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When God Doesn't Make Sense, James C.Dobson

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Book Reviews

Markus McDowell, Editor

Michael C. Armour and Don Browning. *SYSTEMS-SENSITIVE LEADERSHIP: EMPOWERING DIVERSITY WITHOUT POLARIZING THE CHURCH* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1995) 298 pp. Reviewed by Clarence Hibbs.

The authors—experienced ministers who have worked in a wide variety of settings including local church ministries, missions, and academia—set out in this volume to provide a practical theory that would enable church leaders to better conceptualize their various tasks by understanding that “differences in our *intrapersonal* systems conspire to create problems in the *interpersonal* systems of the church” (preface).

“To put it another way, we cannot properly understand why two people interact as they do unless we know their individual thinking and emotional systems” (p. 8). Therefore, building on the previous work of Clare Graves as interpreted by Don Beck, authors Mike Armour and Don Browning construct a conceptual framework for church leaders to use in organizing pastoral and ministerial functions. The first half of the book describes the authors’ adaptation of Graves’ eight-stage theory. The second half concerns practical application of the theory to congregational life.

The theory portion of the book explains what the authors call “eight separate thinking systems,” described at the outset as specifically *intrapersonal* (internal to the individual), rather than *interpersonal* (between individuals). These systems (levels) oscillate between an emphasis on the individual and the group. Thus, System One emphasizes individual thinking, System Two emphasizes group thinking, and so on. Each system has a dominant theme.

For instance, in System One physical survival is dominant, whereas in System Five personal success and achievement are the dominant concerns.

Although initially described as intrapsychic, the systems are subsequently further defined on three levels: first, as the predominant way an individual views life and reacts to it during any given period of time; second, as a developmental theory, in which a person develops increasingly more complex ways of thinking as he/she progresses through life until he arrives at a level that becomes his “dominant modality,” or primary way of coping (similar to Maslow and Kohlberg); third, as a social evolutionary theory, describing the development of civilization in which the increasing complexity of life produces more and more complex ways of thinking. The discussion follows first one of these paths, then another.

I have two difficulties with the theory as presented in *System Sensitive Leadership*. First, the theory’s view of human nature is fairly negative. Each level or system is described as requiring the person (or group) to cope with and adapt to threats from external forces that are perceived primarily as destructive or evil. The second difficulty concerns the evolutionary description, which is perceived exclusively through Western eyes. The last two systems described, and particularly the last, are reminiscent of Eastern thought that has been influential for thousands of years. If the assumption is that each level (or system) is a way of adapting to the increasing complexity of life and does not appear until the requisite level of complexity is reached, then classic Eastern thought, which emphasizes more universal and holistic modes of consciousness, is ignored.

Any comprehensive theory has the effect of constructing reality around the terms of the theory. The usefulness

of the theory, then, is directly proportional to its ability to explain any condition that may arise. In my opinion, the theory presented by the authors is flawed by a Western bias and, further, does not account for contextual variables that can alter the behavior of groups sharing a long history, as in congregations. These reservations aside, the theory's characteristic "thinking systems" are useful for describing differences in the patterns of group attitudes and behaviors.

The second half of the book contains a wealth of practical suggestions and insights. For example, the discussion of managing congregational conflict and planning church programs includes many provocative proposals. It is here that the experience and insight of the authors are clearly evident. Some examples will illustrate. In chapter 13, there is a discussion of preempting conflict by knowing the dominant thought patterns present in a congregation. In chapter 15, there is a very insightful discussion of "flash points," or conditions that signal conflict in a congregation. In addition, discussions focusing on Bible classes, sermon preparation, and worship are extremely helpful.

The strength of this book is in providing a way for church leaders to think about the psychological makeup of the congregation. The authors suggest that using this method of thinking about the congregation will enable the leaders to make pro-active decisions and to utilize planned interventions in carrying out the work of the congregation, often before difficulties arise.

The downside is that it may be difficult to organize one's thinking around the theory in the specific situation of a congregation. For instance, how is the dominant modality of a congregation to be determined? A questionnaire or other testing instrument could be helpful to this end; however, it might be that any tool would prove inadequate to predict or explain attitudes and behaviors of the individual or the group, given contextual variants.

