

Yancey, P. (1988). *Disappointment with God: Three questions no one asks aloud*. GrandRapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House. By Patrick J. Knapp

Many of our well known exemplars of the Christian faith over the course of their lives have voiced passionate displeasure or disillusionment with God as a result of what might be termed religious or spiritual abuse. It can be rightfully said that, at various levels, we all experience such disappointment. Acclaimed writer Philip Yancey seeks in this popular book to address this common malady. In the first half of the book he suggests to the reader what the Bible says can rightfully be expected from God. He seeks in this first section to allow the Bible to speak for itself rather than to carry his own preconceived notions which he concludes were very different than what he had been told most of his life.

The second portion of the book addresses the more practical or existential ideas to actual situations that commonly bring about disappointment with God. In welding these two sections together he readily admits to avoiding intellectual apologetic arguments and seeks to more directly deal with the doubts of an emotional nature.

The author starts off this journey by way of sharing snippets of various people's accounts of differing levels of harsh disappointment with God had evidently chosen to reveal Himself. He provides his own account of a faith healing church event filled with false beliefs. He reports of at least 52 deaths of young children within this particular church as a result of, in his terms, false theology that supported the motion that the use of medicine exhibited a lack of faith. The author states that this sort of false theology drives much of the resulting disappointment in God. In this first section he seeks to closely define what good practical theology might look like.

Yancey provides the reader with an in-depth account of one particular young graduate theology student from Wheaton College that expressed his grave concerns about God in the course of several discussions with him. The disappointments this student express contained three essential questions that are common to all followers, *Is God unfair? Is God silent?* Finally, last but not least, *Is God hidden?* Answering these three questions can be incredibly difficult in the course of wrestling with the various injustices we experience on a daily basis and form the outline of the content of this book.

In the author's attempt at answering these questions he reveals, in my opinion, an appalling lack of understanding of the nature of God. He suggests that God took a divine "risk" in providing humankind an autonomous will (chapter 6); that somehow God "learns" as though He did not previously know something (chapter 7); he posits that authentic "love" cannot be forced and that when God's love is spurned He feels "helpless" (chapter 8); that God cannot "control humankind" (chapter 11); that Jesus showed restraint, refusing to overwhelm people with a "brash display of power" and again "never forces anyone to believe in him" (chapter 15); that God did not know in advance whether Job would remain faithful (chapter 25); that Satan was the "instigator" of Job's suffering (chapter 28).

Positing Arminian assumptions form the basis of his inadequate responses to the three questions. On the positive side he does remind the reader of how Christ identified in our

suffering through His own displayed on the cross and that He weeps for those that suffer and he rightfully says that God deflected the why question that Job asks to instead focusing on His need for faith. Libertarian freewill, as found throughout this book, does not satisfy the soul because it is a false notion.

I was very disappointed with this book and cannot recommend it to those who suffer from various forms of abuse or disappointment. God's *hands are not tied*, He is in *total control* and He is a *loving* God *always caring* for His children. Sadly, the author provides little support for these truths.

Friedman, Edwin H. (1985). *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. New York: The Guilford Press. by Patrick J. Knapp

Unlike many systems theory books, this book makes an attempt at providing its reader with significant thoughts on systems within a *religious* context. It is targeted primarily to addressing the unique role of religious leaders within relational systems. Secondly, its intent is to provide a clear understanding and appreciation for a family systems approach to human problems. Its basic thesis is that all religious leaders are involved in three distinct families: those families within their congregation, the congregation itself as a family and the individual personal family of its leader(s). The author suggests that the emotional process being the same in any of the above three families, relational problems or healing in any of them will manifest itself in various ways in all of them. In a very helpful sort of way, this theme of interconnectedness is maintained throughout the book.

Helpful too, is the injection of a little of the author's personal history, putting a good deal of historical shoe leather to the education that his book offers. Unlike other system theory authors I have recently read, I found this author clearly more pastoral and willing to affirm the value of spirituality in the interplay of counseling from a systems perspective. I found this incredibly refreshing. However, this also made it a bit more difficult in narrowing the scope of my comments.

One of the first insightful, yet unsatisfactory things communicated, is found in the Introduction. The author speaks of the importance of pastors listening to Scripture and having grown from it "in the context of their own souls (a lifetime project)" and "our spirituality and our tradition will spring naturally from our being." Personal growth seems to be seldom emphasized in systems related books and I found this a very helpful and encouraging message. However, as seen through the lens of the New Testament, Scripture has its own voice (II Tim.3:16). It appears therefore that he values Scripture only as he can use it, through his own epistemic grid, not how it can independently causes authentic change in him by the sovereign work of the Spirit of God.

Early in the book he makes several very helpful clearly-communicated observations about the nature of systems thinking. He first makes some general observations about systems, stating that "it focuses less on content and more on the process that governs the data; less on the cause and effect connections that link bits of information and more on the principles of organization that give data meaning" and "The most outstanding characteristic of systems thinking is its departure from traditional notions of linear cause and effect."

