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Practical Theology, Pastoral Ministry, and Pastoral Counseling for Korean-American Marriage: Cultural, Pastoral, and Clinical Applications with Bowen's Family System Theory

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【Abstract】

In reality, Koreans are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States. Recent Korean immigrants constitute the vast majority of the Korean American population. As a result, interracial marriages between Korean and Americans have increased, and have become a momentous issue in the Korean community. These couples face a harsh reality and have a difficult time adjusting to the differences in cultural norms and values. The entire paper is unified by frequent reference to the story of a Korean-American couple who has been married for twenty five years which forms the central clinical case for exploration. I believe that this case will provide a good example of a typical interracial couple's marital problems that center in cultural differences, language barriers, and different family backgrounds. In addition, this paper will evaluate the case of a Korean-American couple utilizing Bowen's approach to systems therapy. I want to critique its contribution as well as some perceived deficiencies in applying this framework to the context of Korean-American couples. If pastors and pastoral counselors can help interracial couples to accept, respect, and understand the partner's cultural backgrounds, interracial marriage provides golden opportunities to understand both their own values and beliefs and learn from other's values and cultures.

Key words: interracial marriage, cultural differences, Bowen Systems Theory, relationship triangle, differentiation

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I. Introduction

Interracial marriage, like any other marriage, is a continuous process in which two individuals learn to live together. They learn how to adjust to each other to produce a successful marital relationship. When a person marries someone with a different racial and ethnic background, the complexity of adjusting to their partner's expectations increases geometrically.

Recently, interracial marriages between Korean and Americans have increased, and have become a momentous issue in the Korean community. Korean-American couples face the diverse problems which are related to family relationships, cultural differences, language barrier, and community activities. In this paper, I will present my own experiences working with Korean-American interracial couples in the United States. Second, I will provide an organized, culturally sensitive theoretical framework that can be helpful for Korean-American couples. I believe that such a conceptual framework should take into consideration the couple's cultural differences, language barriers, original family structures, and help-seeking patterns. Among the many theories of family and marital therapy, I will apply the theoretical framework of Bowen Family Systems Theory which offers the best clinical base for reflection and assessment. Furthermore, I will evaluate the case of a Korean-American couple utilizing Bowen's approach to systems therapy. I want to critique its contribution as well as some perceived deficiencies in applying this framework to the context of Korean-American couples. However, this evaluation will be primarily focused on how to help Korean American women in interracial marriage with American men, because I have a deep interest and

commitment in dealing with the issues of Korean American women in my future ministry.

II. Body

1. Case Study: The Story of Vincent and Pokja

Pokja, a Korean woman, and Vincent, an American man, have been married for 25 years. They are in their late forties and have two sons. Their sons are married and each has one boy. Vincent is a truck driver and Pokja works for a Korean grocery store.

Pokja and her family first came to America from Korea in search of a better job opportunity for her father. Vincent was introduced to Pokja by his Korean friend. He liked the Korean culture and desired to know more about Korea. In addition, Vincent found her very attractive, not because of her good looks, but rather her good personality and willingness to submit herself to him. Pokja was raised within a very conservative Korean family. She could speak only Korean at home and her family's activities usually took place exclusively in the Korean community. She was raised to be self-sacrificing, docile, submissive and eager to please. She tried to listen to and obey Vincent's wishes. He did not see this sacrifice in American girls. After dating her for a while, Vincent asked for Pokja's hand in marriage. However, she worried about introducing him to her family, especially her father and older brother. Her father, a very authoritative and conservative Korean man, would not allow his daughter to marry an American man. This was just the

beginning for Pokja and Vincent. On her wedding day, Pokja's family failed to attend the ceremony. Her mother's absence caused Pokja much grief. Pokja said, "It was the greatest shock I have ever experienced. I was very upset. I felt humiliated, and um... I wanted to die right away." However, Pokja, intuitively, understood that her interracial marriage would bring shame to her family and the Korean community. From that day, she began to distance herself from, and eventually severed all ties to her family. However, in spite of this great loss, she was happy with her husband, Vincent. His family welcomed her and helped her adjust to American life.

After their first son, Tom, was born they experienced some conflicts in their marriage. Vincent complained that Pokja spent all day long caring for her son. When he came back from work, he wanted to have some private time with her. However, she refused this request. He could not understand why Pokja would pour out all of her energy and time into taking care of her son. One day, he asked Pokja to leave her son at his mother's house for dinner. This upset Pokja greatly, and she complained of Vincent's lack of love toward his son.

In addition, Vincent was also distressed that his Korean wife, Pokja, would hardly respond to him sexually. Vincent complained to his wife, "You always turn me down when I want to make love to you. I don't understand that you refuse to give a hug and a kiss to me in public." Pokja explained, "I want to you to make love to me with words as well as actions. I cannot respond affectionately when I don't feel good toward you and toward our relationship. I do not feel comfortable to express my love in front of others." Pokja considered the Western way of publicly demonstrating affection and expressing their love openly as being overly external, physical,

and even unclear. Pokja explained that she was embarrassed when her husband's friends slapped her on the back and tried to squeeze her shoulders from the side. Pokja said, "We just do not do that in Korea, as you know. I get really upset, plus I could not speak good enough English to explain my traditional way to greet each other. I do not want to make my husband angry, but I just cannot do that."

They also have communication problems because of language barriers. Although Pokja has been in the United States for over twenty-five years, she still has difficulty understanding his English. Vincent said that he, sometimes, is not sure if his wife understands his deep feelings for her. She also feels the need to talk about her feelings toward her husband, but is not able to express them easily in English. In an attempt to express her emotions, Pokja tried to talk about her marriage life in detail with her Korean friends and her first son, who can speak Korean. She always feels sorry about the lack of communication between her parents and her husband. This, however, did not seem to be an issue to Vincent.