The authors are to be commended for their effort to provide much-needed help for congregational leaders. Although the theory upon which the book is based may have limited usefulness for the general reader, he or she will be stimulated by the authors' insights and counsel.

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James C. Dobson. *WHEN GOD DOESN'T MAKE SENSE*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale Publishers, Inc., 1993) 250 pp. Reviewed by Stephen and Joyce Kramar.

Christians who lose their faith in God in times of spiritual confusion are like branches cut off from the vine. Dr. Dobson states that this book was written for those who struggle with circumstances in life that just don't measure up to what they have been taught about Christian life. Written in an easy-to-read format, the book strives to help Christians hold on to their faith, even "when God doesn't make sense."

The book is divided into two sections by two chapters of questions and answers. In the first section, Dobson discusses normal reactions and responses to adversity. The second section deals with principles for Christian living. The final chapter presents Dobson's modern-day "heroes hall of fame" and summarizes the information and encouragement he has presented in this book.

In the first chapter, Dobson gives some examples of circumstances that "don't make sense." He then delves into reasons why we have trouble accepting or discerning the reasons for these circumstances. First, we do not have the understanding to comprehend God's mind. Also, the "name it-claim it" philosophy that has been popular over the past few years has helped generate the false expectation that everything will always be all right with Christians—bad things happen to other people. Dobson gives some biblical examples of the fallacy of this belief. He assures his readers that God may conceal things for His purpose and Satan may use that concealment to generate distrust in God, but we must remember that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

When God doesn't make sense to us, we are likely to feel betrayed by Him. This feeling of betrayal will build a barrier between us and God. Once this barrier is built, it can be extremely difficult to regain trust in God. In the second chapter, "The Betrayal Barrier," Dobson gives good counsel for overcoming this barrier—or preventing it in the first place. First, God does not single people out for sorrow; believers face the same hardships that nonbelievers experience. Second, we shouldn't lean on our own understanding or the advice of amateur theologians. Dobson gives scriptural examples noting that all the writers and giants of

faith suffered similar hardships. They didn't always know why they were suffering. Scripture tells us to expect hardships and suffering but encourages us to remain faithful, joyful, and thankful.

Dobson then makes the assertion "God makes sense even when He doesn't make sense." This apparently conflicting assertion is based on his understanding of God in four specific areas: (1) God is present and involved in our lives, even when He seems to be deaf or on an extended leave of absence, (2) God's timing is perfect, even when He appears to be catastrophically late, (3) For reasons that are impossible to explain, we human beings are incredibly precious to God, and (4) Our arms are too short to box with God. Dobson gives some examples and convincing arguments for these beliefs in the remainder of this chapter. He also gives good advice on how we can and should allow God to be sovereign.

In the fourth chapter, Dobson tells his readers they have only two basic choices: Continue to be angry with God, or let God be God and admit you don't understand and may never understand. The example of Abraham is given. Though confused about how God intended to fulfill His promise, Abraham nevertheless believed God's promise. It is up to us, says Dobson, to decide whether we will be faithful through the confusing times or give way to despair.

What is God's role in situations that are confusing and disappointing? Dobson addresses this question along with prayer, faith healing, and glib answers by unthinking (but well meaning) people in the next chapter. He concludes by assuring us that God is always there and won't let us down, but that he isn't going to let us off easy, either.

The second section of the book addresses the same issues as the first section, but at a deeper level. Dobson begins by allowing that God permits adversity in order to help us become strong. Christian life was never meant or promised to be easy. We are in a spiritual war every day and need to be in the best shape possible to cope with the darts and arrows sent our way by Satan. The close interrelationship between mind, body, and spirit causes the Lord to ask us to strengthen our resolve and meet our difficulties head-on. Flabby, overindulged, pampered Christians don't have the stamina to fight the battle. Dobson's contention is that Christians used to focus more on the fact that they were in a battle, while today's Christians focus more on using God to have a successful life. It is bad theology to imply that Christians will always have a good life: we must build our faith on something besides always having a trouble-free life. We should permit the Lord to use our weaknesses for

His purposes. Christians need to be tough, and their faith must be tough. In addition, Dobson also cautions that before we blame God for our problems, we need to take a look at ourselves. Sinful behavior sometimes is the cause of troubles. For example, sexual promiscuity leads to sexually transmitted diseases, smoking to lung cancer, and so on. Thus, some of our trials and tribulations may be of our own making, and we should examine ourselves before blaming God.

