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## Understanding Family Dynamics



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# Understanding Family Dynamics

As creator, God has designed a world filled with dynamic relationship systems. There are systems in creation, systems in the work place, and systems in organizations we are part of. A system is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.” In essence, a relationship system can be a set of individual and unique parts working together or connected as whole.

Paul reminds us the church is one type of dynamic relationship system – “*For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ*”(1 Corinthians 12:1). Each member is distinct in his or her gifting and talents and all work together for the glorification of God. Paul uses the human body as a metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 to convey the reality that individual body parts impact the entire body and the body impacts the individual parts. We are reminded throughout scripture of this truth – when one member weeps, all members weep (Romans 12:15) and to love our brother/neighbor is to love our Lord and follow His commands (John 13:13-15; 1 John 4:7-8).

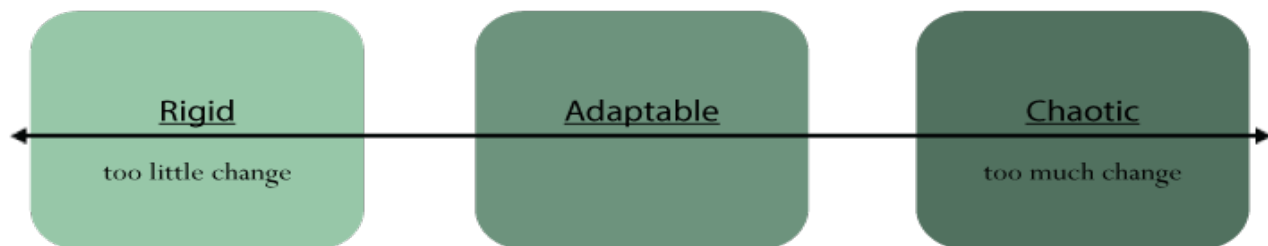
One smaller dynamic relationship system God has designed is the family - an individual system designed to carry out the teaching, modeling of His Word in daily life for the growth, and nurturing of its members and the glorification of God. The family structure is associated with the establishment of rules for family interactions as well as roles and responsibilities of each family member. Some of these rules, roles, and responsibilities are clearly spoken whereas others are unspoken. As is written later, your family of origin provides you with a “blueprint” for communicating, engaging relationships, priorities, and more and influences you even after leaving home. God himself reminded the people of Israel their choices had an impact on future generations (Numbers 14:18). Thus, behavior is informed by and inseparable from the functioning of one’s family of origin.

## Principles of Family Processes

There are a number of processes occurring within the family which influence how family members relate to each other and their individual roles within the family system. These processes affect how a family transitions through various normal life stages as well as unexpected events that occur in life.

### Adaptability

The first of these processes relates to adaptability, as shown through continuum below:



A rigid family functions in an inflexible way and the roles, responsibilities and organization of the family system seldom change. Rigid family systems tend to have an authoritarian leadership style while enforcing strict and stern discipline. Additionally, rigidity within the family can lead to decisions being imposed upon family members with family rules (not biblical commandments) being non-negotiable. This can lead to an environment where family members have difficulty in managing emotions in a healthy manner. Chaotic family dynamics, on the other hand, tend to lack clear leadership and enforce discipline in an erratic manner. Often this chaos leads to excessive expression of emotions, confusion, uncertainty

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and difficulty with making a decision or committing to decisions. Healthy, adaptable families adjust well to change and have clearly defined boundaries or structures. An adaptable family handles problems as a unit and deals directly and respectfully with one another while encouraging healthy expression of emotions.

## Connectedness

The next family process relates connectedness of family members.



A disconnected family tends to be highly independent, with low levels of loyalty to the family and limited emotional connection between members. This leads to feelings of distance and disconnection among family members. An enmeshed family tends to be highly dependent on each other, demand loyalty to family, and imply guilt when family members seek support outside family system. An attached family balances healthy time apart from each other while also spending quality time together. An attached family values loyalty, while not demanding it. Finally, an attached family understands importance of strong emotional connection among members while encouraging healthy expression of differences.

## **Application of Family Dynamics**

Let's consider an example of a well-known family in scripture. King David became a man after God's own heart, yet his immediate family seemed very dysfunctional. The story of David and Bathsheba is well known. David sees Bathsheba bathing on the roof, brings her to his palace, and sleeps with her. Bathsheba becomes pregnant and as an attempt to cover up his transgression, David secretly orders Uriah to the most dangerous part of the battle, where he is killed. This incident happened when Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom were teenagers. These children saw their father model behavior that was manipulative and treacherous. The children learned from their father David to hide or keep secrets, avoid issues, and how to ignore the hurt that grew out of one's own actions. Just in this introduction, we can gather that this family learned a chaotic and disconnected system.

One of the tragedies of David's family is it appears David ignored rather than faced and dealt with the incest between Amnon and Tamar (chaotic – lack of family leadership). Two years later, Absalom chose to take things into his own hands (chaotic - due to what appeared to be David's lack of leadership within his family, Absalom moved into the place of authority and "disciplined" Amnon though it was in an unbiblical manner). After the sheering of sheep was complete, Absalom invited his family and Amnon over to his house for a party. After Amnon had heavily drank, Absalom murder his brother Amnon to avenge Tamar (chaotic – excessive expression of emotions, disconnected – low level of loyalty toward family and disconnection from emotional pain each member was experiencing). Absalom seemed to take pride in the murder, feeling justice had been served. Absalom eventually flees to avoid the consequences of the murder (chaotic & disconnected). Absalom was in exile from his family for three years (disconnected).

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Pause for a moment and consider who in David's family is often considered the "bad guy." Likely it is Absalom. The reality is, however, that David's whole family needed to deal with a number of issues. At times, it is easy to dump all the problems and responsibilities of a family on a single member or "scapegoat." Yet, there is no such thing as a scapegoat in David's family. Absalom was not the only one in David's family that needed help; he simply was "acting out" in obvious ways. Each of David's family members had hurts and wounds; each family member needed help. For some reason, it appears David was unable to take the appropriate steps to deal with Amnon and address the emotional damage done to Tamar. The pain of Amnon's violation likely devastated Tamar's whole life.

## Final Thoughts

Considering the various principles and processes within family's dynamics and each family member's role is important as you illustrate the Gospel of truth and grace. It is important to note, that a number of family processes are not biblically wrong or right. For example, it does not say in scripture there is only one right way to express emotions or there is only one right way for the process of decision making in families. Thus, we need to apply biblical concepts to each family process. Jesus modeled behavior and expression that was balanced. Jesus was full of both grace and truth (*John 1:14*). Jesus also modeled flexibility. He maintained a laser focus on the work His Father had for Him. At times this work including moving to a different village (*Luke 4:43-44*) while other occasions meant being present with children, outcasts, or His own disciples (*Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 5:29-31; John 13*).

As you reflect on your own family experiences, it is helpful to remember the limits and freedoms operating within your family dynamics. Reflecting on these limits and freedoms can greatly shape your environment (both internal and external) and influence the roles of each individual within the family unit. This reflection process is not about blaming your parents or family. It is likely your parents did the best they know how. It is, however, about having a mature understanding of the influence your family of origin had on you as a child and perhaps, certain behaviors you engage in today. It is with this deeper understanding that we make sense of our experiences – both leading to a deeper appreciation for whom God created us to be and sharing our hurts with Him so as He can bring continual healing and transformation in our lives and families.