Another factor contributing to the marital conflicts centered in contrasting attitudes about money. For some time, Vincent had been growing resentful of Pokja's conservative attitudes toward spending money. Pokja, on the other hand, had been feeling uneasy about Vincent's liberal, carefree attitude toward their personal finances. He complained that she did not know how to spend money, but she instead attempted to save for her family's future. Vincent began to distance himself from her and his children. Pokja, on the other hand, was upset about the fact that he was not interested in saving money and making a better future for his children and their marriage. Whenever her husband distances himself from her, she feels lonely and very

depressed. She, sometimes, talks to her mother and sisters, but rarely visits them due to her situation with her father. She, sometimes, regrets marrying an American man.

Now, Pokja has another conflict with his first son's wife, Mariah. Pokja complains that Mariah is very lazy and does not want to work for her family. So, Pokja talked about this with her first son, Tom. However, Tom did not listen to her, instead he became very upset about her intervening in his marriage life. When she tried to talk with him on the phone about her feelings, Tom hung up. Pokja was in a shock and very upset. She said, "It is unbelievable that Tom just hung up. He used to be a good son. His wife spoiled Tom and provoked him to disobey me. I do not want to talk to him and Mariah." Tom and Mariah did not visit Pokja and they did not talk to each other for a while.

2. Cultural Differences in Korean-American Marriage: General Cultural Backgrounds and Differences

Joel Crohn points out that ethnicity, religion, race, gender, and class do influence every aspect of a person's view of the world and what they consider "normal" or abnormal."¹⁾ Cultural norms affect how anger and affection are expressed, how children are disciplined and rewarded, how strangers and friends are greeted, and what roles men and women play in society. For instance, in cross-cultural relationships, contrasting cultural norms may lead one partner to describe behavior as friendly, while the other sees it as seductive. While he intends a little debate to be a friendly disagreement, yet she

1) Joel Crohn, "Intercultural Couples," in *Re-Visioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture, and Gender in Clinical Practice*, ed., Monica McGoldrick (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998), 295.

may be just as sure is a threat. When he says he visits his parents “often,” he may mean twice a year, but for her “seldom” may mean twice a week.

For this reason, the major problem in an interracial marriage is often a result of different cultural values. Each partner is likely to think that his/her own cultural values are “right.” Man Keung Ho points out that “once the individual’s value system is challenged, especially by a spouse, the individual becomes uncertain and most often reacts defensively.”²⁾

At first, such contrasts between American and Korean values may form the basis of the attraction, but these different cultural values can lead into conflict in Korean-American marriage. Crohn suggests in his article, “*Asian Intermarriage: Love versus Tradition*,” that the values of “hyper-individualistic” white American Protestant culture, which elevate the separate, bounded, and autonomous self, stand in sharp contrast to the collective and communal values of Asian culture in which individual and group identity are tightly intertwined.³⁾

In many Asian countries, Lee says, there is a general cultural assumption that the family exists as the basic unit of society.⁴⁾ Many Asian American groups, such as Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, value the commitment to the needs of the group over the individual needs and self-development. These cultures all value obedience, self-control, sacrifice, and family interests rather than typical American values of independence, self-expression, and individual

2) Man Keung Ho, *Intermarried Couples in Therapy* (Springfield, IL.: Charles C Thomas, 1990), 24.

3) Joel Crohn, “Asian Intermarriage: Love versus Tradition,” in *Working with Asian Americans: A Guide for Clinician*, ed., Evelyn Lee (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 429.

4) Crohn, “*Asian Intermarriage: Love versus Tradition*,” 429.

interests.⁵⁾ Although second and third generation of Korean Immigrants have become more familiarized with the individualistic American culture than their counterparts who are born in Korea, they still maintain a strong attachment to traditional cultural and family values. For instance, most Korean women living in the United States still have a strong sense of faithfulness to their husbands and will readily sacrifice for their families. Due to the influences of a strong Confucian background, a Korean wife values the unity of family and feels the responsibility for caring for the whole family. In Korean culture, the roles of men and women are more clearly, although rigidly, differentiated and marriage exists in the context of extended family and long-term interfamily relationship.⁶⁾ Therefore, the bonds of loyalty and obligation in Korean culture are tremendously strong and extend back through the generations. For Koreans, it is common that a family member can be called upon to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the extended family.

However, in American culture, strong autonomy and independence are emphasized among family members. There is a general assumption that the family exists for the development and protection of individual family members. For example, an American husband may not want to be involved in extended family matters, especially of his wife's side. It is likely that he is more interested in his own business or his children's upbringing. He encourages his own children to pursue their own visions, dreams, goals, wishes, and

5) E. N. L. Chow, "The Feminist Movement: Where are all Asian American Women?" in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women*, ed., Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 362-377.

6) Crohn, "Asian Inter-marriage: Love versus Tradition," 429.

desires. The primary concern for the typical American head of the household is limited to the immediate nucleic family, to the point that extended family is easily considered as separate, at least to the point that their concerns become secondary or tertiary in value. To make sacrifice out of respect for even the immediate family is generally not regarded as important as one's ability to fulfill one's own desires, success and happiness. These kinds of difference in cultural values may cause marital problems in a Korean-American interracial marriage.

