

# Anxiety and differentiation in the Ephesian church: A family systems reading of 1 & 2 Timothy.

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## Introduction

Timothy was appointed by the apostle Paul and the ‘elders’ (1 Tim 4:14) as the lead pastor of a first century church in the thriving city of Ephesus, located in what is now modern Turkey. Young, timid Timothy (1 Tim 4:12; 2 Tim 1:7) found himself set in the midst of a somewhat fractious congregation, evidenced by Paul’s references to various interest and pressure groups<sup>1</sup>, and it is plausible that Timothy had considered abandoning his post as a result (1 Tim 1:3). The two letters which Paul wrote (c. 65-67 AD), reveal his attempt to help Timothy respond to these challenges with levelheadedness and poise rather than to cut and run.

This paper attempts to introduce Bowen Family Systems Theory (here on in referred to as Bowen theory) as a conversation partner in the reading of the text and as a commentator on the Ephesian church as an emotional system, particularly with reference to differentiation and anxiety.

The central idea for this paper is contained in Paul’s instruction to Timothy “But you, keep your head in all situations”<sup>2</sup> (2 Tim 4:5), advice which bears an uncanny resemblance to the key concept of the differentiation of self in Bowen theory. But, instead of keeping his head, Timothy appears to have been overwhelmed by the ‘situations’ he faced and to have responded to them anxiously. Murray Bowen understood anxiety as “the response of an organism to a threat, real or imagined” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, 112) and as being evidenced by certain emotional reactions manifested in behaviour. Anxiety of this type seems to have been experienced not only by Timothy, but by Paul and the Ephesian congregation as well and this is depicted in the reported behaviour<sup>3</sup>. However, before exploring this further, it is important to address three hermeneutical issues with regard to using Bowen theory as an interpretive tool.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, there were the myth promoters (1 Tim 1:4; 2 Tim 2:23), the false teachers and ascetics (1 Tim 1:6-7, 4:1-5), the legalists, the promiscuous and unrepentant (1 Tim 1:6-10, 5:20), contentious men and indecorous women (1 Tim 2:8-10), the wealthy (1 Tim 6:17-19) and predators (2 Tim 3:6-7).

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word for ‘head’ (νήφω) means to be ‘sober’, ‘circumspect’, ‘vigilant’ (Mounce, 1993, νήφω).

<sup>3</sup> Note: the material in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was not included in this study because it is widely accepted that Ephesians was a circular letter sent to many churches and contains more generic material. It does not contain the parochial detail of 1 and 2 Timothy.

## **Hermeneutical issues with regard to using Bowen theory as an interpretive tool**

Firstly, some may object to the use of a secular, psychological theory to comment on the biblical text, deeming it unwise or even dangerous. Indeed, caution is advised, but it must be acknowledged that every reader approaches a text with their own set of presuppositions. Background, language, education, and experiences all influence who the reader is, what they bring to the text and how they interpret what they read. It is an inescapable process for any reader as they view the text through their own cultural lens. Bowen theory simply furnishes the reader with a different but legitimate lens through which they can conceptualise the human drama.

Secondly, Bowen theory adds a vocabulary for reframing pastoral questions that the reader may bring to the text. For example, an inexperienced pastor, struggling with what to do as the leader of their first church, might ask questions of content such as, “what does Paul tell Timothy to do?”. Such a question might lead them to focus on instructions like “preach the word...” (2 Tim 4:2) or “command and teach these things...” (1 Tim 4:11), both essential pastoral duties. But, approaching the text with a Bowen mind-set, one might ask questions of process such as, “what sort of person did Paul want Timothy to be?”, or “how was Timothy expected to function under pressure?”.

Thirdly, Bowen did not invent the emotional processes that his theory describes. He merely recognised their existence and labelled them. Although words such as ‘differentiation’ or ‘triangling’ do not appear anywhere in the Bible, their absence does not disqualify their usefulness for describing the social interactions reported in the Bible. Adopting words in this way is, in fact, a recognised hermeneutical practice. For example, the word ‘trinity’ never appears in the biblical corpus, yet it is a commonly accepted term to signify a spiritual truth. If a word does not appear in the bible this does not necessarily mean that the concept to which it refers is not biblical. Likewise, with the use of Bowen theory terms. Human emotional processes have existed since the dawn of time and it doesn’t matter what label is ascribed to them because “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Shakespeare, 1975, 1020)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene II).

