

# POSTMODERNISM AND NARRATIVE THERAPY

## A Christian Response

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### Introduction

Several pastoral theologians and Christian counselors have recently called attention to the need for rethinking the way we do our pastoral care and counseling in a postmodern age, among whom are David Lyall, Francis Bridger and David Atkinson, Roger Hurding and Paul Goodliff.<sup>1</sup> As we are in a postmodern era, we will need to engage in the caring ministry in ways that are different from what we have been accustomed to, in order to stay relevant to the people we serve. This paper will first describe generally the contour of postmodernism to

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<sup>1</sup> David Lyall, *Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Context*, Lingdale Paper 23 (Church Westcote: Clinical Theological Association, 1995); Francis Bridger and David Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, rev. ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1998); Roger Hurding, *Pathways to Wholeness: Pastoral Care in a postmodern Age* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998); Paul Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate: Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Culture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1998).

determine its special character and needs, as a backdrop for our understanding of a postmodern approach to counseling and therapy.

After understanding the underlying postmodern presuppositions, we will be ready to examine counseling and therapy in our postmodern society. However, instead of reviewing and critiquing postmodern counseling and therapy in general, we will focus specifically on narrative therapy, a contemporary approach to therapy mainly influenced by postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault. While our ultimate goal is to establish a relevant model of pastoral care and counseling in the postmodern age, we will make that the subject of a subsequent paper.<sup>2</sup> This paper will prepare for that by focusing on the reviews of some critiques to narrative therapy and offer an initial Christian response.

### The Contour of the Postmodern Age

Within the limits of this paper, it is neither possible nor our intention to trace the whole philosophical development of postmodernism,<sup>3</sup> but rather to understand, in a broad stroke, the progressive development of deconstructionism as an important concept in postmodernism. We will take a look at what several representative postmodern philosophers have to say about postmodernism and what some Christian critics have to say in response.

At the risk of oversimplification, we will briefly describe the general background of the development of postmodernism. We have to start with the Swiss linguist Saussure and his concept of structuralism which maintains that language is a social construction and literary creativity, and that structure is how human beings try to explain the reality that is experienced.<sup>4</sup> Saussure's concept is a significant departure from nineteenth-century linguistic theory as well as from Enlightenment

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Y. Lee, "Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age," Paper presented at the Centennial Pastoral Conference of Alliance Bible Seminary, June 22, 1999. To be published in Chinese in *Pastoral Journal*, Issue 9 (May, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Those interested in a brief general introduction can refer to Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> W.L. Reese ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1980), S.V. "Structuralism". Ferdinand de Saussure's viewpoint was published from notes by his students in the book entitled *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983).

epistemology. According to Saussure, each linguistic system is determined only by social convention.

Taking the above concept further, literary deconstruction proponent, Hans-Georg Gadamer, asserts that "man's relation to the world is absolutely and fundamentally linguistic in nature, and hence intelligible."<sup>5</sup> But Gadamer takes the concept of language structuralism even further by arguing that there is no universal structure, because dialogue between different readers and the text will generate different interpretations and meaning. Therefore the meaning of a text is not found within the text itself or its structure.

Similarly, French postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida has taken literary deconstruction and applied it to the deconstruction of our worldviews. Derrida says, "Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated."<sup>6</sup> He also suggests that just as the meaning of a text is not the same to different readers, the reality that we experience in the world would mean different things to different people. Accordingly, there is therefore really no universal reality, as all meaning is interpreted according to the context of the interpreter.

Michel Foucault takes this concept one step further and argued that since there is no one central meaning in our reality, then anyone who would impose his or her own understanding of reality on others would do violence to others. Every interpretation of reality is therefore an assertion of power.<sup>7</sup> Foucault says, "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth."<sup>8</sup> According to Foucault, discourse brings objects into being by their identification and definition. He cites psychiatry which, after its

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<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 433.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 329.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1971-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Francis Bridger in Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 286.

declaration that schizophrenics exist, treats them as objects of therapy.<sup>9</sup> We can see that Foucault was therefore critical of the use of the medical model in viewing human predicaments.

A contemporary postmodern thinker in the States, Richard Rorty, has brought postmodernism to a new pragmatic level. Not unlike other postmodern thinkers, he believes that we cannot find truth since it does not exist, and so we can only engage in dialogue within the human community. Rorty introduces the concept of "narrative" in the context of man's search for meaning in his temporal and cultural context, and proposes an "ethnocentric" view of the justification of truth claims.<sup>10</sup> In other words, one's truth claims are embedded in the understanding and concepts unique to the community in which one lives. Rorty thus emphasizes the importance of community. He says, "Our identification with our community - our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among which men have made."<sup>11</sup> According to Rorty, truth is specific and relevant only within its local community.