Korean culture places high value on the motivation to serve, to sacrifice, and to connect with others. This is in sharp contrast to the American culture, which places high value on motivations directed towards achievement of personal goals. One study's finding suggests that Asian Americans are more likely than other Americans to make personal sacrifices that foster harmony and promote the well-being of a relationship.⁷⁾ Such behavior may increase the stability of Korean-American interracial marriages. Traditionally, Korean marriages were seen as an extension of the parents' family and the joining of two families. Accompanying this type of marriage were the beliefs that husbands and wives should remain devoted to each other and should maintain harmony no matter the circumstances. One researcher notes that, traditionally, Chinese people view divorce so shameful to a family's honor that they prefer to endure an unhappy marriage than the shame of divorce.⁸⁾ This tendency applies to a Korean partner in

7) Wei-Jen Huang, "An Asian Perspective on Relationship and Marriage Education," *Family Process* 44, no.2(2005): 161-173.

8) Lucy Jen Huang, "The Chinese American Family, in *Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations*," in *Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations*, eds., Charles H. Mindel & Robert W. Habenstein (New York: Elsevier, 1981), 115-141.

Korean-American interracial marriage.

Another difference is that traditional Korean culture avoids open conflict. A Korean American wife may have communication styles in marriage that differs from the American cultural norm. For many Americans, the ability to talk openly over issues and disagreements is considered one of the most important aspects of marital satisfaction. Open conflict is relatively common and normal and is often part of family communication and dynamics.⁹⁾ In contrast, many Korean Americans do not place high emphasis on verbal communication in their marriage. In Korean families, family conflict is frequently managed by isolation, indirect communication, and polite inattention.¹⁰⁾ The strong hierarchy within the family defines who may voice an opinion and who must suppress it. This tendency often leads the submissive partner to be obligated to unilateral self-sacrifice to maintain harmony or avoid conflict. One study found that many Chinese couples deal with conflicts simply by not bringing the issue up again.¹¹⁾ This is also seen in Korean Americans as well. Korean norms discourage the expression of feelings, especially strong negative emotional such as anger and frustration. Koreans were more likely to express love and support non-verbally through doing task for each other and sacrificing their own needs.¹²⁾ For

9) Evelyn Lee, "Overview: The Assessment and Treatment of Asian American Families," in *Working with Asian Americans: A Guide for Clinician*, ed., Evelyn Lee (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 11.

10) Lee, "Overview: The Assessment and Treatment of Asian American Families," 10.

11) Maria Cheung, "A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Gender Factors Contributing to Long-Term Marital Satisfaction: A Narrative Analysis," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 4 (2005): 51-78.

12) Steven T. Mortenson, "Sex, Communication Values, and Cultural Values: Individualism-Collectivism as a Mediator of Sex Differences in Communication Values in Two Cultures," *Communication Report* 12, no.1(2002): 59-60.

instance, in Vincent's case, when he brings up some issues to his wife, Pokja tends to withdraw from the conflict and becomes quiet. He complains that she does not try to voice an opinion, but rather suppresses it. He wants to have frank and open conversations with his wife. Vincent does not understand that it is common and normal that a Korean woman does not speak for herself and raise her voice in the family. Due to these different values, many Korean-American interracial couples have a difficult time adjusting to differences in culture, tradition, family background, and language. Many of these couples enter marriage without sufficient preparation to handle the problems that they will soon face. Consequently, a high percentage of interracial marriages end in divorce.

However, it should be noted that although Korean Americans tend to value obedience, sacrifice, and family, today they may be willing to pursue personal desires and ambitions as well, due to their assimilation into the American culture. This shift in values by comparison makes Korean American partners in interracial marriages less fixated to their spouses and families. They are also less wary of the Korean ethos of potential shame that is associated with the lack of self-sacrifice in a family environment. If an American husband expects that a Korean American wife be obedient and sacrificial to family members, this expectation could become a source of conflict within their marriage.

3. Bowen's Family Systems Theory with Interracial Marriages

Most Western family therapy approaches have been limited in their application to interracial couples focusing primarily on American issues. However, Bowen family systems therapy offers the most

coherent clinical and philosophical base for moving between cultures in both theory and practice. The strength of Bowen's model for cross-cultural work rises from its firm biological base, clear interpersonal stance, and socio-cultural orientation. Bowen's model recognizes that the family system is a subsystem of the community and the community is a subsystem of the society; the society is of the national culture, and the culture of humanity. All these interrelate; each sets the emotional, rational, relations and moral tone for all others because all are interdependent, and any change in one affects the whole.¹³⁾ In this context, with the Bowen's family systems theory, we can help the couples to see their problems within both the extended and immediate families and to differentiate themselves from the unhealthy bonds.

Bowen's family systems therapy will help the interracial couples, especially for a Korean American partner, to understand their conflicts better within their original cultural contexts and family backgrounds. Bowen theory will help to understand self-sacrifice in the context of Korean American marriage because in many cases for the female, Korean American partners interact with fear of being abandoned. They try to maintain close contact with their partners but with a coping mechanism of either *merging* with or *distancing* from the spouse. They believe that husbands and wives should maintain harmony at all costs. I believe that Bowen's theory helps to identify the situation on an objective scale between union and separation, reducing the chance of conflict-avoidance which can turn unhealthy in the long run.

13) David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Culture* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 179-180.

Bowen presented the concepts of self-differentiation, triangulation, fusion, and emotional cutoff. Self-differentiation is an individual's ability to distinguish his or her own thoughts and feelings from the system and remain an individual. The key to self-differentiation is to remain connected but separate. Families have a way of pulling individuals back to homeostasis and ensuring their loyalty to the system. The term triangulation refers to the tendency of a dyad to pull in a third member when the stress and anxiety is too great. The third person becomes the stabilizer as the anxiety is shifted around. Fusion occurs when a family's boundaries are very weak. The relationships become enmeshed and dependent upon one another for their sense of identity. Emotional cutoff can occur when the stress and anxiety is too great. The individual may emotionally disconnect from the family in order to gain some distance and a sense of individuality.

