

The Genogram

Someone commented to me recently that it seems like we judge others by their actions, but we judge ourselves by our intentions. That should not be the case. I would suggest that we should judge ourselves by the impact we have on people, not even by our intentions. Let me make a theological point. In the theological heritage that I grew up in there was a definition of sin that I remember being quoted a lot. Sin was defined as willful transgression against a known law of God. So if you did not mean something, it did not fit in that category. If you did not know something, it did not fit in that category. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, however, defines sin as any want of conformity to the will of God. Intent does not matter. It does not have to be willful to be sinful. We could be ignorant and still sin. About six or seven years ago I became aware that we really want to live by that other definition. We want to judge ourselves by our intentions. Have you not been in a situation where somebody came to you and said, “When you did that it hurt my feelings,” and you responded by saying, “I did not mean to,” thinking that makes it go away? But the fact is you had that impact and you are responsible for it. That may not feel fair. I am not sure it is fair, in a human sense. It is right, however. We are responsible for the impact we have on others.

Several years ago I was teaching this same course. It was the first day of class. Actually, it was the first day at this institution for a number of the students. I chose to start that day with an introduction to systems thinking by playing a song called “The Living Years” by Mike and the Mechanics. In the song the singer is talking about his relationship with his father and his father’s subsequent death and how he wrestled with that. While I was playing the song I noticed a young woman in her mid 20s weeping very heavily. I did not know what was going on. We continued on with class, and at the end I tried to catch up with her to talk, but she left before I could. We did end up having a conversation, however. The point is that I traumatized her by playing that song. It turns out that her father used to call her up and play that song during the time before he committed suicide. Well, she walked into her first counseling class, and I played that song. I did not mean it. I was ignorant about that. There was no way I could have known. But I am responsible for the impact I had. I just am. I needed to apologize to her. I imagine that I said, “I did not mean it.” But I hope I did not treat that as the answer. I do not think she would have let me, actually. Was I sinful in my behavior toward her? Sin is any want of conformity to God’s will. We are supposed to love one another. Yes, I was sinful. I stumbled into it. I did not mean it. I was completely ignorant. I had no way of knowing. If you stumble into sin, it does not mean that you are not responsible for it. We want to cut ourselves that slack, but we cannot. If we understand this it will help us better understand the extent of God’s grace. When Christ died He was dying to pay the penalty even for those things. I had a destructive impact on that woman. I traumatized her. I think that concept is crucial. We might remind ourselves not to let ourselves off the hook too much.

We often make excuses for our sin. But the *Confession*, trying to express what the Bible says, states that any want of conformity to God’s will is sin. That means that if you missed the mark in any way it is sinful. This is not just referring to our brokenness, the result of Adam’s sin. We have sinned. We know that we can sin by the things we do and by the things we fail to do. That may help us understand what I am saying. I recognize that what I am saying is not comfortable. I know that not everyone will agree with it. But I have come to believe that it is true. Praise God that it is all covered by the blood of Jesus. It is all covered by the blood of Jesus. The quality of our relationships is not on the basis of whether or not we sinned against people. We are going to impact people in harmful ways, and we are responsible for it.

I suppose there are things that you might technically be able to define as not being sinful even though they have a bad impact. There might not be a direct cause-and-effect relationship between what you did

and the effect of what you did. The effect could be several steps removed from the cause, I suppose. But we are still responsible for those things even though we might be able to define them as not being sin. But my question is, why are we working so hard to define sin so specifically? It seems that we are simply trying to justify our actions. I think we are really in a better position if we simply call things what they are. Maybe there are some areas where it is not sin. But what is the harm in calling it what it is? None, as long as we recognize that by the grace of God the price is paid. Either way, the important thing is that we take responsibility for it. Rather than try to make excuses, we need to be honest in our relationships. Honesty might mean that you say, "I am sorry for the way I hurt you. I never meant to do that." It is all right to say that, but not as an excuse. That should not be the end of the talk. If that is the end of the talk, we are probably not taking responsibility for what we should be taking responsibility for.