### Christian Critiques of Postmodernism

We have gone through a very brief overview of postmodernism. It is important to realize that we are moving from modernism shaped by the Enlightenment, to the postmodern context, which is basically a reaction to modernism. Grenz reminds us that "in this new context, Foucault's suspicion of every 'present order,' Derrida's questioning of reason by reason, and Rorty's thoroughgoing pragmatism are commonplace..."<sup>12</sup>

Christian psychotherapist and author, Dr. Roger Hurding uses three main characteristics to describe the postmodern age: antifoundationalism,

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Press, 1972), 40-49.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism," in *The Consequence of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 162.



pluralism in our culture,<sup>13</sup> and deconstructionism in terms of contemporary hermeneutics.<sup>14</sup> Hurding sees this phenomenon manifests itself in two contrasting ways. The first way is where the reality and value of metanarrative and virtue are denied, as seen in the person of the liberal ironist (a person who sees irony in everything). The second way is where the richness and variety of human experience are celebrated, through the exploration of myth, symbol, metaphor and parable, as seen in the person of the postmodern Christian.<sup>15</sup>

In the first instance, the liberal ironists, as described by Richard Rorty, are people who are "never quite able to take themselves seriously," because everything is contingent to the chances of history and the vagaries of the new language game,<sup>16</sup> since "truth cannot exist independent of the human mind."<sup>17</sup> Rorty describes such an individual as "enlightened, secular, through and through."<sup>18</sup> His solidarity does not arise from any notion of a shared humanity, but from "similarities with respect to pain and humiliation."<sup>19</sup>

In the second way, Roger Hurding, after Roger Lundin in his *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*,<sup>20</sup> argues for the recovery of the Christian faith in the postmodern age by cultivating "a biblical sense of mystery" which addresses the truth. Hurding believes it is possible to view people as "living human documents" (after Charles V. Gerkin<sup>21</sup>), where human story is taken seriously in the light of the Judeo-Christian metanarratives. Christians

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<sup>13</sup> Roger Hurding, *Pathways to Wholeness* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 75-81.

<sup>14</sup> Hurding, *Pathways to Wholeness*, 112-15.

<sup>15</sup> Hurding, *Pathways to Wholeness*, 148-52.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73-74.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 204-205.

<sup>21</sup> Charles V. Gerkin, *Living Human Documents: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1984).

in the postmodern world can acknowledge the riches of pluralism without submerging the distinctives of the Christian faith.<sup>22</sup>

More concretely, this postmodern context, according to pastoral theologian, Paul Goodliff, has seven major features as follows:<sup>23</sup>

1. The rejection of all 'metanarrative' (grand theory) used to explain everything.
2. Replacement of a fragmented worldview (no social unity).
3. The new religion is consumerism, and its temples are the shopping centres.
4. No objective truth as there is no distinction between object and subject. Everything is relative and there are no fixed points of reference.
5. The world is a global culture (e.g. Coca-Cola).
6. Elements (mysticism, cosmology, intuition and emotions) set aside by modernism, are all welcomed back. In religion this is most evident in the renewed interest in paganism, new age religions and Eastern religions.
7. The demise of hope with progress and development, replaced by a loss of hope despite our wealth.

As we can see, postmodernism, in reaction to the philosophical assumptions of modernism, has taken us into a new world where everything is relative, pragmatic and consumer-oriented, and thereby destroyed all the anchors that have previously given the modern man a sense of security. Paul Goodliff calls postmodernism the new Babel and summarizes his description this way:

Postmodernism says goodbye to big stories or metanarratives that are grand explanations of truth (the Enlightenment), history (Marxism), or faith (Christianity). In their place are a multitude of local stories, often conflicting, but celebrating their illogicality and diversity... The past is revalued and aspects of culture which modernism rejected - magic, myth, cosmology and feeling - are absorbed into the postmodern melting-pot. The confident culture of modernism, optimistic, utopian

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<sup>22</sup> Roger Hurdling, *Pathways to Wholeness*, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1998), 26-27.

and progressive, has been replaced with a different, often hope-less and anxious spirit about our age.<sup>24</sup>

Goodliff sees a certain amount of validity in the postmodern critique,<sup>25</sup> but he also sees some major problems with a postmodern Christianity, and believes that its skepticism must be countered by our Christian belief in the God who is really there and not silent.<sup>26</sup> God incarnate speaks of a God who communicates in a human language, and thus our understanding of language should begin with Christ and not postmodern skepticism. Postmodernism sees truth as relative, arising only from individual local community. We however believe in Jesus Christ who says, 'I am *the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*' (John 14:6), and this is the scandal of particularity that challenges postmodern relativism.<sup>27</sup> Therefore while we welcome the insights of the critique of modernism by the postmodern philosophers, we still maintain that there is objective truth and divine revelation that is accessible to human enquiry.