## Paul's anxiety

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, his personal greeting quickly gave way to a pressing issue: "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus" (1 Tim 1:3). Paul had urged Timothy on at least two separate occasions, once in Macedonia and again in this letter, to remain in Ephesus. It appears that Timothy had considered, for some length of time, abandoning his post there and Paul seemed anxious about a number of possible scenarios developing:

1. If Timothy departed, the church would surrender its apostolic-based leadership and the vacuum created by Timothy's departure would be filled by false teachers and myth promoters who would undermine authentic gospel ministry (1 Tim 1:3-4; 2 Tim 2:17-19).
2. Viral groups had infiltrated the congregation and threatened the church's wellbeing, for example, the Jewish genealogists (1 Tim 1:3-4) and the ascetics (1 Tim 4:1-3). Some of these groups had already targeted vulnerable members of the church (2 Tim 3:6) and Paul was worried about their teaching, their domineering style (2 Tim 3:3-7) and their eroding influence<sup>5</sup>. Other internal issues also concerned Paul, such as church order, morality, the appointment of leaders, the treatment of widows, and autonomous teachers who were bypassing Timothy's leadership.
3. Timothy's own personal development would be impeded. For example, Paul's call for Timothy to attend to his own "life and doctrine" (1 Tim 4:16) and to "fight the good fight" by pursuing "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness" (1 Tim 6:11-12), reveals Paul's concern for Timothy's personal growth. Fleeing Ephesus might reduce Timothy's stress but it would not help him build resilience and character.
4. Paul's absence meant that Timothy worked alone and Paul was concerned that Timothy ministered in an isolated situation and longed to reunite with Timothy. "Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy", he wrote touchingly (2 Tim 1:4). However, his longing was not just for a personal reunion but included Paul's desire for Timothy to, once again, partner him in ministry and together bear its associated suffering (2 Tim 1:8, 2:3, 4:5). In the meantime, Paul

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<sup>5</sup> Paul's description of them is remarkably similar to Edwin Friedman's depiction of parasitic, non-self-regulating types who hold "the whole system hostage by their oppressive behaviour" (in Steinke, 2000, 59).

wrote to inspire Timothy with some examples of others who had endured hardship for the gospel, namely, Paul himself (2 Tim 4:6-7, 16-18), and Jesus (1 Tim 6:13) and reminded him of the indwelling presence of God's Spirit (2 Tim 1:3-7) and Christ's protection (2 Tim 4:17-18) in an attempt to alleviate Timothy's feelings of aloneness and impotence.

5. Paul feared that Timothy might become a ministry casualty like others who had failed in the ministry (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 1:15, 4:10). His call for Timothy to care for himself (1 Tim 5:23) and his warning about those who had already shipwrecked their faith (1 Tim 1:19) are evidence of his concern for Timothy's emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing.
6. Paul seemed aware of his own imminent death, as noted in his second letter which he probably penned in Rome (2 Tim 4:6-7). If this eventuated, he was concerned for the continuation of gospel ministry under a new generation of faithful leaders such as Timothy.

### **Timothy's anxiety**

1 and 2 Timothy contain seven key pieces of evidence that Timothy had also experienced anxiety and that it resulted from both his ecclesial circumstances and his personal disposition.

1. Timothy appeared to have been a reclusive type of person. Paul knew that Timothy possessed a thin skin and wrote, "*for the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline*" (2 Tim 1:7) in an attempt to motivate him to become more daring. Together with Timothy's temptation to flee Ephesus, this insight depicts an individual who tended to retreat in the face of hardship.
2. Timothy's timidity may have partly originated in his family of origin (2 Tim 1:5). There is no mention of Timothy's father in this reference and it is a glaring omission worth noting. Did Timothy lack a paternal role model as a child? Having been reared by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, the absence of a father figure might indicate that his father might have been a disinterested unbeliever, or was deceased or had been absent from the home during Timothy's upbringing. Given the patriarchal household structure of the first century, it is likely that an attending, believing father would have played a role in his child's upbringing and, therefore, would have rated a mention. Furthermore, Paul, on a number of occasions, referred to Timothy as his

“son” (1 Tim 1:2, 18; 2 Tim 1:2, 2:1). Coupled with Paul’s personal interest in, encouragement of, advice for and longing to reunite with Timothy could suggest that he had assumed the role of a surrogate parent. These two letters certainly resonate with a familial tone. For instance, Paul’s urging of Timothy “to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim 1:6) sounds like a fatherly encouragement, as if to say, “I believe in you son, you can do it”.

