of other helpful topics, but the real power comes not in acquiring new knowledge, but in a small change in their system. With Divine wisdom you may bring that kind of a small, but big, change in your church, and free it from blaming others. You just might be the instrument ordained to melt the cold clutches of stuckness.