British Christian thinker Francis Bridger in his Frank Memorial Lecture, *Christian Counseling and the Challenge of Postmodernity*,<sup>28</sup> given to the Clinical Theology Association in July, 1997, outlines four themes at the heart of postmodernism, namely: narrative, truth, power and the self. First on narrative, Bridger quotes Jean-Francois Lyotard's seminal discussion *The Postmodern Condition* published in 1979, 'I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.'<sup>29</sup> The implications for counseling are that there is no way of assessing personal or collective narratives against any overarching principle or metanarrative, and therefore the only thing the counselor can do to is to play the pragmatist and opt for what works at the time.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Bridger points to the postmodern skepticism concerning truth, and the problem it poses for

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<sup>24</sup> Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate*, 66-68.

<sup>26</sup> Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate*, 68-70.

<sup>27</sup> Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Included as an appendix in Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 275-94.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), xxiv, quoted by Francis Bridger, in Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 280.

<sup>30</sup> Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 281.



the counselor.<sup>31</sup> Bridger sees the third theme of postmodernism is the accusation that the primary use of claims to knowledge and truth is to exercise power and control over others. Similarly, in his most recent work, British theologian Anthony C. Thiselton, takes this theme seriously and discusses thoroughly the category of power as postmodern thought.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Bridger points out that the self, defined by modernism as autonomous, coherent seat of knowledge, value and decision, is denied by postmodernism.<sup>33</sup> In its place, the self as defined by postmodernism, is unstable, lost, manipulable and alone.<sup>34</sup> However, against such picture of fragmentation and despair, Bridger believes that the Christian worldview has a lot to offer to the postmodern man.

Summing up the views of the various scholars we can draw a composite picture of postmodernism. Postmodernism is the denial of the possibility of truth apart from the human mind, resulting in a fragmented worldview relative to the individual in his particular context. In his despair, the postmodern man also finds himself reacting to the rationalism of the Enlightenment that often accompanies the pursuit of objective truth and universal metanarratives, welcoming instead the emotionalism that often accompanies our subjective experience with reality and the mysticism in the encounter with mystery. Even though in the process, postmodernism has put aside the absolute concept of truth and the possibility of finding that truth, a position that most Christians do not accept, the postmodern critique of modernism has brought about important insights of our reality. We therefore must take seriously the challenge of postmodernism. No longer can we assume that the philosophical assumptions of modernism, nor its Christian counterpart in the largely rationalistic version of the Christian faith, are adequate to provide us with meaning for our reality.

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<sup>31</sup> Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 282-85.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 288.

<sup>34</sup> Bridger and Atkinson, *Counselling in Context*, 289-90.



## Narrative Therapy: A Secular Response to Postmodernism

Narrative therapy is a new postmodern approach to therapy practiced by, among others, Michael White from Adelaide, Australia. We choose to examine White because in his writings he readily acknowledges his indebtedness to Michel Foucault.<sup>35</sup> He is heavily influenced by Foucault's structural deconstruction, and his understanding of discourses and narrative, and the relationship of knowledge and power. For instance, in a paper "The Externalizing of the Problems and the re-authoring of lives and relationships,"<sup>36</sup> White discusses the central ideas and practices associated with the externalization of problems. Therapy begins with the questioning and recognition of the dominant cultural practices that have been imposed on an individual. The practices associated with the externalization of problems are used to counter these dominant cultural practices. White enters into discussion with Foucault on the use of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon<sup>37</sup> architectural form in looking at the controls of individuals in society. Metaphorically, each individual is under scrutiny. White quotes Foucault on his comment on the Panopticon as a mechanism in which all persons are simultaneously a subject of, and an instrument, or vehicle, of power:

This indeed is the diabolical aspect of the idea and all the applications of it. One doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised.<sup>38</sup>

White has tried to make a case for the therapeutic practices associated with the externalizing of problems as counter-practices to cultural

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<sup>35</sup> White's views are regularly published in Dulwich Centre Newsletter in Adelaide. He collected what he considered as representative papers in *Selected Papers* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 5-28.

<sup>37</sup> As an architectural form, the Panopticon is a circular building with a courtyard at the centre. Each level of the building has the thickness of one room only and is divided into "cells" laterally, each with a rear window allowing in natural light, and a front facing an observation tower at the centre of the courtyard.

<sup>38</sup> Michael White, "The Externalizing of the Problem and the Re-Authoring of Lives and Relationships," in *Selected Papers*, 26. Michel Foucault's quote is taken from "The Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 156.

practices that are objectifying of persons and of their bodies. The goal is to open space for persons to re-author or re-constitute themselves, each other, and their relationships, according to alternative stories or different knowledge.<sup>39</sup> White believes that these practices provide a basis to realize Foucault's proposal that we engage in actions that would "liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state."<sup>40</sup> It is clear that White's form of therapy is directly influenced by Michel Foucault's postmodern concepts.