3. Timothy possibly felt abandoned and stranded. He had been left alone in Ephesus to defend his post without Paul. It seems that their parting, over which Timothy shed tears (2 Tim 1:4), was particularly grievous and the lack of frequent contact or news from Paul may have left Timothy feeling somewhat forsaken. Richardson wrote that the feeling of abandonment is a high anxiety generator (Richardson, 1996, 44). This is not to suggest that Timothy had been abandoned in reality, only that it is reasonable to suppose that he felt that way.
4. Ministry presented Timothy with some difficult challenges, such as defending the gospel against superstitious and mythical doctrine, internal conflicts, gender role disputes and justifying his youthful authority. But, Timothy somewhat lacked the courage to challenge erroneous doctrine and caustic behaviour in the church or to endure its consequential adversity. Hence, Paul urged him to face these challenges with single-minded focus, like that of a soldier and with bravery to share the hardship that ensued (2 Tim 2:3-4).
5. Timothy’s desire to depart Ephesus on the one hand, coupled with Paul’s admonishment for him to remain on the other, would have engendered within Timothy a moral dilemma causing some anxiety.
6. By the time Paul wrote these letters, the Ephesian church was around ten years old. Some were critical of Timothy’s leadership, saying he was too young and inexperienced for such a role (1 Tim 4:12). The lack of confidence in his leadership, together with his timid nature could have unnerved him.
7. Timothy was prone to frequent illnesses (1 Tim 5:23), including stomach complaints. The origin of his illnesses is unknown but the symptoms are consistent with stress-related causes. It is possible that Timothy’s situation together with his timid disposition could have contributed to some sort of psycho-somatic condition.

## Anxiety in the Ephesian church

One gets the feeling that life in the Ephesian church was anything but calm. Paul's description of the factions and their associated behaviour patterns suggests a highly agitated church and the following list proposes some possible anxiety-inducing triggers in the Ephesian church:

1. The role of men and women in leadership and teaching (1 Tim 2:8-15).
2. Leadership issues: aspirants to leadership, their qualifications, selection, maturity and moral integrity (1 Tim 3:1-12) and complaint protocols (1 Tim 5:19-20).
3. Contentious teaching: Paul and Timothy versus the genealogists, ascetics and myth promoters (1 Tim 1:3-6).
4. Timothy's youth (1 Tim 4:12), lack of self-confidence (2 Tim 1:6-7, 2:15) and ill health (1 Tim 5:23).
5. The tension between the social and gender classes, e.g. slaves and masters (1 Tim 6:1-2), the wealthy (1 Tim 6:17-19), men and women (1 Tim 2:8-15).
6. The care of widows and the exploitation of the church by those who neglected their own relatives (1 Tim 5:3-16).
7. Gossip, anger, disputes and quarrels (1 Tim 2:8, 6:4, 20; 2 Tim 2:23). For example, those who "worm their way into houses" to teach their myths and fantasies, some of whom were autonomous women and who had bypassed Timothy's leadership and authority<sup>6</sup>. Triangling, a key indicator of anxiety in Bowen theory, is evident through a number of disputes.
8. Narcissistic behaviour (2 Tim 3:1-5).
9. Coalitions gathered around false teachers (2 Tim 4:3-4).

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<sup>6</sup> The controversial passage of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 contains Paul's prohibition for women to teach or have authority over men. Some understand Paul's reference to the Adam and Eve story as suggesting his argument was *ontological*. That is, there is something built into the DNA of men and women that makes this male/female order timeless. Others understand this creation story *typologically*, suggesting that Paul chose a quintessential OT narrative that corresponded to the type of situation in Ephesus. Women in the church had bypassed Timothy as their leader. They autonomously visited households and imposed their false ideas on unsuspecting and vulnerable people (1 Tim 5:13; 2 Tim 3:1-6). By circumventing Timothy, they repeated the sin of Eve who similarly bypassed Adam, the sole human bearer of God's word, and acted independently. The point is that this issue would have raised the emotional temperature in the Ephesian church, as it does today in modern churches.

