

Tim Clinton and Gary Siby

Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do

(Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2002),
303 pages.

Reviewed by Winston T. Smith

At times, relationships seem a vexing mystery. They produce a troubling stew of conflicting, even contradictory feelings. At any given moment we find ourselves both yearning for, but terrified by intimacy, both wishing others would reach out to us, and yet pushing them away. Making matters worse, these conflicting motives sabotage the relationships that mean the most. We leave interactions with friends and family scratching our heads and asking, "Why in the world did I just do *that!*?"

The subtitle of *Attachments* promises a key for unlocking these relational mysteries. But it doesn't quite fill this tall order. It does, however, offer useful insights. First, it provides a good synopsis of "attachment theory," which when carefully considered (when reconsidered biblically) can help us appreciate the shaping influence of childhood relationships. Second, it offers useful descriptions of some of the most commonly held, unexamined, and destructive internal "rules" of relationship that regularly frustrate the people you counsel. Finally, perhaps most importantly, it reminds us of the need to make one's relationship with God one of utter dependence. It is not enough simply to know about God in an abstract or impersonal way. Instead, we must exercise spiritual disciplines in a way that enables us to develop a profound relationship with God. However, important theological pieces are missing and in order to benefit wisely from this book, we must be aware of these missing pieces.

Attachments begins by explaining attachment theory as its theoretical foundation. To their credit, Clinton and Siby don't try to conceal their commitment to this secular theory and, in fact, do a very good job in making attachment theory straightforward and clear. The second chapter introduces observations of John Bowlby, an English psychiatrist who studied the responses of young children as they were left by their parents at a sanitarium for tuberculosis. Bowlby observed that these

children went through fairly predictable stages after being separated from their parents for extended periods of time: protest, followed by despair, followed by detachment or some other form of "defense" against the experience of perceived abandonment. Children either developed an "ambivalent" response (an angry, clingy, and punishing form of behavior), or an avoidance response (emotionally isolating themselves from their parents altogether). The importance of this "attachment behavioral system"¹ as Bowlby describes it, is that it represents the construction of an "internal working model" or set of rules and beliefs that the child applies to all of his or her relationships throughout life.²

Mary Ainsworth built upon Bowlby's observations, but wanted to study attachment in the context of day-to-day interactions between mothers and their children. As she studied these interactions, she observed the "secure-base" phenomenon.³ Simply put, children with secure attachments to their mothers will seek them out for comfort when they are anxious or upset. Children with insecure attachments do not do this, but rather show the same defense responses that Bowlby observed. The importance of this for *Attachments* is that, taken together, Bowlby's and Ainsworth's observations mean that early childhood relationships, especially those with parents or other primary caregivers, form the inner rules of relationship that shape relationships throughout the rest of life. That our patterns have a "history" is not threat to a Christian view of human responsibility. Our hearts are active from birth.

Synthesizing the work of Bowlby, Ainsworth, and others, Clinton and Siby posit that this internal working model or "attachment style" consists of a set of core beliefs that can be understood as a set of concerns that one has about self and others. Two concerns make up the "self dimension": "Am I worthy of being loved?" and "Am I competent to get the love I need?" Two concerns make up the "other dimension": "Are others reliable and

¹ p.20.

² p.23.

³ p.25.

trustworthy?" and "Are others accessible and willing to respond to me when I need them to be?" The answers to each set of questions reflect either a positive or negative view of self and others. Given that each set of questions can have either a positive or a negative response, a four-quadrant grid represents the possible combination of views of self and other each quadrant representing an "attachment style."⁴ The first seven chapters of *Attachments* describe the four possible attachment styles, the early childhood experiences that foster them, how these play out in relationships, and how family behaviors promote healthy attachments.

