

## Healthy Social /Family Systems: Church as "Household"

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**1Tim. 3:15** if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the **household** of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

**1Tim. 3:4** He must manage his own **household** well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own **household**, how will he care for God's church?

**Eph. 2:19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

### Healthy Social-Family Systems

(Adapted from Jack and Judith Balswick, *The Family*)

#### A. Healthy Social Systems Operate in Four levels of Interaction

(Whereas Unhealthy families are stuck on level one only...)

**Picture**-- every family "system" is constantly interacting in way that chooses, reinforces and tolerates certain behaviors...

**Question:** How does a family control, balance or change behavior within a system?

##### 1. Behavioral Control (Simple Feedback)—simple cause and effect model

- I.e. behavioral modification kinds of approaches... (positive and negative reinforcements and even "punishment") sometimes intentionally and self-aware (parenting), but mostly unintentionally in the way we interact... a simple exchange between the system and the environment."
- Issue of routine/norms/rules

##### 2. Tolerance: (Cybernetic control)-- systemic adjustments that monitor and define expected behavior so as to control itself from constantly reacting—a kind of tolerance limit that is set which allows for some variation beyond which one cannot go...

- Example—Self-monitoring action of a thermostat—set on 68 degrees with a tolerance of 2-5 degrees either way... So when a room gets below say 65—kicks on, when gets to 72, kicks off—this is cybernetic control because the heating system has a built in mechanism to control itself from constantly reacting. (Imagine what would happen if the tolerance limits were set at 67.999 and 68.001. the heater would be turning on and shutting off constantly—all the energy would be exerted in control vs. heating...
- Social system needs some flexibility in setting its tolerance limits—for if set too rigidly, there will be a constant need to correct and normal family living will be impossible .
- Example—family meals—too rigid a time limit—say exactly 6pm for evening meal... how much time of variance is allowed before all chaos breaks out... When does the "preasure" begin...

- Issue of grace
- But a system that functions only at a cybernetic level can do absolutely nothing—it must enter resort to a past way of acting or do nothing—therefor the next level is

**3. Adaptable Methods of “Control” (Morphogenetic level)**—capable of generating or creating new ways to responding to the situation—new responses are created whenever tested methods no longer work...

- “One of the major advantages which functional family systems have over dysfunctional family systems is the ability to operate at this higher level. The family which is overly rigid is usually incapable of morphogenetic responses because it lacks flexibility/grace. On the other hand, families that are chaotically structure/“law” with few rules or boundaries will have as much difficulty because they do not possess the cohesiveness to act in a united way.
- The tendency in most families is to respond in old, familiar ways to new situations—yet it is likely that these old ways will be inadequate and the family will become stuck in them rather than be stirred up to operate on the morphogenetic level...
- Issue of “Balcony” and New paradigms

**4. Value Modification (Reorientation)**—change goal itself to be more compatible with values in a new situation... Various levels from less dramatic to most dramatic in new ways of thinking and behaving...

- Issue of Gospel Transformation and “S” Cycle freedom from Idol Oppression!

**Conclusion: Healthy families will demonstrate all four of these levels rather than only one!**

**B. Healthy Families Balance Individuality with Mutuality: “ System Cohesion” (Figure 5)**

*I.e. relative to the degree of closeness which exists in a family—two extremes of dysfunction and healthy being in the middle... Note: Figure 5*

**Question:** *How does individuality and communality interact?*

**Goal:** *Both Flourish in synergetic relation between the parts and the whole*

**Three options, only one being health:** *(first two are both forms of “co-dependency” albeit in love-hate relationship that evolves*

- **Enmeshed**—where family members lack a sense of separate identity or individuality—each being overly dependant upon the family for identity. An example is a whole families being devastated by one members problem—being overly involved the needed perspective is lost and the chance of a solution lessons.
  - *In an enmeshed system— the lives of all are hopelessly entwined with each other—a member of an enmeshed family who tries to separate is likely to be labeled disloyal and to experience pressure from the others to remain enmeshed.*
  - In an enmeshed system— it is difficult for a member to break away to establish a separate identity—Example: the bonding between parents is like a restrictive glue which prevents children from establishing space needed to establish personal*

identity—it is too tightly bound up with the family—rebellion may be the only way in which children from an enmeshed home are able to become differentiated—some will in fact not differentiate and will spend a lifetime enmeshed with their family of origin...