Most of Michael White's work have been done in the context of family and especially with problems identified in children. The externalization of the child's problem has great appeal because the problem has in modern therapies been defined as internal to the child. When the members of these families describe the problems, they use what White calls "problem-saturated description" as a "dominant story of family life."<sup>41</sup> "Externalizing" is the process of encouraging persons to objectify, and to personify, the problems that they experience as oppressive. In the process, the problem becomes a separate entity and thus external to the person or relationship that was ascribed the problem. The process of externalization opens up possibilities for family members to describe themselves, each other, and their relationships, from a new and non-problem-saturated perspective, thus enabling the development of an alternative story of family life that is much more attractive. From this new perspective, persons are able to locate "facts" that provide the nuclei for the generation of new stories, thus resolving the child's problem.

White believes that this approach of externalizing problems has the following benefits:

1. Decreases unproductive conflict between persons, including the person responsible for the problem;
2. Undermines the sense of failure that has developed for many persons;

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<sup>39</sup> White, "The Externalizing of the Problem and the Re-Authoring of Lives and Relationships," in *Selected Papers*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, "The subject and power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. Dreyfus and P. Rainbow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 216. Quoted by White, *Selected Papers*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 5.

3. Paves the way for persons to co-operate with each other in resolving the problem;
4. Opens up new possibilities for persons to take action to retrieve their lives and relationships from the problem;
5. Frees persons to take a lighter, more effective and less stressed approach to problems; and
6. Presents options for dialogue about the problem.<sup>42</sup>

White believes that when people seek therapy for their problems, it is because the narratives in which they are storying their experience and/or the narratives in which they are having their experience storied by others:

- \* do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and
- \* there will be significant and vital aspects of their lived experience that contradict these dominant narratives.<sup>43</sup>

The externalizing of the problem enables persons to separate from the dominant stories that have been shaping them, and enables the identification of previously neglected aspects of lived experience referred to as "unique outcomes" which are then plotted into alternative story or "unique account." In the process, persons derive new and "unique re-descriptions" of themselves, opening up "unique possibilities."<sup>44</sup> The therapy process involves the use of relative influence questioning that maps the influence of the problem as well as the persons,<sup>45</sup> defining the problem to be externalized,<sup>46</sup> in order to identify unique outcomes.<sup>47</sup> In short, the practices associated with the externalizing of problems free persons from problem-saturated descriptions of their lives and relationships, encourage alternative storying, and assist persons to identify and develop a new relationship with the problem by assuming responsibility for the investigation of new choices and pursuing new

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<sup>42</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 7-8.

<sup>45</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 8-12.

<sup>46</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 12-16.

<sup>47</sup> White, *Selected Papers*, 16-20.



possibilities. In short, narrative therapy enables a person in re-storying his lived experience.

With his colleague, David Epston in Auckland, New Zealand, Michael White has co-authored a book entitled, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*,<sup>48</sup> in which much of his narrative approach to therapy has been documented. White and Epston summarizes the concept of externalizing this way:

Externalizing is an approach to therapy that encourages persons to objectify and, at times, to personify the problem that they experience as oppressive. In this process, the problem becomes a separate entity and is external to the person or relationship that was ascribed as the problem.<sup>49</sup>

### **Critiques and Proponents of Narrative Therapy**

Many others have followed Michael White's lead in this approach, among which is a group known as Yaletown Family Therapy, based in Vancouver, Canada. Recently, their work has been published in a new book of essays by the therapists in the group,<sup>50</sup> which contains 10 papers dealing with the theory and practice of narrative therapy. Among the applications of this approach are cases dealing with attention deficit disorder, substance misuse, problem gambling, Anorexia and Bulimia, depression and retirement. Thus narrative therapy has received wide acceptance among many therapists with a postmodern orientation, especially among those who have to deal with issues of feminism and politics.

Stephen Madigan who has adopted the narrative approach, after his review of Micheal White's use of Foucault's practice interpretations in therapy, concludes with the following insightful comments:

Through careful considerations of a person's alternative stories, White highlights dominant cultural knowledges which act to specify, classify, and subjugate. The major difference between Michael White's therapeutic practice from many other popular American and European "schools" of therapy is his consideration to locate

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<sup>48</sup> Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Madigan and Ian Law, eds., *Praxis-Situation Discourse, Feminism & Politics in Narrative Therapies* (Vancouver: Yaletown Family Therapy, 1998).



a person's problem experience within the restrained socio-political language context of the culture in which they live. Hence, the person's body is not the problem; the problem is one of discourse, power, and culture.<sup>51</sup>

Another therapist, Karl Tomm, has also spoken positively of this therapeutic approach of externalizing problems. He describes it as "a linguistic separation of the distinction of the problem from the personal identity of the [person]."<sup>52</sup> He believes that this approach enables a person to escape the influence of the problems in their lives. He describes White's narrative approach as a "major achievement" and a "tour de force."<sup>53</sup> For his innovative work, the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy has recently recognized Michael White as a "master" clinician.