First, the "avoidant" attachment style emerges out of a positive view of self and a negative view of others. The avoidant person believes that he or she is worthy of love and capable of getting the love and support needed, but believes that others are either unwilling or incapable of providing these things. Others, therefore, are not trustworthy.⁵ These core beliefs result in a fear of intimacy, a tendency to stay emotionally distant from others to avoid the disappointment and pain of relationships. Difficulty in disclosing private thoughts and feelings, fear of intimacy, and struggling with nonsexual touch are described as primary features of the avoidant person.⁶ Other possible trends or themes within each attachment style *Attachments* describes as "shades". These are tendencies that may or may not be present in a person falling within a particular attachment style, but these shades illustrate the variety of particular emphases a style can have. The possible shades of the avoidant style are described as the narcissist or inflated false self, the exiled or disconnected self, and the compulsive perfectionist self.⁷

Second, the "ambivalent" attachment style emerges out of a negative view of self and a positive view of others. The ambivalent person believes that he or she is not worthy of love and is incapable of getting the love and support needed. He or she believes others are capable of

meeting those needs but might not do so because of the ambivalent person's flaws.⁸ The ambivalent person is described as living out of a sense of dependency on others but being ruled by a fear of abandonment at the same time. Of the many qualities used to describe them a few are: very low self confidence, accepting unpleasant tasks to please others, feeling helpless when alone, and a fear of making decisions.⁹ The "shades" or potential trends in the ambivalent person's behavior are the anxious dependent, the melodramatic dependent, and the angry dependent.¹⁰

Third, the "disorganized" attachment style emerges out of a negative view of both self and others. The disorganized person believes that he or she is not worthy of love and is incapable of getting the love and support needed, while also believing others are unable to provide it.¹¹ *Attachments* considers the disorganized style to be a product of childhood abuse¹² and assumes that framework in describing the disorganized person. The disorganized person basically has a shattered sense of self. Abusive relationships that offer no stability or predictability don't allow a well-defined sense of self to form as the child is torn by daily conflicting messages about themselves and their caretakers.¹³ The disorganized person, therefore, has a chaotic inner world. They have difficulty maintaining commitments, are prone to volatile emotional responses, tend towards anxiety and depression, are riddled with self-blame, guilt, and a sense of helplessness. As a result the disorganized person finds it almost impossible to have stable relationships.¹⁴

As you would expect, the fourth attachment style described is the "secure" style.

⁸ p.76.

⁹ p.84.

¹⁰ pp.87-94.

¹¹ p.96.

¹² *Attachments'* definition of abuse is when a "child is treated merely as an object or a piece of property, devoid of thoughts, feelings, and intentions." Six forms of abuse are considered: psychological abuse, emotional neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse and incest, exposure to severe marital conflict, and addictive behavior. pp.103-106.

¹³ pp.99-100.

¹⁴ pp.117-121.

⁴ p.24.

⁵ pp.56-58.

⁶ pp.53-56.

⁷ pp.68-69.

Secure persons believe both that they are worthy of love *and* capable of getting the love and support they need. They also believe that others are willing and able to love them.¹⁵ Secure persons are described as confident in their sense of self, believe that they are able to influence others, have a basic trust of others, are willing to seek and accept comfort from others, are not afraid of their emotions, are responsible for themselves, and bring courage to their relationships. The secure person is not impervious to the pain and emotional ups and downs of relationships, but is more resilient and grows from their pain.¹⁶

The first seven chapters, while filled with interesting descriptions of how one's past might shape the present, leave readers panting for hope. Parents, blindsided by deeply rooted beliefs about self and others, miss the mark in so many ways. Is there any escape from distorted relationships? Chapter 8, entitled "God and You," promises to be a refreshing drink for discouraged readers. Clinton and Sibcy begin by asserting several crucial propositions. First, God Himself serves as an attachment figure. His interactions with His people fit the bill: His people seek him out in times of trouble. He serves as a sort of "safe haven" as Ainsworth would describe it. God serves as a secure base from which to explore the world. Separation from Him produces fear, anxiety, grief, and sorrow.¹⁷ Secondly, the authors explain how God providentially uses the trials in our lives to produce an awareness of our need for Him. Life in a fallen world requires us to look beyond the human attachments we have and find Him. However, Clinton and Sibcy add, as we seek out relationship with God we often find ourselves stymied because we bring the same attachment strategies to Him that we apply to other relationships. Left to our own devices we aren't likely to be any more successful in connecting with God than with anyone else.