- **Disengagement**-- low level of cohesion, the life of each member rarely touches the others members in any meaningful way—each member too busy working out his or her own problems to notice what is happening to the others.  
--Key: This can be a reaction to enmeshment in an attempt to get free —a kind of “all or nothing” response.. sometimes even needed at least for a season if the system is eventual recalibrated to reflect a healthy win-win differentiation with inter-dependence (vs. co-dependence), etc..  
-- , but long term very bad on social system and human flourishing for obvious reasons
- **Healthy Differentiation w/ Support/loyalty**-- strong families have a degree of mutuality and involvement which is supportive but not intrusive—lives overlap but each individual is also involved in activities outside the family. Each member has a separate life and identity and it therefore actively and meaningfully engaged with others...  
-- the amount of cohesion required to produce strong family life will vary from family to family  
-- will vary from life stage to life stage—the degree of enmeshment will be higher in most families with young children where emotional bonding is of primary concern, when children become teenagers and are working at self-identity, it is appropriate that they separate and disengage emotionally in preparation for the independence necessary to leave home eventually...

#### **Conclusion:**

the ideal is a moderate amount of cohesion—enabling a teenager to work through the process of differentiation...

#### **C. Healthy Social Systems are Adaptable (Figure 6)**

Again, two extremes looking for healthy middle...

- **Chaotic**-- “Social systems that have an extremely high level of adaptability tend to be chaotic—they lack needed structure and predictability which provide stability and security.
- **Rigid** --families have a very low degree of adaptability and can be equally dysfunctional. They create a tight, unbending structural system that they have not give or flexibility, a strength which is especially needed during periods of change and transition...
- **Adaptability in Strong families**—characterized by an appropriate degree of adaptability—two dimensions of flexibility and stability mark the orderly family...

#### **D. Healthy Social Systems express clearly defined roles/expectations**

-- characterized by clear boundaries relative to roles/expectations:

Example:

- parents are parent/marriage and children are children/siblings...

- Some degree of hierarchical structure relative to how decisions are made with healthy given and take of a collaborative process.
- Some degree of flexibility involved
  - I.e. parents should occasionally break out of the fixed roles and this is a good sign of flexibility—i.e. playing on the floor, joking, etc.
  - I.e. children might on occasion console a parent for having a bad day—or give advice—again a sign of positive flexibility...
- However, it is confusing when one of the marriage partners assumes the role of parent or child to the other—or when a child becomes a parent to the other siblings or to the parent themselves...

### E. Healthy Social Systems Communicate Well

The dynamics of good communication boil down to clarity of perception and clarity of expression.,

- Perception—pertains especially to the receiver of communication—it involves good listening skills, the ability to pick up the senders intonation and body language and willingness to ask for clarification when needed—functional families have empathic skills—which can put themselves in others shoes...
- Expression—strong families are able to communicate feelings, opinions, wishes and desires in a *forthright* and unambiguous manner.. In such families—there is a minimum amount of deceptive game playing

### Systems Leadership Issues:

#### A. Leadership of Healthy Social Systems Adapt to Personal Development

(c.f Table 4 and Table 5) (Figure 12) ( Illustration)

There are of course all sorts of ways to analyze development

—A social science perspective

*Cognitive-development*— particularly aware of a stage of reasoning... (See Piaget, Table 4)

*Freudian*—will look for unconscious motivations in overt behavior

*Symbolic Interaction*—child's self-concept and self-awareness

*Social learning*—how the children learns from observing others...

Table 5 – Pieget model with respect to learning...

(Our Biblical corrective certainly needs to be applied here-but it at least illustrates that your child is changing and we must change in our parenting styles with them  
—a willingness to observe and learn from children is a sign of parental maturity as well.

Figure 12:

*Four predominant stages of empowerment*—developmentally sensitive (see figure 12)

-- the four styles—develop along a continuum reflecting the child's increasing maturity... *parents who cannot change their styles to meet the professing needs of their children will retard the growth of all involved... maturation of parenting style is an essential factor in the mutual empowering process...*

1. *Telling*—one way communication—predominat style with young children
2. *Teaching*—best for low to moderate in maturity, (pre-teen) both control and emotional support—communication is two way... questions discussion,etc.

3. *Participating*-- parents become player coaches who directly engage in activities with children, instruction takes place—encourages children to do things in their own ways—parental control is reduced yet another notch—more willing for child to learn by trial and error, etc.
4. *Delegating*—(college age)—who are willing and able to take responsibility—with a continued level of emotional support—yet too much often interpreted as a sign of lack of confidence—

-- A Spiritual perspective??

**1. Repentance & Faith**—A Gestation phase leading to profession of faith—involves discovering ourselves in our brokenness and sin such as then to lead to the discover of Christ as our savior and Lord. Were as most of the scripture assumes a knowledge of god, the focus here is on Christian apologetics and first things pertaining to the gospel. I think here of the first chapters of gospels and the “who is Jesus” focus and even

**2. Enlightenment & Guidance**—An Infant phase wherein a person learns the “basics” in terms of Christian faith and practice—a “foundations” phase learning to take baby steps in Christian disciplines and involvement in the church. (I think of the gospels and the focus in the early portions of introducing Christ and the Kingdom of God, especially sermon on the mount... But especially books like Galatians, Eph and even Romans... gospels the sermon on the mount and the clarifications of who Jesus is?)