Bowen also looked at the influence and impact of multiple generations on the family. He believed that individuals find spouses of the same level of differentiation as they are. Their level of differentiation is then transmitted to the next generation. The genogram is a great diagramming tool used to map the intergenerational transference that occurs within families.

Murray Bowen proposes that "the most central theoretical premise of family systems theory concerns the degree to which we all have poorly 'differentiated selves', or the degree to which we are 'undifferentiated,' or the degree of our unresolved emotional attachments to families of origin."¹⁴⁾ When a self is less differentiated,

14) Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978), 529.

behavior is largely emotionally responsive or reactive and controlled by emotions and the anxiety of the moment.¹⁵⁾ When a self is more differentiated, behavior is goal directed, with a clear awareness of distinctions between thinking and feeling activities.¹⁶⁾ Thus, the most important goal of family systems therapy is to help family members toward a better level of “differentiation of self” within the interpersonal relationships. Edwin H. Friedman states that Bowen defines differentiation as “the capacity of a family member to define his or her own life’s goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures, to say ‘I’ when others are demanding ‘you’ and ‘we.’”¹⁷⁾ However, the concept should not be confused with autonomy, independence, or narcissism. Instead, this concept needs to recognize the capacity for the individual to remain as an individual while remaining connected to the family. A critical point in Bowen theory is that differentiation is not achieved through cut-offs but by balance between separation and connections. Cut-offs rather, implies reactivity and fusion which is the opposition of differentiation.

In Pokja’s case, by Bowen’s differentiation of self-scale, she is still living in the degree of the “stuck-together” domain and has a hard time separating herself from the painful experience of the past. She is intensely related to her family and its cultural issues. Therefore, she tried to leave her family by making an emotional “cutoff” from her family. However, she may still stick to “deep-rooted” anger, grief, and unresolved personal conflicts that may lead to marital troubles.

15) C. Margaret Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Use* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1981), 17.

16) Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Use*, 23.

17) Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 27.

These unresolved issues have caused Pokja to avoid openly sharing her problems with her husband. The way Pokja seeks to distance herself from her family of origin is by having no communication with her family. Pokja felt that she was rejected by her family of origin, especially by her father. At times, she also felt isolated from her husband and American society because of cultural differences.

Bowen has dealt with this concept within the marital relationship, but also within the larger context of the extended family. According to Bowen, anxiety increases in one or both partners when they allow emotional forces to dominate intellectual functioning.¹⁸⁾ If each spouse depends on the relationship patterns developed in their families of origin and they continue to stick to the patterns in their marriage, this leads them to marital conflict. One spouse who was relatively undifferentiated in his or her original family will continue to be undifferentiated when they form a new family. In other words, if the partners are still intensely and emotionally influenced by their families of origin, they may bring unresolved conflicts from their family into interactions with each other. The lack of differentiation in the family of origin may lead to an emotional cutoff from parents, which in turn leads one to distance him/herself from the partner. In fact, many interracial couples deal with their unresolved emotional problems from original families by merging into or totally separating from their family. It is obvious that if the pattern remains, problems between the interracial couples are likely to persist.

For example, Pokja with her background in patriarchal Korean family handled her anxiety by distancing herself through withdrawal or unilateral sacrificing because she was afraid of confronting her

18) Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 305.

husband. Displacing the focus, making it less personal and less threatening, was an excellent way for her to decrease her anxiety. Sacrificing her own needs was the pattern that she has learned from her family of origin, to avoid conflict and maintain harmony. In order not to repeat this in her new family relationship, it is important for Pokja to understand this inescapable link to her family of origin. Also, unless Vincent makes proactive attempts to understand her family of origin, he will continue to face this unresolved issue with his wife as well.

Another important concept offered by Bowen theory that gives insight to interracial marriages is the transmission of the problem to offspring. Bowen called this the “family projection process.”¹⁹⁾ This is the process by which parents transmit their immaturity and lack of differentiation to their children. It is important to note that projection is different from caring concern, but it is an anxious and enmeshed concern. The child who is the object of the projection process becomes the one most attached to the parents (positively or negatively) and the one with the least differentiated self. In this sense, a family project can be considered a scapegoating process in which one person is singled out as a family “problem.”²⁰⁾ The family projection process is so common that Bowen says “it exists to some degree in all families.”²¹⁾

Family “triangles” are also important factors that we should take into consideration for understanding the interracial couples’ conflicts originating from their different family origins. Celia Jaes Falicov points out that most symptoms of family distress have been regularly

19) Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 308.

20) Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Use*, 24.

21) Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 308.

linked to the presence of family triangles.²²⁾ The concept of “triangles” describes the ways that any persistent tension, conflict, or anxiety between two people can be diffused by involving a third party. Bowen has defined the smallest relationship unit in the family as a triangle, or a three-person system.²³⁾ This triangle relationship unit can be found in any family in any culture and society. Especially, in a marital situation, the conflict is often manifested as disagreements over a third party, such as a child or an older parent.²⁴⁾ Falicov calls this alliance between two members of different generations (usually a parent and child against the other parent) the “cross-generational coalition.”²⁵⁾ Many therapists not only believe that unresolved marital conflicts cause the intrusion or the recruitment of a third party, but also believe that a triangle has the effect of weakening necessary boundaries around the couple, and thus further precludes the resolution of the underlying marital discord.

4. Cultural, Pastoral, and Clinical Applications: Features of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory

The relevance of Bowen’s family systems theory with interracial couples is that the theory helps us to see the effect and impact of unresolved emotional conflicts from the family of origin. In other words, the family system theory’s theoretical concepts describe the

22) Celia Jaes Falicov, “The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles,” in *Re-Visioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture, and Gender in Clinical Practice*, ed., Monica McGoldrick (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998), 37.

23) Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Use*, 23.

24) Falicov, “*The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles*,” 37.

25) Falicov, “*The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles*,” 37.

range of ways family members are emotionally “stuck to” each other, and the ways this “stuck togetherness” continues to operate in the family background, no matter how much people deny it or how much they pretend to be separated from the family origin.²⁶⁾

In this sense, Bowen’s concept of differentiation will help to strengthen Korean-American marriages. The partners who are clearly differentiated selves are freer to relate to one another in mature patterns and are not bound by dependency needs and insecurities which both limit relationships and the persons within those relationships.²⁷⁾ Therefore, differentiation of self contributes to the healthy functioning of individuals and thus enhances the functioning of the marriage. To interpret this differentiation with an ecological perspective, one needs to differentiate “within” as an individual, and differentiate “between” his family, environment, and society. As a differentiated individual, he does not seek to control others, merge his identity into others, is not afraid of being rejected, rather, freely and mutually interact with one another, and is able to separate himself from his culture and environment despite the togetherness pressure exerted, and connect with others freely.

Through Bowen Theory, one can see clearly how the act of self-sacrifice occurs in Korean American family relationship dynamics. People with good differentiation are capable of clear thought and rich feeling, without tendencies to overpower or control the other. They interact freely without fear of being either absorbed or abandoned. They maintain close contact with all the significant people in their family relationships but without being flooded by other’s anxiety or

26) Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 529.

27) David D. Waanders, “Ethical Reflections on the Differentiation of Self in Marriage,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 41, no. 2(1987): 100.

fleeing into distance to manage stressful times. David Augsburger emphasizes that “the crucial insight for understanding differentiation is that it is always balanced between union and separation. Differentiation is not radical independence but centered responsive interdependence.”²⁸⁾ The Western nuclear family, when congruent with its social context, is centered toward independence. In contrast, the Asian family is centered towards unity and dependence on one another. Understanding this family dynamics will provide an invaluable tool in realizing the pattern of self-sacrifice in Korean American women.

The concept of self-differentiation can also be found within the biblical text. First of all, the nature of God reveals the example of differentiation. Jesus claimed to be one with the father and yet declared, “I proceeded forth and came from God; neither cam I of myself, but he sent me” (John 8:42, KJV), showing a divine unified distinction.²⁹⁾ Differential unity is demonstrated elsewhere in the New Testament. Probably no better example is seen than when the Apostle Paul used in the metaphor of human body functioning to describe complementary concepts of differentiation and integration.³⁰⁾ Within As in the body of Christ; each member is an individual yet connected to the other. Outside the body of Christ, there is no membership. Likewise, families must be individuals yet connected. Because of my personal and strong Christian background, this is a concept I can help my clients gain and understand. family

28) Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Culture*, 181.

29) Larry Kuhn, “*Differentiation and Integration: Applying An Interdisciplinary Systems Perspective to Spiritual Growth*”(Ph.D. diss., Azusa Pacific University, 2008), 109-110.

30) Kuhn, *Differentiation and Integration*, 114.

therapy offers the Christian counselor a framework to work with clients from a Biblical perspective. The flexible boundaries, structure, and the definable roles found within family therapy, is consistent with my Christian views.

In addition, through the lens of Bowen's theory, Korean-American couples can be helped to see complicated "triangles" in their relationships: With each other, children, and extended family members that can aggravate their marital conflicts. As Hall states, a Bowen's theory emphasizes the importance of an individual's ability to objectively observe the primary emotional system and the part the individual plays in it.³¹⁾ Once this ability is sufficiently developed, each member of the family can interact with one another without emotional intensity and fusion. However, triangular patterns cannot be isolated from their cultural context, nor can they be judged as universally troubled or dysfunctional.³²⁾ In Western cultures, triangles are viewed with mistrust or a sign of disruptive relationships. However, within Korean culture, conflicts are immediately referred to a third party—family members, especially parents, friends, or a trusted person from the religious community. However, it would be an unhealthy process to draw in persons who are emotionally involved and to reduce unresolved tension and stress in their relationship. Therefore, in order to help Korean-American marriage to interact with one another without leaving other people disabled, overloaded, and over-engaged in their relationships, the crucial issue is not the presence or absence of triangles but whether they are healthy or unhealthy; the goal of third party involvement is whether it

31) Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Use*, 67–69.

32) Augsburg, *Pastoral Counseling Across Culture*, 183.

is conducive to resolve the conflict or not.³³⁾

Based on Pokja's case, Pokja desperately devoted her emotional energy to the children, especially with her first son, Tom. It is possible that Pokja wanted to regain her cultural identity through Tom. By understanding the fact that her family is away from her both emotionally and physically and that Vincent is usually out of town because of his job as a truck driver, we can see that Tom was the only available one with whom she could identify herself as a Korean. However, her intense focus on her children has caused Vincent to further distance himself from her. Because his wife was not available to him all the time, Vincent often went with his friends when he was off-duty. On the other hand, when Vincent left home, Pokja focused more on her children. Consequently, she made a fixed and rigid triangle relationship between herself, Vincent and her children. This emotional fusion between Pokja and Tom may take the form of warm, dependent and close bond, but the emotional fusion often created another conflict. As Friedman notes, one side of emotional triangle tends to be more dysfunctional than healthy.³⁴⁾ In relationship systems that are not as healthy, the conflict tends to be located on one particular side of a triangle. Pokja said, "I often felt envy, anger, and jealousy when Tom did not listen to me, and took his father's side." Pokja, through her son (identified patient), made her triangle relationship and attempted to restore the balance in the family.

According to Bowen's theory, the emotional fusion may distract her from her own anxieties but does not resolve her own problem.