It is not possible for the reader to observe peoples' reactions, their facial expressions, gestures, posture or inflections, but it does not follow that emotion cannot be revealed in the text at all. Chronic anxiety can only be deduced from long-term observation, which is not possible here, but there are enough signals to, at least, discern a level of acute anxiety in Paul, Timothy and the congregation at the time of Paul's letters. There is also evidence of low differentiated activity among poorly self-regulated individuals who were secretive, who triangled and who transgressed the boundaries of decency. In Bowen theory, these are symptoms of anxiety in the system.

### **Differentiated leadership at Ephesus**

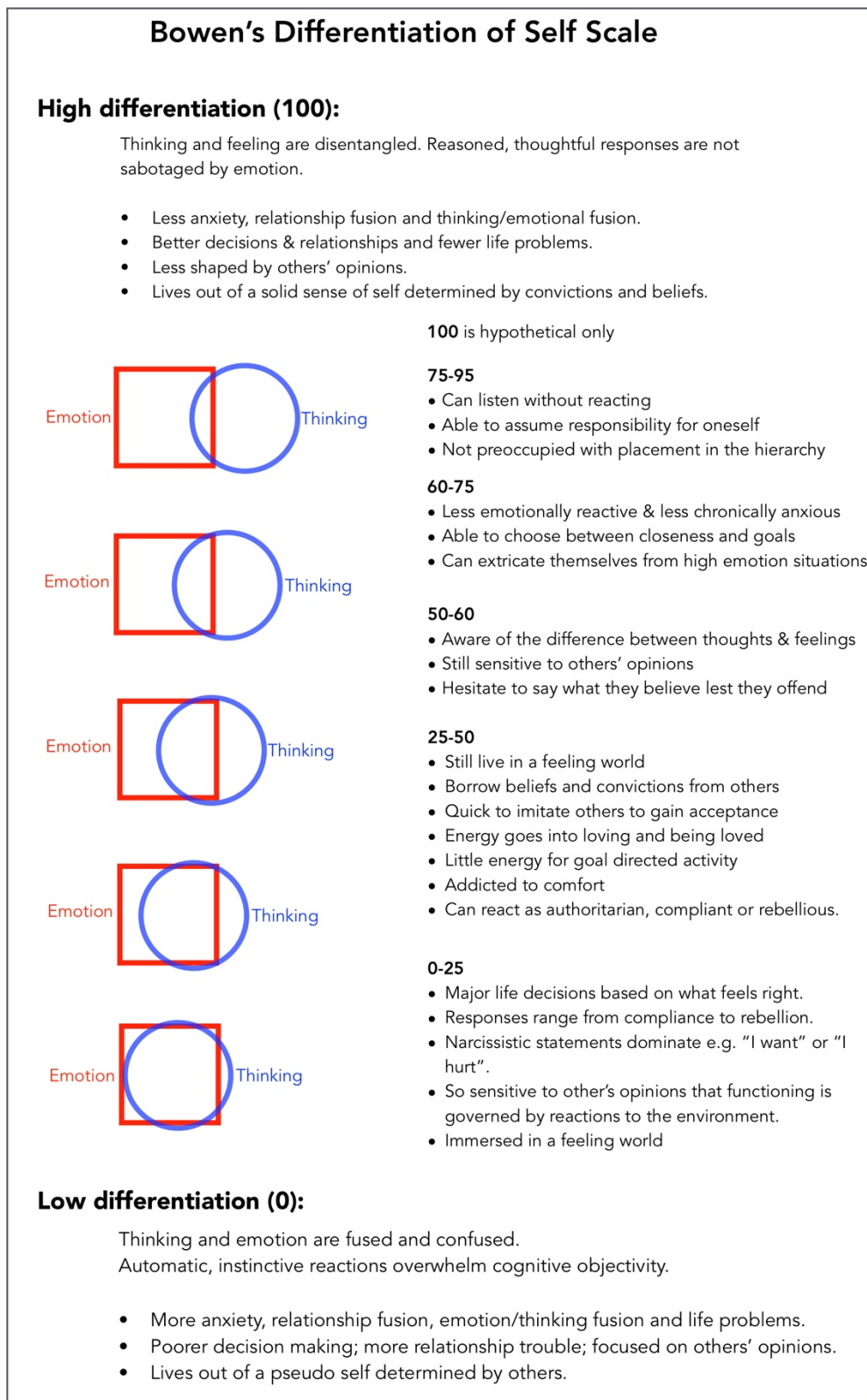
Paul's instructions in these two letters were partly directed towards Timothy's self-management and this provides a unique insight in the Pauline correspondence. He wanted Timothy, not only to remain at Ephesus, but to also reinforce his personal convictions (1 Tim 1:19; 2 Tim 3:14-15), assert himself as leader (2 Tim 1:13) and expand his capacity to weather criticism and opposition. All of this was to be motivated by love which demands connection with others (1 Tim 1:5). In other words, Paul wanted Timothy to become a more highly differentiated leader.