There could be people who take too much responsibility, however. One definition of maturity is that a person is able to be clear on what they are responsible for and what they are not responsible for. Some of us, in a less mature way, take responsibility for things that are not ours. For instance, often one spouse will take too much responsibility when the other spouse has had an affair. The offended spouse will often volunteer to take the blame. They think that if they had lost weight, or slept with the other more often, or had not been so critical, or whatever it is, then this would not have happened. Now, we have been talking about family systems, so we know that the context out of which this infidelity occurred was created by the couple together. But the truth is that there are lots of marriages where there are similar contexts and yet neither spouse decides to have an affair. It is true that you have a share in the responsibility for constructing that context, yet you are not responsible for the choices of the other spouse.

Let me give another example. A large number of people who have been sexually abused end up being raped later in life. They often take responsibility for that. They think it was their fault. They think there was something wrong with them. They think they were too seductive, or whatever it is. It may be true that they did something to create the context, but they are not responsible for the choice of that other person. I would want to help them recognize that.

By the way, sexual abuse often distorts boundaries. Normally people have fences in their heart, and when those boundaries are crossed, alarm bells go off. But that gets distorted through sexual abuse. I am thinking of a real story of a girl who was sexually abused by her father up to the age of 10 or 11. The mother discovered it, and the marriage ended in divorce. At age 18 this girl met an older man in his 30s. They were in a public place, having a nice conversation, and enjoying each other. He invited her over to his house, and she went. For most of us, warning bells would go off about now. But that did not happen with her. She went to his house, and he raped her. We are not surprised, but she was. In retrospect she looks at it and says that she was stupid. But she was not. She had been sexually abused. The boundaries had been obliterated, so the warning signs never went off. She had no idea that going to his house would not be a good idea. She never questioned it. I am convinced of that. She did not have the capacity to. For her to say that she is responsible for that is not right. She may have done some things to create the context. But she did not have the capacity for understanding that boundaries were crossed. I want to help her not beat herself up about that.

As I am making this statement about sin I realize that I am saying it strongly and unqualified. I understand that. I am not meaning to imply that we ought to tell people that everything they do is sinful and they need to stop making excuses. I am not saying that. I am trying to help us see that in our relationships we need to pay attention to the impact that we have. A part of our fallen nature is that we prefer to escape and make excuses. We try to excuse ourselves from the impact that we have on people. That is what I am trying to say.

Let us move on and talk about genograms. I want to begin with a quote from a book on genograms written by Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, who is now deceased. It is a helpful book.

Family history has a powerful impact on the development of the individual, and its impact extends into the present. It has been said that the family is the primary and, except in rare instances, the most powerful system in which a person ever belongs. Accurate assessment of personal problems must include examination of the intrapersonal [within the person], interpersonal, and inter-generational aspects of a person's life. All are strongly influenced by one's history within the family. Donald Coggan, archbishop of Canterbury, said the longest and the hardest journey in the world is from the head to the heart. Understanding a person's history is most helpful when it is more than an exploration of the facts. Facts are helpful, but seldom do they take us to where we need to be when trying to help. We need to understand people's hearts. It is a long and hard journey. The genogram can help map the territory, but we must not misuse the tool as if it is merely a fact-gathering device. The genogram—an historical picture, relational map, emotional family tree—is one tool to effectively manage the various data available when examining a family history.

Let us talk about what our assumptions are when doing a genogram. Families are the primary influence in our lives, humanly speaking. Families are driven by emotional forces. So we want to look particularly for anxiety, fear, what is underneath anger, and other things like that. I like to use an illustration that helps me think about what to look for. It has to do with the distinction between termites and termite damage. In eighth grade I went to Atlantic Junior High School in Quincy, Massachusetts. Our school was a fairly new building. In the auditorium there was real wood paneling. I should not call it paneling, because that gives a wrong image. Rather, this consisted of pieces of wood that were about three inches wide, rounded on the ends, and nailed up to the walls. My homeroom happened to be science class. We took a spontaneous field trip one day down to the auditorium to listen to a termite exterminator, because termites had gotten into those walls. He explained about termites. I do not remember much of it, but I clearly remember him taking out a pocket knife and putting his knife right through one of those boards. The termites had eaten away almost all of the wood. The only thing that was there was the varnish on the wood and a little bit of wood fiber. It looked just like the other wood, but there was nothing there. There was nothing solid to it. We had seen termites crawling in the hallway, and it was one thing to see the termites, but it was another thing to see the damage they had left behind.