The postmodernist view of Michel Foucault as applied in Michael White's narrative therapy has indeed brought a new and critical awareness of the therapeutic process as a linguistic process, and a greater sensitivity to the relationship between knowledge and power. I believe that this is a healthy and important awareness for both the therapist and the client. It is a clear departure from modernist view of structuralism and functionalism. Structuralism infers that behavior reflects the structure of the mind and that it is possible to have a direct knowledge of the world. Ian Law and Stephen Madigan point out that consequently the therapist is viewed as an expert who has the ability to probe beneath the surface behavior of a person and find systems of deeper meaning.<sup>54</sup> Functionalism on the other hand links specific symptoms to a necessary purpose in a system. The family therapist possesses the expert knowledge and expert language to treat the symptoms, thus placing marriage and family therapy within the medical model. An evidence of the influence of structuralism and functionalism in individual therapy is the ever-expanding clinical classifications of "mental and psychological disorders"

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<sup>51</sup> Madigan and Law, eds., *Praxis-Situation Discourse, Feminism & Politics in Narrative Therapies*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Tomm, "Externalizing Problems and Internalizing Personal Agency." *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies* (1989): 16-22. Cited in Stephen Madigan, "Practical Interpretations of Michel Foucault," in *Praxis-Situation Discourse, Feminism & Politics in Narrative Therapies*, ed. Madigan and Law, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Madigan "Practical Interpretations of Michel Foucault," 15.

<sup>54</sup> Ian Law and Stephen Madigan, "Discourse not Language" in *Praxis-Situation Discourse, Feminism & Politics in Narrative Therapies*, ed. Madigan and Law, 4.

in Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) now in its fifth edition, DSM-IV, which is widely used by clinical psychologists. Medical model language has been criticized for using deficit-language, that is, the description and diagnosis of persons and problems as "less than" some prescribed standard set by the medical and psychological experts.<sup>55</sup> Examples of that are in the following labels: depression, schizophrenia, dysfunctional family, personality disorder, etc. Furthermore, as in the discourse of Freudian psychosexual development, we are all somehow deficient in some aspects in each of our development stages. Therefore, Michael White, following Michel Foucault, has in my mind offered a valid critique to the way we do therapy in the modern society.

For White, following Foucault, people constitute discourse and are constituted through discourse, thus people are seen as speaking themselves into existence by inhibiting or performing certain cultural discourse.<sup>56</sup> Post-structural theory moves us from language to discourse, which refers not only to the actual words and statements themselves but also to their connection with the socio-political context. Thus therapists need to challenge their own assumptions of their therapeutic discourses. I believe that this is a necessary corrective to the modern practice of therapy.

### **A Christian Response to Postmodernism Narrative Therapy**

With the conclusion above, I maintain that the awareness of the influence of cultural discourse for both the client and the therapist does not preclude the importance of the Judeo-Christian metanarrative in the therapeutic process. A Christian therapist can help a client in exploring new discourses of his lived experience on the basic of the common worldview shared by both the client and himself in the faith community. The metanarrative of Christ crucified and the Christian community is not a knowledge/power relationship. It speaks of submission and sacrifice rather than control and imposition. The re-storying and externalization

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<sup>55</sup> H. Goolishian and H. Anderson, "Plenary address" at the Dis-diseasing of Mental Health Conference, San Antonio, USA, 1991. Cited in Madigan and Law, "Discourse not Language," 5.

<sup>56</sup> Michael White, "Deconstruction and Therapy," *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, no.3, 21-40. Cited in Madigan and Law, "Discourse not Language," 7.

of problems by the client is done of his own free will. The acceptance of the faith stance of his faith community is an option he can freely choose. The Christian therapist can co-create and co-author the new discourse with the client.

In proposing a response to postmodernism, Stanley Grenz, like other Christian thinkers, believes that we should stand our ground in refusing to accept the postmodern rejection of metanarrative. However, he also believes that we share common ground with the postmodern critics in the rejection of Enlightenment epistemology. He believes the contour of a postmodern gospel should be post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and also post-noeticentric.<sup>57</sup> We shall use Grenz's four main points as the outline of our critique.