33) Augsburg, *Pastoral Counseling Across Culture*, 183.

34) Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 38.

She may transmit her anxieties and her marital problems to Tom because she cannot deal with her problems. It is possible that she does not want to face the painful and traumatic experiences of her past. To deal with her own issues, she expresses her anger toward Tom and tells him almost everything about his father. This emotional fusion with her family of origin and Tom may interrupt the process of differentiation of self for both Pokja and Tom.

If we take Bowen's family systems therapy to help Pokja's family, the main task is to reduce the emotional fusion between a mother, her children, and her family. In other words, the therapist may encourage Pokja to differentiate herself into a clearer relationship with her family of origin and her children. This would require exploration of ways of bridging the cutoff and restoring a new level of connection with her family. It is obvious that the concept of Bowen's differentiation of self can help Pokja recognize her emotional cutoff from her family of origin and emotional fusion with her children in order to differentiate herself from the frozen situation of being "emotional stuck," thus allowing her to step back to see her marital problems with a different angle. It is no doubt that pastoral counseling or therapy should help Pokja to deal with her problems by reversing the triangles and beginning to deal directly with Vincent rather than projecting these on Tom. Pokja and Vincent should see the ways in which their triangulation relationships lead them to conflicts. They must reframe their family communication structures and break the "triangles" between Pokja, Vincent, and the children. The differentiation will strengthen their marital relationship and maintain a more stable and healthy family. If they are differentiated from fixed and frozen triangles, they will be able to relate to one another more freely and maturely.

As a practical matter, the triangle relationship can be understood positively and theologically.³⁵⁾ James David suggests an unwitting congruence between Bowen's triangle theory and marital stability for Christian couples.³⁶⁾ David insists that "The more central an authentic relationship with Christ is to the marital dyad, the greater the likelihood of enduring, dyadic commitment."³⁷⁾ It is necessary to say that the third person in the central triangle could be anyone or anything. For example, Pokja chose the third person is her first son, Tom and her friends. However, for Vincent, it was his work or hanging out with his friends. Their marriage may be stabilized by these triangle relationships. However, these relationships are inadequate for the Christian couple who realizes that they are called

35) At this point, the question should be raised whether any and all triad relationships have a harmful effect on human relationships. In other words, is it possible that a third parties or issues in relationship can work positively within human relationships? Suppose a wife and a husband have a common interest or hobby. They can enjoy this together and build up their marital relationship with common interests in a constructive way, thus helping them manage potential tension in their marriage. In other words, by bringing a common third party into the relationship, they can share their resources, find love and friendship in their relationships, and mitigate their possible strain or pressure in their marriage, rather than distorting and subverting real issues and placing all blame on others. Bowen's concern is with imbalance in triads, when one side of the triangle is close and the other is pushed far away. He is concerned about fixed and frozen triangles that do not allow clear healthy dyadic or person to person dialogue and conversation. In Pokja's case, it would be helpful for her to make some meaningful relationships with her women friends. Within the relationship, she can release her stresses caused by emotional separation from her family of origin and her husband. She can get gratification and emotional support rather than distorting and subverting the issues in her marriage. I hope some further study about his positive effect of triangle relationship within Korean-American marriage will be done in the future.

36) James R. David, "The Theology of Murray Bowen or the Marital Triangle," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 7(1979): 259.

37) David, "The Theology of Murray Bowen or the Marital Triangle," 259.

to be a sign and symbol of Christ's intimate love relationship to Church (Eph. 5:25-26). They can invite Christ to be the third person of the inevitable triangle. This concept is very helpful for Pokja to make her marriage more stable and stronger. In the light of Pokja's family background and cultural value in which direct confrontation and voicing her opinion in public are discouraged, Pokja has a difficult time carrying all burdens from disapproval of family, a disconnected husband, and her own work stress. She needs to release her feelings and emotions which have been suppressed or oppressed. She may create some meaningful relationship with the third person. She can develop her relationship with God to help to love her husband and God. This relationship with God can help her see who she is and hold a balanced stance between fusion and individuality. This triangular way of viewing the traditional marital proposition of two people being united in Christ will stabilize many interracial marriages.

Despite these apparent benefits, if it means adopting a "take it all to Jesus," pietistic stance as a means to avoid relational tension and anxiety, then it is not helpful for neither Pokja nor Vincent in dealing with their marital issues and their spiritual development. It becomes a utilitarian quest, to make Jesus a destination of religious escapism. I suspect that there may already be much of this, endemic in the Korean church and community.

In this sense, we as pastoral counselors should not ignore the presence of different cultural values. The concept of the differentiation of self has different meanings and methods in American than in Asian culture. In Western culture, people believe that optimal development requires a stance of differentiation from one's family of origin.³⁸⁾

38) Falicov, "The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles," 39.

Within a Western perspective, we may easily pathologize the lifelong connectedness and interdependence, which is characteristic of many Asian cultures, including Korean, whose life conditions often make of the parent-child dyad a more enduring or stable relationship than the marital bond. For example, in Korean-American marriage, Korean wives are blamed for fusing their identities to their children's. However, Korean spouses should not be blamed for social arrangement that is culturally sanctioned. Korean women grew up in hierarchical and patriarchy system in which a man and woman has different roles that are rigid and unequal. It is possible that Korean women may be encouraged to be in fusion with other family members. In their marriage, there is still inequality in power based on gender or culture. Korean women are searching for their identity through their fusion with their other members of the family. Consequently, their search and values from this fusion must be acknowledged by the family. For this reason, this is always a mistake to evaluate people from one's own cultural perspective. Instead, the culturally capable counselor must be equipped with a multi-cultural perspective to help interracial couples. In Pokja's case, she may discover her true self in her connectedness and emotional involvement to her children rather than attachment to her husband. It may be natural or possible that Pokja wants to devote her time and energy to her children and sacrifice herself for her family because she was raised in a collective culture where the parent-child relationship was more emphasized than Western culture.