As you do a genogram, the temptation is to keep track of the termites instead of looking deeper for the damage that has been left, even though that may have been a long time in the past. How has the structure been impacted, so to speak? How do people respond to certain things? What are the emotions? What are the recurring patterns? Those are questions that ask about the damage, not the termites themselves. You may remember that I said earlier that sometimes people will say, "My father was an alcoholic." That statement is similar to saying, "We had termites." If you do not go on and say what happened, you are not going far enough. There were termites around our house before we lived there. That is not a big deal. The big question is, what is the damage? When we had them most recently, they were in a structure outside of the house. The things that were damaged were outside of the house. As you do your genogram, pay attention to the emotional damage. Pay attention to the emotional forces in the family. Look at differentiation.

Family members fit together as a functional whole. We have talked about that. That is a basic assumption of systems. Look for that in your genogram. Recognize that life-cycle transitions in one part of the family impact other parts of the family. For example, a parent who is wrestling with middle-age

issues is going to have an impact across the family. We usually do not think about that, but it does. The parent who is wrestling with middle-age issues, which includes rethinking identity, is often doing that while the children are moving through adolescence. But a big task in adolescence is thinking about identity as well. One of the things that adolescents need is a parent whom they can look at who knows who they are. Sadly, adolescents are often looking at us, thinking that we do not know who we are. The way the whole system fits together is important. The life-cycle changes that both are going through can impact the other. But even one person going through a change will impact the others.

When you do a genogram you have to choose which relationships you are going to focus on. If you draw relational lines for every relationship, you will not be able to see anything. That would be similar to highlighting everything on a page in a book. It does not really help. It is like using bold font for everything. It does not help. Focus in on things. For instance, what is the relationship of the men like with their sons versus with their daughters, and how does that repeat itself? Sometimes the key may be not the way that things repeat but the way they stop with a certain individual, who begins a new pattern.

Families repeat themselves. Relational and behavioral patterns are often repeated from generation to generation. Genesis 20 and Genesis 26 are biblical examples of this. Genesis 20 contains the account of Abraham and Sarah going to another land because of a famine. Abraham is aware that Sarah is beautiful and that a king may take her and kill him. So Abraham tells Sarah to tell them that she is his sister so that he will be treated well for her sake and his life will be spared. When I read this story I always think, "What about Sarah?" Abraham does not seem to be thinking about her. But the interesting thing is that in Genesis 26 the same story happens again, only a generation later with Isaac and Rebekah. It even sounds like the same king. He has the same name, but it is probably his son. It is in the same country. The context is the same. Isaac tells Rebekah to tell the men that she is his sister.

Now, this was a culture that had a very strong oral tradition. They would tell stories around the campfire, we might say. People knew the stories, and they could tell them. Stories were valued. Do you think that when someone told this story of Abraham and Sarah people thought that Abraham had done a good thing? I do not think so. That is not the way the Bible portrays it. And yet Isaac does it, too. It is interesting. I want to suggest that the issues in their respective families were operating in a similar way. There is repetition. These men respond to certain situations in similar ways. Basically, when they are scared for their lives, if they can figure out a way for someone else to alleviate the situation, even if it will cost them, they will do it. Abraham and Isaac both do it. Underlying this is the idea that families repeat themselves.