The rest of the chapter is a prescription for building a relationship with God. This section begins with a useful distinction between

motivation and skill. In a nutshell, it isn't enough to be motivated to *want* a better relationship with God, it requires *skill*.¹⁸ This is not to say that a relationship with God reduces to self-effort, but that like any relationship it is made up of real interactions referred to in other contexts as the means of grace. The skills or spiritual disciplines outlined here will not surprise anyone, but there are useful suggestions as to how to make these activities more than some form of rote obedience. Some of the more intriguing suggestions involve practicing solitude, silence, and simple prayer. These practices are designed to remove the regular dissonance and distractions that inhibit simple, honest, and frequent interactions with God. We are reminded that sometimes we fill our lives with busyness and distractions to avoid the anxiety and pain of facing what we would be required to face if we were alone before the Lord. I think Clinton and Sibcy are right to remind us that living the Christian life beyond is not simply following a philosophy of life—striving to think and act the way Jesus did—but forming a vital union with Him. We *experience* this vital union at a motivational level through active dependence, fostered through what would simply be called "good communication" in the context of human relationships.

While I recognize the importance of understanding the beliefs and inner-logic of people's relationship strategies, as well as appreciating the way *Attachments* argues for vital relationship with God, an odd tension runs throughout the book. There is an underlying disconnect between the way Clinton and Sibcy describe the problems of relationships and the solution they offer in Christ. A trajectory is set in the first two chapters that makes it difficult to achieve the connection they are arguing for in Chapter 8.

As *Attachments* unfolds Bowlby's and Ainsworth's theories, we are left with a fundamentally godless view of personhood. As explained above, the attachment model consists of four basic categories based on two dimensions of relationship, self, and other.¹⁹ There is no distinct dimension for God or understanding of

¹⁵ p.126.

¹⁶ pp.127-131, 139-144.

¹⁷ p.149.

¹⁸ pp.160-161.

¹⁹ p.23.

how God and Scripture put a different valuation on their four questions. I am fairly certain that Clinton and Sibcy would respond by stating that God clearly fits into the "other" dimension, but this makes an assumption about human motivation that Scripture does not support. *Attachments* basically assumes that we are *fundamentally* shaped by human interactions as children and that the core beliefs formed project outward onto others, including God. But Scripture doesn't describe the human condition as emerging out of environmental factors that ultimately shape our disposition towards God. Quite the opposite. We all, as Adam's descendants, are born with a fundamental disposition towards God and neighbor—sinful self-interest. Our environment will further shape and suggest directions for our approach to relationships, but it can only cultivate or impede what is already, from birth, an inclination to act in sin towards God and neighbor. In other words, before any other persons act upon us, we have a relational disposition towards God and others because of original sin. The development of human personality does not have a neutral starting point. Our disposition towards God, then, is not a *secondary* result of the way our families treat us, but a *primary* cause of why when people sin against us, we develop sinful strategies in response.

Of course, this is not to say that children *self-consciously* adopt sinful approaches to relationships, especially as infants. Rather, it is to say, that as fallen creatures we only have sinful responses from which to choose, whether reflexively, or to the extent that we are capable of making conscious decisions. To respond out of one's *nature* rather than self-conscious *choice* doesn't abrogate the category of sin. Rather it demonstrates that sinners sin instinctively.

Consider the four questions used to construct the four possible attachment styles: Am I worthy of being loved? Am I competent to get the love I need? Are others reliable and trustworthy? Are others accessible and willing to respond to me when I need them to be? While these questions may express very common concerns, they are not innocent questions. They are not simply expressions of fear and longing, but questions that express the egocentric and lustful sin nature.