In this respect, Bowen's family systems theory may have some weaknesses in applying the concept of the differentiation of self and triangles to Korean and other Asian cultures. However, for Bowen, differentiation is not from but with, and his concern is to maintain a

balance of separateness and connectedness. He would point out that differentiation of self for Pokja is made difficult by her cutoff and would seek to find alternatives to staying distant from her family; he would see differentiation as choosing how close to be to her son and not using him as a substitute relationship for what she is missing in her marriage; he would look for parallels in Korean marriages that allow an effective marital intimacy as well as a vital mothering commitment. He would not support confusion of relationships where Tom becomes the stand-in for Vince, and the isolation from her family is accepted as necessary to obey cultural hierarchy. Bowen theory recognizes that an affective closeness between the mother and children may be culturally expected to be a more intense alliance in one culture versus another. With Bowen's theory, pastors or counselors should discourage Pokja from completely devoting herself to her children and family and encourage her to focus on her job. If they are encouraged to separate from family with ignorance or without balancing differentiation and connectedness, the Bowen's strategy may make Pokja more puzzled and depressed because this can be perceived as selfish or disrespectful to Pokja who may not have a cultural code about the autonomy and separation of the children.

In addition, in the hierarchical and patriarchal Korean society, it is acceptable for the father to distance himself from his wife and from his children for a social life related to his job and for the mother to have an affective closeness with her children. With the different cultural perspective, in which the mother-child bond is emphasized and father can be a "less involving" outsider, a "light" triangle relationship is not always harmful to a Korean woman because she does not have to confront her husband, an authoritative figure, and

she can ease her anxiety and fear through others with whom she can build a more comfortable relationship. They can receive some emotional support and gratification of releasing their stress. These triadic relationships may make Korean partners feel more security and enhance the stability of the marriage. At this point, Falicov gives us an insightful example of a first generation Filipino American family making use of triangles to grow together. I think that this example can well apply to Korean culture. He says:

The process of triangulation, so often seen as dysfunctional by Western-culture clinicians, can be successfully employed by first-generation Filipino-American families, and their second-generation

offspring, especially in dealing with their parents. That is, concerns or complaints about a person can be relayed to that person without straining relationships or exacerbating conflict.³⁹⁾

Like Filipino Americans, Korean women also wish that the third person act as a go between and delivers their message to their husbands in an attempt to induce a change in their spouse. Therefore, when pastors or counselors can detect triangle relationships in interracial families, they should not automatically consider these relationships as destructive or harmful to this family, but ask what is the function of the third party process. They should take into consideration the cultural backgrounds and communication styles.

In Vincent and Pokja's case, their problem lies in a dysfunctional communication between his wife's family and his family, his wife

39) Falicov, "The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles," 41.

and himself, his wife and his children, and so on. It is especially sad to see that there is no communication between his father in law and himself at all. If they experience any conflicts, their communication style is to become quiet and angry to each other indirectly, rather than to have an open-talk and solve problems directly. This dysfunctional communication style should be understood in different cultural situation. For example, Vincent immediately voices disagreements or complaints and does not continue to carry this burden inside. In contrast, Pokja has few way of venting or letting out her frustrations when confronted by husband and in-laws because of the prohibitions of rigid hierarchy in Korean society. Even when she knows that she is right, yielding is necessary due to the influence from the patriarchal hierarchy. She does not want to deal with the criticism or disrespect from her husband and his family and may be forced to hide real thoughts and emotions.

Also, Koreans wish to preserve family connectedness and avoid interpersonal conflict. They like to take an indirect, implicit, and covert communication style. They agree with others in order to make them comfortable. Falicov argues that “this superficial harmony may be accompanied by talking behind a person’s back to a third party for two reasons: first, simply to decompress and reduce tension about some difficult aspect of the relationship; or, second, actually to engage the listener as a helper in changing the other person, with whom the speaker does not wish or dare to negotiate directly.”⁴⁰⁾ If pastoral counselors understand the Korean communication style in the patriarchal and hierarchial society, they will be in better position to help Pokja to solve her conflict with Vincent.

40) Falicov, “*The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles*,” 40.

As for Vincent, he also may feel that Pokja is not listening, understanding, or not caring about his problems and his issues. He may believe that they are on different level, “talking to the wind,” and “passing right by each other.” There is no doubt that the cultures in which they were raised in can be detrimental to their marriage. However, the truth is that different communication styles apply to different people, and true communication between Vincent and Pokja requires that they learn to understand, accept, and accommodate each other’s style. However, it is important that they also learn to accept the fact that they probably will never completely understand each other’s true state of mind. They must also accept that their problems will not automatically go away despite the realization of each other’s different communication styles.⁴¹⁾ Realization will help to alleviate some of the perplexity, scapegoating, and judging negatively from a culturally different perspective.

Furthermore, many therapists believe that the actual process of change is begun by learning about one’s larger family history—which made up the family, where they lived, what they did, and what they were like.⁴²⁾ Augsburg states that “no symptom is ever just one generation deep. A minimum of three generations is involved in any personal problem—self, the parents one is reacting or responding to, and the grandparents who are the repetition or reverse of the parents’ emotional style.”⁴³⁾ To see the larger family history and dynamics, Bowen uses a genogram as a multigenerational family map. Genograms are schematic diagrams of families, listing family

41) Dugan Romano, *Intercultural Marriage: Promises & Pitfall* (Yarmouth, ME.: Intercultural Press, 2001), 139–140.

42) Romano, *Intercultural Marriage: Promises & Pitfall*, 139–140.