In Bowen theory, differentiation of self refers to the individual's ability to distinguish thinking and feeling and how this influences the individual's capacity to connect to others while maintaining a distinctive self. Higher differentiated individuals can think reasonably and rationally while holding their emotions in check. Conversely, lower differentiated individuals confuse and fuse thinking and emotion rendering them indistinguishable. The line in the song "Love is all around" by British band The Troggs (1967), "My mind's made up by the way that I feel", captures succinctly how emotion can overrule rationality among low differentiated people. Bowen illustrated these polarities in his scale of differentiation<sup>7</sup> which, if applied to Timothy, reveals responses that approximate lower differentiated functioning.

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<sup>7</sup> See below Bowen's scale of differentiation in figure 1, adapted by the author.

Figure 1



Paul's challenges for Timothy to progress, confront crucial issues in the church and to face the backlash, imply that Timothy's response up to that time had been one of fear and withdrawal, culminating in his desire to flee Ephesus. Timothy had allowed people to



disrespect his youth, so Paul challenged him to dissuade them from doing so<sup>8</sup>. Paul also urged Timothy to replace feebleness with boldness, self-protection with love and self-discipline (2 Tim 1:6-7) and to accept his share of suffering for the gospel because Timothy had struggled in these areas (2 Tim 1:8, 2:3). However, Paul's method was wiser than to impose a list of imperatives. He wanted Timothy's conduct to spring from his gospel-centred convictions (1 Tim 1:19), so Paul reminded Timothy of his faith heritage, which was strongly rooted in his family of origin (1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 1:5-6), and in the models of other servants of God who had endured similar opposition (2 Tim 1:12; 1 Tim 6:13). His advice to Timothy centred on strengthening the inner man, out of which a more courageous and loving functional style would emerge. It would seem that Paul knew about differentiation even before the term was invented.

Richardson has proposed a graphical way to visualise a person's functional style using the parameters of togetherness/individuality to plot their level of enmeshment with others on the one hand, and of differentiation/fusion to plot their level of maturity on the other (Richardson, 1996, 101). Paul's desire for Timothy to move from lower to higher levels of differentiation can be theoretically plotted using Richardson's graph (see figure 2)<sup>9</sup>. Initially, it would appear that Timothy functioned more in quadrant 4, a position of fused isolation. Timothy's, instinctive reactivity had overshadowed calm reflection to the point of cutting loose from the church. He had chosen to distance himself, however he was still emotionally fused with the church because his reactions were determined by it. Paul encouraged him to move towards quadrant 1, a position in which Timothy could draw from a solid self<sup>10</sup> and, less anxiously, remain connected to the church.