First, *Attachments* fails to examine how these questions reflect the way "love" is popularly linked to an accepted set of desires labeled as "needs". Being loved does seem to meet our desires for comfort, security, appreciation, and acceptance. But because of sin, our desires must be carefully understood. Desires, even for good things can evolve into monstrous demands. When we label desires as "needs," they quickly become demands that are legislated to others. A desire for security can become a tyrannical demand expressed as fearful clinging or angry punishment towards those who fail to deliver. A natural desire for acceptance can, in a flash, become a felt need to be the life of the party, or alternately to withdraw from relationships altogether. Love simply cannot be equated with having "felt needs" met. *Attachments* fails to unmask the countless desires that often masquerade as "being loved" because attachment theory permits no doctrine of sin. But meeting felt needs is not God's definition of love. Love does not always "feel good". Jesus, as love incarnate, loved in every instance, but clearly His actions were not always understood as love. He often disappointed those He loved because in the very service of love, Christ refused to meet the felt needs of the masses.

Second, note the self-centered nature of these questions. Whether the frame of reference is self or others, the essence of these questions is "Will I get what I need from the people around me?" From the perspective of Freudian psychodynamics (and its descendants) ego defense, the need to defend the self from anxiety provoking realities, is simply a universal means of psychological survival. Attachment styles are nothing more than attempts to adjust to unstable relationships. In such a framework moral terms like "selfishness" have no place. But take "ego defense" at face value. What label best describes someone who acts out of self-concern without regard for his or her impact on others? In common parlance, the word "selfish" seems quite appropriate. Indeed, the law understood as "love your neighbor as yourself" reveals this ego defense for what it is: a violation of love. To the psychologically trained ear the word "selfish" seems harsh (and hardly scientific) but it is, in reality, the most gracious

and hope-giving label because selfishness is a problem the gospel solves. The simple word "selfish" implies responsibility and an opportunity to interact with the Savior who came to rescue the selfish from their own snares.

Is this meaningless theological hair-splitting? I don't think so. It means the difference between defining oneself as a victim or as being responsible. It's the difference between being determined by one's environment versus being an active initiator, responder, and participant. It is the difference between knowing Christ as a healer of the past or as one who bestows grace in the present.

For instance, to minister to the person with the avoiding style may well mean appreciating how he or she has experienced the pain and disappointment of neglect in relationships. It means being sympathetic with their sufferings, not minimizing past and present hardships. Is it understandable that people prefer to avoid painful relationships rather than work through them? Of course, it is understandable. We all resonate with the inner-logic of self-protection. But in the end, the avoiders must deal with their own lack of love towards others. They find it so easy to protect self rather than have the courage to trust God and engage in meaningful relationships.

But self-protection simply is not a neutral behavior. It is moral behavior. It places concern for self, whether I am loved, lovable-over love for God and neighbor. So the avoider comes to Christ for protection, refuge, healing, and hope for the ways he or she has been sinned against. But avoiders also must know Christ as the one who forgives them for their ongoing desire to protect self rather than to love. They come to Christ who gives them grace daily as they ask for His help in loving others. They turn to Christ who changes the questions that demand our inner love

I don't believe Clinton and Sibcy get off track because they are overly enamored with attachment theory. I suspect that attachment theory simply resonated with their improper understanding of what it means to be an image bearer of God. On the first page of Chapter 1 *Attachments* reminds us that God created human beings as a plurality, intended for relationships. "God hardwired us that way right

from the beginning, right in the Garden. We were made for intimacy with Him, and according to the opening passages of Genesis, intimacy with each other."²⁰ Clinton and Sibcy are right to assert that image bearing is the right place to begin understanding what it means to be human. Image bearing tells us that we are fundamentally connected to God and neighbor. Image bearing does make relationship fundamental to human existence. They also correctly point us to the Fall as the beginning of our relational woes. It is also true that man's sin and expulsion from the garden truly have left us in relational upheaval. But here *Attachments* narrows its focus in a way that shifts the trajectory of the rest of the book. *Attachments'* primary focus is on one aspect of how we experience this relational disruption—fear and longing. We suffer the longings of image bearers who want the joys, security, and peace of paradise lost but whose experience leaves us with nothing but the fear these things are never to be had. Experience tells us that all that awaits is eternal disruption, abandonment, and ultimately Death as the final realization of being separated from others. Image bearers sabotage their relationships by adopting poor strategies for dealing with the very natural experience of longing for what was lost in the Fall and fearing it can never be regained.