He goes on to identify and then explain the five basic concepts of family systems theory: the *identified patient*, the concept of *homeostasis* (balance), *differentiation of self*, *the extended family field*, and *emotional triangles*. He acknowledges that various schools of systems theory emphasize these basic ideas at differing levels and sometimes with slightly differing terms. I appreciated his not overstating his contribution to the field of systems theory and this caused me to consider his suggestions all the more.

The author goes on to explain the significance of the application of these terms to the field of counseling. His educational approach is quite pastoral. Consequently as I read this book, I became convinced that it would become a long term companion. Unlike other recent readings in systems theory, this book provides a very practical and personal approach rather than primarily philosophical and theoretical.

Friedman makes a particularly insightful observation about religious cults that I have never found in other systems books. "Cults, for example, do not destroy families as much as stuck-togetherness attitudes in families create candidates for cults." My experience, in counter-cult work, has informed me that very few families want to hear this and yet this and other connections with family-of-origin issues exposed in cult involvement are absolutely relevant to recovery from religious abuse. In my opinion this makes Friedman not only well-informed but a brave man!

The author's second chapter, on understanding family process, emphasizes the importance of ten "laws" of family life that flow from systems theory. These "laws" consist of: the importance of *emotional distance*, the nature of *loss and replacement*, the effects of *chronic conditions*, the role of *pain and responsibility*, the *paradox of seriousness and the playfulness of paradox*, the negative role of *secrets*, the role of *sibling position*, the problems associated with the *diagnosis* of an individual family member, the function of emotional *symmetry* and finally the importance of *family survival*. In describing these "laws," he again highlights the practical usefulness in understanding systems principles. After having laid this clear foundational understanding of family systems, in section one, the author moves on to more directly apply these principles to families within the congregation.

In his second section, the author applies principles of family systems to: marriage and marital counseling, the difficulties of addressing those families that are overly focused on identifying their child the center of counseling, the significance of seeing the interconnectedness of the family process, difficulties in working with the aged, and the place of life-cycle ceremonies such as marriage, death, divorce, birth, *etc.* In all this the author identifies a very helpful snapshot of how the spiritual leadership can understand and play a significant part in the healing of family problems. An incredible amount of material is covered in this section. The author doesn't waste words and provides some concrete direction and understanding of specific factors in family dynamics and suggestions for counseling support. I found this section particularly encouraging as I think about forming my own model for counseling and the requirements contained in the book manuscript I am currently drafting.

In section three, the author shifts his attention to the congregation as a family system. He focuses on: the family process as it relates to organizational life, the interplay between the leaders own family and the larger congregational family; the incredibly influential role of the one or two leaders at the top in effecting the congregation and the importance of the leaders' capacity to self-differentiate, and finally the dynamics and significance of leaders leaving or coming into an organization. I found this section as being particularly relevant to my own wrestling with the congregation that I have attended for many years, as leadership changes are unfold there.

Over the past three years our congregation has been undergoing a confusing change in leadership which has, at times, felt like having a teenager who is having a great deal of difficulty entering puberty. This section added sociological clarity in my understanding of family dynamics as it relates to churches. As our new pastor will soon arrive to fill the vacated thirty year role of senior pastor, I will certainly want to suggest to him and others the reading of this book and particularly this section.

The final and shortest section of this clear and well-written book addresses the importance of the personal family of the clergy and serves as a conclusion for the book. In this section the author provides leaders with some suggestions regarding the role of their immediate family and the nature of its influence through conflict and traps, upon the larger congregational family. Additionally, he rightfully speaks of the nature of the leader's extended family as a source of healing and wholeness. This section highlights the interconnectedness of interlocking families as a source of recovery from our various wounds. The author again reiterates the role of the family (congregational) leader as being both unique and primary in the process of congregational growth. I can understand this emphasis, but am yet hesitant to affirm it as decisively as the author presents. It seems to me that this idea denies the role of God in overriding bad decision making and inadequate role modeling of leadership. Leaders are certainly important (Heb.13:7). However, consider the context of this verse as it relates to one of the major themes of this book:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can human beings do to me?"*" Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* Heb.13: 5-8 (Emphasis mine).

Wherever families are found, the author sees congregational leadership as a primary source of growth. He rightfully presents a cogent argument for the huge role leadership plays within the interconnectedness of the various family systems. However, it seems he fails to adequately consider the primacy of the role of the God of the Bible in forming our families and leaders. In my opinion, his undiscerning ecumenicalism causes him to overstate the role of the congregational leadership. Another major criticism, as mentioned earlier, is his underestimating the role played by the Bible. The Bible should not be viewed as controlled by the perceived needs of the individual, but rather as having a life and intent of its own, influencing the believer from without as he/she is directed and illumined by the Holy Spirit.

Despite the above two criticisms, this is still a very helpful, clear and concise book. It is in some respects simple, but is certainly not filled with silly simplicity. In rereading this book for the purpose of this review, I understand why this book is already referred to as a classic in the field of family systems. There are a small handful of books that I reread and interact with. This book will clearly become one of these long term companions, resulting in a good deal of helpful conversation with others in the field.