What are the advantages of using genograms? You are able to record, clarify, and update a lot of information fairly easily. You are able to map the structure. It enables you to get a quicker grasp of the situation. You are able to see the whole family and how it functions. You can note relational patterns. We can use it as an emotional family tree. It helps unload some of the emotionally filled issues and helps families see it for themselves.

Genograms are usually done in early counseling sessions. They should be used with flexibility. I usually do not use one in the session. That may have to do more with the fact that I am aware that I need to stay focused and not get distracted, because there is a lot going on. If I am doing a genogram I am not always focused enough on the people. So I tend not to do a genogram in the actual session. I tend to do it later. You will have to figure out what works best for you. It may be better for you to do one in the session. I have a friend who writes three or four pages of notes every session, and he is able to do that without being distracted. He will even do a genogram on a whiteboard as he talks with people.

Genograms can be great to do with families. Kids are great informers. They tell you things. They do not evaluate whether they should say things or not. I have done genograms on big newsprint. I love the newsprint that is like a big Post-it note that sticks to the wall. I write it up there so everyone can see it. The kids get into it. It can be very powerful.

The stories that are told in a family can be very important. The stories that are celebrated have a lot to do with what a family views as important. So asking yourself about the stories that you know can be important, what are the sources of the stories? Who tells them? Ask yourself why you know the stories you do and not other stories. Ask yourself, is this story true?

For instance, I have an uncle who tells a story about his grandfather. The grandfather's nickname was Bull. He drank a lot. He lived in West Virginia in the 1880s and 1890s. In the city that he lived in, apparently the police officers wore helmets. Well, he came home one night after he had been drinking and explained to his wife that he had a run-in with a police officer and had managed to flatten the officer's helmet as he was beating the guy up. So his wife and a friend put Bull in a trunk, drove him down to the railroad station, and shipped him to another city. Literally, as the story goes, he was being driven down the hill as the police were coming up the hill to get him. That story is celebrated in this family.

What does not get talked about, however, is that Bull continued to live out of town. He did not come back often and could not be relied on to send money home. I did not know that part of the story until after my grandmother died. I heard the earlier part of the story at my grandmother's funeral. People were laughing and having a good time. The latter part of the story does not get talked about. But I began to put some pieces together after I heard it. Let me explain.

Not too many years earlier I had been visiting my grandmother. She always had strawberries and rhubarb in her yard, which she would can. When I was there, she asked me to take some down to the pantry in the basement. When I went down there I saw that she had jam and jelly that had been down there for years. I was just bringing more to add to what was already there.

A few years before that, I was taking my grandmother to the store. My grandmother asked me to get a big bag of flour. I do some shopping, so I know the difference between a 5 pound, 10 pound, and 20 pound bag. So I came back with a 20 pound bag and gave that to her. She said, "No, I want a big bag." So I went back around and looked, but that was the biggest bag there was. I went back and told her that. But she found someone who worked in the store and asked them. They went into the back room and came back with a 50 pound bag of flour. Why does a woman who lives with one daughter buy a 50 pound bag of flour? She baked a lot, I know, but that is a lot.

Well, I came to realize that all these things stem from the fact that my grandmother had gone hungry at one point when she was a kid. Her family lost her house at one point. That very seldom gets talked about. They lost their house because her dad, Bull, was not sending them much money. They were living with other people. She did not always know if there was going to be food or not. She had to quit school after the sixth grade. She was a smart woman, but not educated. That does not get talked about, but it all fits together. I started to recognize that this story about Bull that gets celebrated was not such a good story for my grandmother. It had a lot to do with why she did not always eat as a child. She was neglected by this man, largely because of these wild and crazy things that he did. This can be traced all the way down to the present, explaining why people do not talk about certain things and feel the way they do about other things. It even helps to explain why we have a number of heavy people in the family. In this family your plate was not allowed to be empty. You had to be really full for my grandma

to believe you. That usually meant having about three helpings. That was driven by her history and her anxiety about being hungry. She knew she was being a good mom and grandma if she was filling people up. And she did. So most of the family is used to being as full as we possibly can be on a regular basis, and it shows.