**3. Ministry Training and Leadership Development**-- As per the steps of transfer, a more complete, nuanced and transferable understanding Christian faith and practice is developed and a vision for taking responsibility for others and the kingdom of God is developed. (I think of the gospel when the disciples were challenged “be ye fishers of men? Or 1 Timothy and Titus)

**4. Re-evaluation & Separation**—Perhaps at each level there is some aspect of re-evaluating our lives such as to discern how we are “in the world and not of the world”—but it can be observed that when people stop doing this, that the whole process of discipleship stops—there is a “count the cost” aspect of discipleship that involves our relation to the world—moving from being of the world to being in the world, not of the, FOR the world. I suspect from my pastoral experience that most people have a season of life after some degree of growth and leadership in Christ’s church where they “re-evaluate” what till now has been a first level experience and theological journey—“Do I really believe xyz? Is it really worth my time to do xyz? Etc. Those who come through this without stumbling are better prepared to disciple others and have a much more nuanced and even “confessional” (vs. traditional) understanding of Christian faith and practice. (I think of the gospels when the disciples were brought to the question “Will you leave me too?” or the intent of 2 Tim.)

**5. Worldwide Vision/Ecumenism**—Beginning to grapple more with issues as they impact regional and global Christianity. Vision for Missions, Presbyterian/Regional Church Involvement, Missional Ecumenism, etc.

Important note

—some of us will do this more intuitively than others—some parents for example will be better at some stages than others... )

**Parental/Leaer Complementariness:**

**B. Leadership of Healthy Social Systems Balances Control and Permissiveness.**

See again Figure 6

Four dynamics and optimal interaction: (“Potter Box”)

Low support

## High Support

Low Control

## High Control

1. *Authoritarian*—(low support, high control)—members have a respect for authority but show little independence and only moderate social competence. What is missing because of a lack of bonding is a sense of warmth, openness and intimacy and creativity.
2. *Permissive*—(high support, low control)—members tended to lack both competence and inter-dependence
3. *Authoritative*—(combines best qualities of both support and control), attempts to direct member—expects member to conform to social/value expectation but also to be independent and self-directing within a collaborative system. Example: ... it has been well documented that socially competent children are products of homes in which parenting style is authoritative...

Certain kinds of control are better than others...

- *Coercive approach*—forcing members to act against will tends to result in low levels of social competence.
- *Withdrawing love* in order to obtain compliance—almost ineffective
- *Inductive control*—giving explanations, using reasoning and encouraging a members voluntary compliance by avoiding direct conflict proves most effective...

### C. Leaders of Healthy Social Systems Balance Division of Labor/Authority within collaborative hierarchy. (Figure 15)

#### Figure 15

The incidence of rebellion is high in homes where either father or mother is overly dominant—more moderate when they share equal authority and low when one parent has slightly more authority than the other...

i.e. Child needs to know where the ultimate authority rests but that both parents represent authority and are working together in it...

It has been discovered that there is less rebellion in homes in which one of the parents clearly takes authority and makes final decisions when there is a question of how to handle a situation—i.e. one parent assumes the "tie-breaker" role...

### D. Leaders of healthy Social Systems Understands the mutual impact of one another such

**Key:** What one person is experiencing in his/her life and or other social system WILL impact the other systems.

Examples:

- **Family: Adolescence and Midlife: Both Seedbeds for Stress and Conflict (Illustration)**  
As illustrated, right as the child is reaching prime, so the adult is losing prime (or at least is feeling this to be so—the result is a tension as two people are stressed in two opposite directions.  
Example: marriage and workplace, Medical and church, etc.

- **Often, the REAL culprit in dissatisfaction in one system is the fear to face the other system—an escape**

Examples:

--Marriage struggles that are being denied/avoided as then work/church relations are being harmed out of jealousy/resentment of positive marriage.. etc.

--Or Job struggles/inadequacies that make a person feel insecure /lack of esteem that is then reflected in defensiveness and/or aggressiveness at home or church.

**Leader Response:**

- *Know yourself and the issues you are facing both privately and organizationally and WORK at not letting the social system be about YOU! Take precautions to minimize personal. Related to this...*
- *Don't React (and when you do, and you will per your own "issues" yet fully sanctified/resolved) its still not to late to step back and try with the person to get the bigger picture.. "whats going on xyz? I sense there is more here than just what we are seeing/hearing... try in other words to help the person set up a boundary at least enough to not be a source of social dysfunction in your sphere of influence*
- *If necessary—minimize (even if temporarily) a persons ability to create dysfunction in social system even if by marginalizing them at points of greatest temptations*

**Conclusion:** *Social Systems are Covenant Family/Church Applied!*