43) Augsburg, *Pastoral Counseling Across Culture*, 185.

150 / 복음과 상담 • 제21권

members and their relationships to one another. In a Korean-American interracial marriage, the genogram will serve to describe the dynamics of relationship within each partners' family. The recognition of both strengths and weaknesses (whether biological, psychological or in interpersonal relationships) from generation to generation is instrumental to help Korean-American couples to understand the differences in behavioral responses of members of different culture or family backgrounds.

In Pokja's case, it will be helpful to see how much she is differentiated emotionally her family when we look at her family genogram. Pastors or pastoral counselors are able to get much of Pokja's information about both past and present relationships with other family members. In Pokja's genogram, she had "conflicted" relationships with her father and brother. Instead, she had a very close relationship with her mother and sisters. She was completely "cutoff" from her father. Whenever she felt the need for family support, she was forced to turn solely to her mother and sisters. This triangular pattern was continued until she married Vincent. Interestingly, she has a similar relationship pattern with Vincent's family. She also has a conflicted relationship with her father-in-law, but a good relationship with her mother-in-law. She may see her father's image in her husband's father. As she used to do, she went to Vincent's mother or her children to gain their emotional support.

If pastoral counselors detect severe intergenerational conflicts in Pokja's family, they may want to interview all involved family members. However, all of Pokja's family members do not reside in the United States. It is very difficult to bring them together into a therapy session. Although chances are, even if they reside near her they would still be reluctant to cooperate. Due to this dual-fold

limitation imposed by circumstances in space and culture, it will be helpful for pastoral counselors to use the genogram of both Pokja and Vincent to get all information of how close they are related, what they do, how old they are, and so on. This genogram can be used as an alternative to find out intergenerational conflicts that have long been hidden. In addition, this genogram will help Korean-American couple to understand that family is system and that individuals have a direct impact on the family's behavioral patterns, functions, and relationships; the potential for change in the individual members and the entire family; and to find and understand unresolved issues within the family.

Also, the method of family systems theory is directed at the entire family unit, but Bowen's theory is also focused on the nuclear family unit. Bowen believes that meaningful changes are followed by observable changes in the levels of functioning of significant members in the family. Change is initiated by individuals or couples who are capable of affecting the rest of the family. Differentiation of self, which begins as a personal and individual process, is the vehicle for transforming relationships and the entire family system. This seems appropriate in helping interracial couples see their conflicts within not only a family's cultural context, but also the nuclear family they had formed in the United States. However, there still is a level of inequality in power based on gender and culture within Korean-American marriages. So although one person is changed, if he or she is in the weaker position, it will be very difficult to influence changes of the whole family. For Korean women, even within a Korean-American marriage, taking the initiative is difficult as they are still living in a sexist society. Therefore, when we examine interracial families, we must look deeply into individual's

152 / 복음과 상담 • 제21권

ecological background: individual, family, culture, and environment.

III. Conclusion

Today, interracial marriage has become a big issue in pastoral ministry. Many interracial couples still do not know how to balance their differences when conflicts and struggles occur in their marriages. For pastors and pastoral counselors, it is the urgent task to help interracial couples, especially Korean-American, to understand the partners' different cultural and family backgrounds and prepare for anticipated problems in their marital relationship. Before Korean-American couples decide to marry, they should take time to consider seriously the future of their relationship. This preparation enables them to think of their anticipated struggles and plan how to resolve difficulties and problems that come up in their marriage. The couples should fully understand and respect each partners' cultural background and family tradition. If interracial couples are ready to accept, respect, and understand the partners' cultural backgrounds, interracial marriage provides golden opportunities to understand both their own values and beliefs and learn from other's values and cultures.

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【 국문초록 】

한국인과 미국인 사이의 국제결혼을 위한
 목회신학, 목회돌봄, 그리고 목회상담:
 보웬의 가족시스템 이론의 문화적, 목회적, 그리고 임상적 적용

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현실적으로 한국인들은 미국에서 가장 빠르게 성장하는 민족 중에 하나이다. 그 결과로 한국인들과 미국인들 사이의 국제결혼이 늘어나고 있는 추세이고 이것이 한인 사회에 큰 이슈로 등장하게 되었다. 국제결혼을 한 부부들은 문화적 배경의 차이와 가족배경에서 오는 차이에 적응하는데 많은 어려움을 겪으면서 매서운 현실에 마주하게 되었다. 이 논문은 결혼 한 지 25년 된 한국인 아내와 미국인 남편의 케이스를 중심으로 국제결혼에 대한 임상적인 연구를 하였다. 이 임상연구는 문화적 차이, 언어의 장벽, 다른 가족배경으로 인해 어려움을 겪고 있는 국제결혼 부부에 대한 좋은 예를 제공하게 될 것이다. 이 연구논문은 보웬의 시스템 이론을 사용해서 한국-미국인 국제결혼을 문화적인, 목회적인, 그리고 임상적인 관점으로 분석해 보았다. 특별히 이 논문은 보웬의 시스템 이론을 한국-미국인 국제결혼의 문맥 안에서 적용할 때, 그 장점과 단점에 대한 비평을 하였다. 마지막으로 목회자들이나 목회상담학자들이 국제결혼을 준비하거나, 이미 결혼을 한 부부들이 서로의 배우자들의 문화적 배경을 받아들이고, 존중하고, 이해하도록 도와줄 수 있다면, 국제결혼은 자신의 문화를 더 잘 이해하고, 서로를 통해서 더 넓은 문화를 배울 수 있는 아주 좋은 기회를 제공하게 될 것이다.

중심단어 : 국제결혼, 문화적 차이, 보웬 시스템 이론, 삼각관계, 자기 분화