Attachments states, "The persistent human cry is simply for someone to love us, to hold us tight."²¹ But we don't just leave the garden experiencing the terrible upheaval we have inherited. I would add that another persistent human cry is "I am God and there is no other." What is missing from *Attachments* is the critical understanding that we have inherited the same terrible sin nature of Adam. The rift that created all rifts was Adam's highhanded rejection of God as God. Adam and Eve embraced nothing less than a wicked grab at replacing God. We live now, therefore, as image bearers who share this same deep, underlying motivation. We ruin relationships because we live out of that same sin nature that always makes selfish desires the center of all things. This is why I believe the first and second halves

²⁰ p.3.

²¹ p.5

of the book don't quite fit together. Redemption, grace, and the gospel just don't map on as a natural solution to "attachment injuries." The gospel is a love that addresses our violations of love; attachment injuries are simply the everyday experience of mammals. Yes, the gospel does speak to our fears and the painful sufferings of life in a fallen world. We must never ignore or downplay that emphasis. But it is critical that we respond to Christ as those who must confess our own deep-seated rejection of God and neighbor. When the solitary focus is to abate fear and disappointment, the major human problem is left unaddressed.

Who would benefit from reading *Attachments*? Anyone interested in descriptions of how inner-logic and shaping influences can correlate with certain relational strategies, who is also willing to work carefully to reinterpret the amoral language and God-less perspective of attachment theory. Understanding a person's core relational beliefs can help the Biblical counselor not only have more sympathy and understanding but also make repentance more specific. Describing underlying beliefs in words ferrets out fear, self-protection, and sin. It is also a benefit to reflect on the various ways *Attachments* seeks to make the disciplines of grace more concrete and relational. However, these simple, straightforward, and profoundly important aspects of the Christian life lose some of their impact within the framework of *Attachments* because they only secondarily address the deeper issues of relational disruption.

Gary Thomas

Scared Marriage

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 274 pages.

Reviewed by Michael R. Emler

For a Christian culture that too often affirms the right to divorce when one or both spouses no longer is "happy" or "fulfilled" in marriage, Gary Thomas's book *Sacred Marriage* is strong, but welcome medicine.

Thomas, is the writer and founder/director of the Center for Evangelical Spirituality, a "ministry that integrates Scripture, church history, and the Christian classics." He has

written this book to describe "how we can use the challenges, joys, struggles, and celebrations of marriage to draw closer to God and to grow in spiritual character."¹ His endpoint is not a happier marriage *per se*, but the transformation of each spouse into the character of Christ (which, as he says, *does* often achieve a greater sense of satisfaction within the marriage). The subtitle of the book really captures his main theme: "What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?" In that sense, spiritual growth is the main focus of the book, and he examines marriage as the shaping context for that growth.² Thomas peppers the book with many examples and illustrations from his own and others' marriages and with thoughtful quotations from a variety of sources, particularly from those believers coming from a contemplative tradition.

In the first chapter "The Greatest Challenge in the World: A Call to Holiness More Than Happiness," Thomas supports his arresting assertion that marriage is meant to be a refiner of Christian character more than it is a place of care-free and challenge-free romanticism. He notes, "Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value...I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness. Not that God has anything *against* happiness, or that happiness and holiness are by nature mutually exclusive, but looking at marriage through the lens of holiness began to put it into an entirely new perspective for me."³ He goes on to say what most of us experience in marriage: "I found there was a tremendous amount of immaturity within me that my marriage directly confronted...If the purpose of marriage was simply to enjoy an infatuation and make me 'happy,' then I'd have to get a 'new' marriage every two or three years. But if I really wanted to see God transform me from the inside out, I'd need to concentrate on changing *myself* rather than on changing my spouse."⁴ This is a

¹ p. 12.

² p. 26.

³ p. 22-23.

⁴ p. 23.