By post-individualistic, Grenz refers to the need of replacing the individual from center stage by community. We need to take seriously our Trinitarian theology and emphasize that since our God is a social Trinity—Father, Son and Spirit—our gospel must address the human person within the context of his community. Grenz states emphatically:

What they [the postmodern world] want to see is a people who lived out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships. Focusing on the example of Jesus and the apostles, a Christian gospel for the postmodern age will invite others to become participants in the community of those whose highest loyalty is to the God revealed in Christ. Participants in the inviting community will seek to draw others to Christ by embodying that gospel in the fellowship they share.<sup>58</sup>

I agree with this assessment. Thus our approach to therapy should emphasize the importance of community and the place of the individual within the community. In fact therapy should go beyond focusing on creating new discourse for the lived experience of the person to the extending of a new community itself for the person seeking help. The Christian community should be inviting rather than rejecting, empowering rather than oppressive. In this sense, a narrative approach to therapy fits in nicely with our Christian faith.

By post-rationalistic we are looking at the postmodern reaction to the rationalism of modernism. Christianity has accommodated itself to

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<sup>57</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 161-74.

<sup>58</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 169.



the modern era by making our faith a "reasonable" faith. Our critique of our modern faith is not that it should be irrational or unreasonable. Rather, it should not be reduced to merely rationalistic propositions. We should not regard our faith as nothing more than correct dogma, but also make room for the "mystery" of God who is beyond our human rationality. Our faith should be cognitive and intellectual, and at the same time encompass the other dimensions of life. Grenz summarizes his view this way:

A postmodern articulation of the gospel is post-rationalistic. It no longer focuses on propositions as the central content of Christian faith. Instead, it takes seriously a dynamic understanding of the role of the intellectual dimension of human experience and our attempts to make sense of life.<sup>59</sup>

With this in mind, therapy should be done in such a way that will focus not only the correctness of our thinking and belief, but also the intellectual dimension of human experience and the mystery of life. Our concept of the Judeo-Christian metanarrative should allow room to form discourses that include post-rationalistic dimension of life. With this assumption in mind, a Christian therapist can employ narrative therapy in a profitable way in helping people discourse more post-rationalistically.

Grenz also insists that in order to minister in the postmodern context, we must re-emphasize a biblical holistic view of man, thus a post-dualistic gospel.<sup>60</sup> The Enlightenment project was based on dividing reality into "mind" and "matter." Thus the Christian concern was for saving the "soul." We must re-integrate the emotional-affective, bodily-sensual with the intellectual-rational dimensions within one human person. Our aim should be to speak to the whole person and the person-in relationship.

Again, narrative therapy offers a good approach for us to minister to the post-modern man, as long as we do not reject the Judeo-Christian metanarrative. If we reject the possibility of transcendental truth and the spiritual dimension of man, we are then merely shifting our emphasis away from the rationalistic dimension without addressing the whole person. Moreover, again this post-dualistic consideration encourages

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<sup>59</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 171.

<sup>60</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 171-72.



us to minister to people as persons-in-relationship and thus in community, especially the community of faith.

Finally, the call to make our gospel post-noeticentric is to affirm that the goal of our existence is not just the accumulation of knowledge, which has been the mark of modernism. Our goal instead should be to gain wisdom, with a spirituality that fosters a proper ordering of activism and quietism, drawing from the inner resources of the Holy Spirit. Grenz puts it this way: "As Christians, then we should be concerned to gain knowledge and to hold to correct doctrine *in order* that we might attain wisdom for living so that we might please God with our lives."<sup>61</sup> This should be the goal of our ministry, including the narrative approach to therapy.

Narrative therapy, the externalization of problems, and the creation of new discourses for a person's lived experience, has its roots and presuppositions in the deconstruction concepts of postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault. As Christians, we share many of the postmodern critiques of modernism, and welcome the correctives they bring. Our awareness of the knowledge/power relationship has also been increased, and this in turn has made us more reflective of the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship and process. However, we still maintain that the Judeo-Christian metanarrative is our central worldview, and that it is important both for the therapeutic process, as well as being the content of the new discourse a person has to form with regard to his lived experience. With the Judeo-Christian metanarrative as its basis, narrative therapy can prove to be a powerful form of Christian therapy.

### **Practical Application of A Narrative Approach to Counseling**

Psychologists have long been interested in narratives from a psycholinguistic perspective. As early as 1943, Theodore Sarbin already used the concept of role-taking, as in a drama, to explain social behavior.<sup>62</sup> He also edited the book, *Narrative Psychology*, in 1986, an anthology which contains work by prominent "narrativists" in psychology, including works by people like Kenneth Gergen and Mary

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<sup>61</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 173.

<sup>62</sup> Theodore R. Sarbin, "The Concept of Role-taking," *Sociometry* 6 (1943): 273-84.

Gergen on narrative form; Karl Scheibe on self-narrative and adventure; and Brian Sutton-Smith on children's fiction-making.<sup>63</sup> The key concept here is that "Life is a story and people are actors."