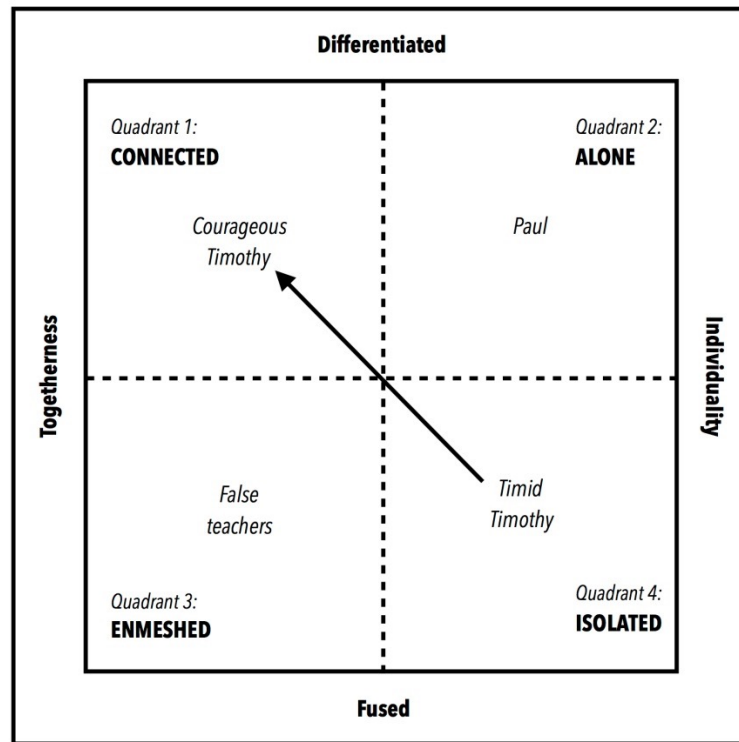
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<sup>8</sup> An implied contrast behind Paul's exhortation "don't let anyone look down on you because you are young", suggests that Timothy had been doing just that.

<sup>9</sup> A generic form of this graph appears in Richardson's *Creating a Healthier Church*, p101.

<sup>10</sup> The 'solid self' is Bowen's term to describe the self that is "made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles" that can say, "this is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will do or will not do' in a given situation" (Bowen in Gilbert, 2008, 20-21). The 'pseudo self' is a self that is borrowed from others.

Figure 2 – Richardson’s functional style graph



Paul, on the other hand, would appear to be located in quadrant 2 because he seems to be more highly differentiated but nevertheless alone. As Paul approached the end of his life and after years of opposition and suffering due to his defence and proclamation of the gospel, many of his friends and associates had distanced themselves from him (2 Tim 4:10, 16). Unlike Timothy, however, Paul’s isolation was not a chosen reaction but one that had been consequentially imposed upon him.

The false teachers have been placed in quadrant 3 because they seem to be emotionally fused to members whom they could assimilate into their own likeness. Emotion appears to have dominated their thinking as they huddled together in groups that discouraged difference. They would “worm their way into homes...are swayed by all sorts of evil desires” and “are men of depraved minds” (2 Tim 3:6-8). They disregarded appropriate social boundaries and coerced people to think like them in a way that approximated Bowen’s ‘undifferentiated ego mass’ (Bowen, 2004, 122)<sup>11</sup>.

Richardson proposed that differentiation is “the basic requirement for good leadership in the church and the major marker that distinguishes better and poorer leaders” (Richardson, 1996, 86), and he believed that a higher level of differentiation enables a person to:

<sup>11</sup> A phrase coined by Murray Bowen to refer to a lack of individuation.

- perceive more accurately the reality of a situation.
- identify her/hers own opinions, beliefs, values and commitments.
- think clearly and wisely about possible options for action.
- act flexibly on one's opinions, beliefs, values and commitments.

These abilities appear to resemble those that Paul urged Timothy to cultivate<sup>12</sup>.

Richardson also identified four reactive responses that emerge from a combination of high anxiety and low differentiation: compliance, rebellion, power struggle, emotional distancing (Richardson, 1996, 93). Paul did not advise Timothy to capitulate to the behaviour of the anxious church, nor to rise up in rebellion. It could be perceived, however, that Paul did instruct Timothy to engage in power struggles. For example, “Command certain men not to teach false doctrines”, Paul wrote (1 Tim 1:3). But Paul did not endorse power struggles per se, the goal of which is often dominance, but rather instructed Timothy to stand strong for truth, the goal of which is love (1 Tim 1:5) and which would invariably invite opposition. Furthermore, Paul cautioned Timothy explicitly to avoid in quarrels, disputes (1 Tim 4:7; 2 Tim 2:23) and “godless chatter” (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 2:16). But avoidance should not be confused with emotional distancing. Rather, a differentiated individual sets defining boundaries around ‘what is us’ and ‘what is not us’ and avoidance, in this instance, was to be a deliberate and calculated response by Timothy to de-triangle himself from contentious factions<sup>13</sup>.