Dobson concludes the book with his own "hall of fame," a discussion of his heroes in the faith. He again addresses the issue of the barrier we can allow to come between us and God, and describes different situations where this is likely to occur. He encourages us to expect hardships, to know that God will use them for His purposes, and to remember that He promises they won't be more than we can bear.

This book is replete with touching stories, examples, and perceptive insights that can be helpful in dealing with difficult circumstances. Although it provides no answers to specific problems of suffering, it does offer good advice, comfort, and a realistic hope for dealing with the problems of tomorrow.

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Bruce Shelley and Marshall Shelley. *The Consumer Church: Can Evangelicals Win the World Without Losing Their Souls?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993). Reviewed by Robin D. Perrin.

The basic premise of this book should be reasonably clear from the title and from the illustration on the front cover: a saxophone and surfer inside the curl of a large wave. Californians may be immediately reminded of evangelical movements like the Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Calvary Chapel, which have created a "culture current" version of evangelicalism that has proved especially attractive to Baby Boomers. In *The Consumer Church*, the father and son pair of Bruce and Marshall Shelley examine the dilemmas facing market-oriented churches like these.

The first part of the book is a reminder of our call for outreach in the church. The Shelleys criticize churches that are too self-absorbed—churches that, in their words, “tend to operate with their own members in mind. . . . The approval or disapproval of the pastor’s ministry is based on the ‘care of the saints.’ As a result, many congregations and ministries tend to grow older and smaller, comforted by the fact that ‘things are the way they’ve always been.’ The deeper the traditions and the commitment to ‘our own people,’ the more likely the possibility that the ministry or congregation will dwindle to the aging few” (37–38).

The Shelleys maintain that in our increasingly secular and unchurched society, many churches have begun to recognize that they must make the Gospel appealing to people who have not grown up in the church. It must be understandable and it must be attractive. For many of the churches about which the Shelleys are writing, the outreach has been targeted at Baby Boomers. Now in their thirties and forties, the Baby Boomers have had much to do with the declines in the mainline churches and the growth in evangelical churches. Compared to their parents, they are busy and mobile. As a result, they are more likely to be church shoppers, focusing on individual needs rather than institutional commitments.

In many ways the Shelleys applaud those churches that have tried to appeal to unattached Boomers with a “culture current” style. But the “entrepreneurial spirit” of these churches poses two main problems. First, in an attempt to sell their product, some churches are making compromises they perhaps should not be making. Torn between the often competing objectives of faithfulness and effectiveness, some churches offer a shortcut version of faith and service that is

not responsible. Many are not communicating the cost of following Christ.

Second, the Shelleys also remind us that we cannot neglect the needs of our current members. To these people, denominational traditions are important. Traditions remind us of who we are. Indeed, we find community in our traditions. Once again, the Shelleys are searching for a balance between being market-driven and tradition-bound.

Like many of us, I suppose, the Shelleys have watched the selling of evangelicalism with mixed emotions. They are not quite sure what to think of evangelical television and radio programs, of contemporary Christian music, of evangelical books, T-shirts, and bumper stickers. They certainly recognize the advantages of translating the Gospel into a “culture current” dialect, but they wonder aloud about whether the success of evangelicalism is due more to marketing skills than anything else. The Shelleys do not offer a blueprint for how to do it right, but rather a challenge for how to attempt to do it right. “The primary need in the ministry of the church today is a recovery of the feeling of home. In tradition-minded churches this will mean a willingness to change in order to be effective in shaping the church in ways that will give secular-minded Americans a sense of ‘fit.’ . . . But in many progressive and growing churches this will mean looking ahead to the biblical ideal we have called ‘community’—the sense of security and family unity that comes when members know who they are and what their Father expects them to do” (p. 232).

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