In my own research, I have studied the use of metaphors which is one of the key aspects of dynamic narratives. I used transcripts of the work of Virginia Satir in studying the use of metaphors in the therapeutic process.<sup>64</sup> The research demonstrated the fact that metaphors can be the direct vehicle of insights that contribute towards effective counseling. It was also discovered that insights from the metaphors used by the counselor were not dependent on the ability of the client to reciprocate in metaphoric expression.<sup>65</sup> This implies that during counseling, the counselor is a co-creator of the client's story, helping him make sense of his own experience and creating his own self-narrative. Furthermore, we know that all languages often contain many idiomatic and metaphoric expressions that are in fact stories in themselves. There is an old Chinese saying that states, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Metaphors are word pictures that can be used effectively in counseling. From this research we further see the usefulness of using the Biblical narratives (stories of Bible characters), metaphors and parables, in Christian counseling. Christian counselor can help the Christian counselee identify with the experience of certain Biblical narratives, thus integrating his own narrative with the Biblical metanarrative.

Dr. D. John Lee, a professor of psychology, edited a book called *Storying Ourselves: A Narrative Perspective on Christians in Psychology*, concludes his own conversion experience to the narrative psychology with this remark:

I now do psychology from a narrative perspective. This means I make use of narrative concepts in my attempts to understand human experience and behavior. For example, I interpret people and events in their lives in the same way I would interpret a story. I consider the "setting," the time and place in which their behavior occurs. I pay attention to the "plot" within people's lives, or the value and meaning

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<sup>63</sup> Theodore R. Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

<sup>64</sup> Simon Y. Lee, "An Exploration of the Use of Metaphor in Effective Counselling," (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> Lee, "An Exploration of the Use of Metaphor in Effective Counselling," 78-79.

they place upon their experience. I try to discern the significant "characters" or relationships in a person's drama to identify his or her community.<sup>66</sup>

Lee is working from a psycholinguistic approach. Lee's book is a collection of the stories of ten Christians and their own journey. It is written to encourage counselors to understand and use narrative as a tool for listening to the counselee. The use of autobiography becomes a useful way of integrating psychology and the Christian faith at a personal level.

It is quite fascinating to read these autobiographies and to see the effect the process has on the autobiographers, namely: discovery, relatedness, thankfulness, healing and hope.<sup>67</sup> I appreciate especially the concluding words of Lee when he comments on Malony (one of the autobiographers) and his understanding of the relationship of integration between the Christian faith and psychology as an autobiographical process, a pilgrimage, or a story.<sup>68</sup> Lee agrees with Malony's view but thinks that he has not taken the metaphor far enough. Lee sees it as a story that honors the story of Christ who is the "author and finisher of our faith" and that "storying ourselves" is one way of inviting Christ's authority into our lives. Lee has these insightful words about this narrative approach: "It is stepping out of our comfort zones and being transparent with one another with our current struggles and challenges of living in a relationship with Christ."<sup>69</sup> I concur with Lee's notion of storying ourselves in light of the story of Jesus Christ, and believe that this is the fundamental guideline for the use of a narrative approach to Christian counseling.

Other Christian psychologists and therapists also pointed to the usefulness of narratives or autobiographies in counseling, including Paul C. Vitz and David G. Benner. Paul C. Vitz is presently working on a narrative model of Christian counseling. His published work on this aspect includes two papers on "From Analysis of the Past to Stories about It",<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> D. John Lee, *Storying Ourselves: A Narrative Perspective on Christians in Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 18.

<sup>67</sup> Lee, *Storying Ourselves*, 293-301.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, *Storying Ourselves*, 300.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, *Storying Ourselves*, 300-301.

<sup>70</sup> Paul C. Vitz, "Narrative and Counseling, Part I: From Analysis of the Past to Stories about It," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 20 (1) (1992a): 11-19 .



and "Stories about the Past to Stories for the Future."<sup>71</sup> These two papers outline Vitz's idea of using narratives in counseling, moving the client from reminiscing about the past to writing his own story for the future, based on reflections in relation to his Christian faith.

David G. Benner, on the other hand, calls for the use of autobiography in the care of souls. Benner says:

Because our self-narratives are so fundamental to our identity and are the way in which we make sense of our experience, the sharing of our stories with others is crucial for our growth and healing. Soul care involves allowing someone to share his or her story and then helping that person to consider the implications of the way in which he or she has put that story together.<sup>72</sup>

Benner asks a Christian receiving soul care to prepare autobiographical essay and journal writing at least a month before a retreat where the intensive soul care work takes place. The retreat director then spends one or two hours each day at the retreat in dialogue with the person. I believe this is a very good use of autobiography in counseling and can be viewed as a form of narrative therapy. We also see a good example of the use of narrative in both counseling and spiritual direction.