Paul was undoubtedly unaware of the modern insights of neuroscience, but he knew that Timothy would be the one person in the Ephesian church who would need to exercise the higher, reasoning part of his brain and wrote, “But you, keep your head in all situations...” (2 Tim 4:5). Paul was aware of those with debased or “depraved minds” (1 Tim 6:5; 2 Tim 3:8) with whom Timothy had to contend and whose conduct revealed their lower levels of differentiation. But Paul expected better things of Timothy. If Timothy learned to operate more from a “*clear conscience*” and put more distance between his thinking and emotion, he could offer a calm and rational presence (1 Tim 1:5, 18-19; 2 Tim 2:22-23). He would be able

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<sup>12</sup> See 1 Tim 1:5, 1:19; 4:6-8, 4:12, 4:14-16, 5:1-3, 6:11-12, 6:20-21; 2 Tim 1:8, 2:15, 2:22-25, 3:10-15.

<sup>13</sup> Literally, *περιστημι*, translated ‘avoid’, means to ‘stand around’ not to stand in or among (Mounce, 1993, *περιστημι*). In this sense it would be possible to engage with one's opponents but not adopt their beliefs.

to more accurately perceive the reality of situations, think clearly and wisely about strategies and act flexibly and responsibly.

Arthur Boers (2002) observed that, when leaders are confronted with difficult behaviour, they can react with ‘hardball’ or ‘softball’ responses, neither of which are healthy. Hardball, or ‘fight’ mode responses include blame, retribution, hostility and counterattack. Softball or ‘flight’ mode responses are more indirect, non-confrontational, passive, sentimental, placating or appeasing. Both these responses do more harm than good, Boers wrote<sup>14</sup>. 1 and 2 Timothy contain no evidence that Paul directed Timothy to either hardball or softball responses. In fact, he encouraged Timothy to move beyond his softball responses of withdrawal and desertion. He urged Timothy to remain in contact with his congregation and to expand his repertoire of responses to include commanding, teaching, setting an example, exhorting, managing complaints, avoiding and so on. He was to do this “without partiality” or “favouritism” (1 Tim 5:21) both of which are characteristics of less differentiated leaders who are motivated by the need to ‘fit in’ or gain a following. Paul’s instructions are consistent with Bowen’s concept of balancing the definition of self with maintaining a vital connection with others. He wanted Timothy to lead and influence them, not be absorbed by them, and to maintain a non-anxious presence in the community<sup>15</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has proposed that Timothy had considered resigning as leader of the Ephesian church and Paul had written on two occasions urging him to adopt a different strategy, that of remaining and building his resilience. Using Bowen family systems theory as a way to conceptualise the situation at Ephesus, evidence was presented which suggested that Timothy, Paul and the church experienced anxiety over a range of issues. Their anxiety appears to have been amplified by poorly differentiated individuals who had imposed upon and exploited vulnerable people with false doctrines and immoral conduct.

In such a culture, Timothy’s feelings of inferiority, impotence and fear (1 Tim 4:12-14; 2 Tim 1:6-7, 2:15) had caused him to lose perspective and the ability to think calmly and reasonably (2 Tim 4:5). His withdrawal and intention to sever his ties with the church

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<sup>14</sup> Boers’ description of hardball and softball responses closely resemble Bowen’s concepts of over-functioning (hardball), distancing and cut-off (softball).

<sup>15</sup> Bowen’s term, for a differentiated and connected individual in an anxious system. This author, however, prefers the phrase ‘low-anxious presence’ because he believes a non-anxious state to be a virtual impossibility.

suggests that he had over-focused on the congregation's responses. Paul's letters reveal his attempt to urge Timothy to build a more solid self by drawing on a good conscience and sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5, 18), reflecting on his family heritage (2 Tim 1:5-6; 3:14-15), fixing his mind on Jesus (2 Tim 2:8), not on the congregation, bravely engaging in the battle for truth and fighting the good fight of love (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12) and preparing himself to suffer the consequences (2 Tim 2:3). By reinventing himself via a process of self-differentiation, Paul hoped Timothy would learn to 'keep his head' (2 Tim 4:5), remain in Ephesus and offer a more poised, calm, connected and courageous style of leadership.

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