Similar to Benner, Dr. Richard Peace, Professor of Evangelism and Church Renewal at Fuller Theological Seminary, encourages the use of autobiography as a form of spiritual discipline. He shares his idea in *Spiritual Storying: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Biography*,<sup>73</sup> one of five books in the Spiritual Disciplines series. Peace believes that we all have a story, and our stories give us identity. But we do not always know our stories, hence there is a need for writing spiritual biography.

Returning to a postmodern perspective, Dr. J. LeBron McBride, an ordained minister and a family therapist, has pointed out the usefulness

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<sup>71</sup> Paul C. Vitz, "Narrative and Counseling, Part 2: From Stories of the Past to Stories for the Future," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 20 (1) (1992b): 20-27.

<sup>72</sup> David G. Benner, *Cares of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 220.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Peace, *Spiritual Storytelling: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Biography* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1996.)



of narrative theology and narrative therapy.<sup>74</sup> He sees that personal stories can on the one hand be confining and stifling, like prison of the mind instead of "merely a prism of the mind,"<sup>75</sup> and on the other hand liberating and expanding. The rationalism of modernism has robbed us of the vitality of the personal stories in our lives. Indeed, narrative theology emphasizes the importance of stories in our theology, pointing to the fact that the Bible is full of meaningful stories.

Critics of modernism characterize it as being only concern with facts and rules, and not in the quest for meaning. While this is a caricature of modernism, it is nevertheless true that that is an imbalance of facts over meaning. Critics of postmodernism on the other hand criticize it as moral relativism, in ethics and in narrative therapy. Defending narrative therapy, Freedman and Combs, has this to say:

When we say that there are many possible stories about self (or about other aspects of reality), we do not mean to say that "anything goes." Rather, we are motivated to examine our constructions and stories — how they have come to be and what their effects are on our selves and others.<sup>76</sup>

As I have argued above, I believe that the examination of our cognitive and moral constructs is important to the therapeutic process. In fact Jesus could be regarded as someone who deconstructed his society, upset hierarchy and opposed the status quo, for example in helping persons on the Sabbath or eating grain on the Sabbath.<sup>77</sup> Also, the emphasis on the uniqueness of each person and situation is an important corrective to the stereotypical way we look at individuals and the over-systematized way we look at families. However, without a reference point, such re-storying can become relative and subjective. Again, we find the need to have a moral reference point stemming from the anchoring in a metanarrative, which in our case is the redemptive history of the Bible. The Bible is more than an ethical manual or a textbook of systematic theology. It is

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<sup>74</sup> J. LeBron McBride, *Spiritual Crisis: Surviving Trauma to the Soul* (Binghamton: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 1998), 167-73.

<sup>75</sup> Hugh Rosen, "Meaning-Making Narratives," in *Constructing Realities: Meaning Making Perspectives for Psychotherapists*, ed. Hugh Rosen and Kevin Kuehlwein (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 23. Quoted in J. LeBron McBride, *Spiritual Crisis*, 168.

<sup>76</sup> J. Freedman and G. Combs, *Narrative Therapy* (New York: Norton & Company, 1996), 35. Quoted in J. LeBron McBride, *Spiritual Crisis*, 170.

<sup>77</sup> McBride, *Spiritual Crisis*, 170.

primarily the history of God's redemptive acts. Storying is part of our Judeo-Christian tradition where we find answers to the questions we have in our lives. Questions such as: Identity: "Who am I?"; Relationship: "How am I accepted?" and "How should I accept others?"; Community: "Where do I belong?" and Ethics: "How shall I live?"<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion, I believe that while we do not agree with many of the premises of postmodernism and the relativism used in the narrative approach to therapy, narrative therapy can still be employed profitably by Christian counselors and therapists in helping people in their life situations, as long as we do not discard the centrality of the redemptive history of the Bible and the Christ event. One useful and practical application is the use of autobiography in counseling and spiritual direction.

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to rethink the way we do pastoral care and counseling in light of the characteristics of the postmodern age in which we live. The paper first paints for us in a broad stroke the contour of postmodernism and then provides some initial Christian critiques. Next, narrative therapy, a method of counseling heavily influenced by postmodernist Michel Foucault, is examined closely and critically. The paper goes on to provide a Christian response to postmodernism in general and to narrative therapy in particular. The applications of a narrative approach to counseling are then discussed.

### 撮 要

本文旨在重新評估我們如何在後現代的社會中實施教牧關懷與輔導。文章首先繪畫出後現代的輪廓，並從基督教的角度作出初步的批判。接著我們檢視一個備受後現代思想家傅柯所影響的輔導方法——即「敘述式治療法」，並且從基督教的角度作出回應。最後本文討論從敘述角度來輔導的實際應用。

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<sup>78</sup> McBride, *Spiritual Crisis*, 167.