

## CHAPTER THREE: A NARRATIVE HERMENEUTICAL PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

*"I cannot play with you," said the fox. "I am not tamed." ...  
"I am looking for friends," said the little prince.  
"What does that mean - 'tame'?"  
"It is an act too often neglected," says the fox.  
"It means to establish ties."  
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The little prince**

In this chapter we shall be journeying along the road of a narrative conversation. This will be a continuation of the conversation that we had in the previous section, but narrowing it down to the implication of narrative for Practical Theology and Pastoral Care. I will not give an overview of the historical development of narrative in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care, since this has been done elsewhere. Instead I will describe the approach of certain proponents of this movement that are important for this study. The use of narrative to create a new understanding of the human story can be a useful element in the development of a premarital narrative conversation. The (biblical) narrative should meet, and not fuse with, the human narrative in its concrete situation. The purpose of the biblical narrative should not be seen as just bringing a correction to the human narrative, but should open new horizons of understanding.

Concerning the field of study of Practical Theology, the term *narrative* contributes to a better understanding of the idea of *communicative actions*. When communicative actions are studied in Practical Theology from a definitive and purposeful narrative perspective, this approach is much more inclusive and it refers to the whole ecosystem in which the communication processes take place (Müller 1996:4). Within the human sciences the narrative developed into a perspective through which cultural and individual experiences can be placed in an understandable (hermeneutical) context (Paré 1995:7).

### 3.1 THE LIFE-STORY AND LIVED CONVICTIONS

Stephen Crites' article, [The narrative quality of human experience](#) (1989:65-88 - originally published in 1971), was one of the earliest pieces in Narrative Theology and has proved to be one of the richest and most suggestive. He argues, by making use of a "homemade" phenomenology, that one of the conditions of being human is the possession

of the capacity for having a history, and -

*that the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative*  
(Crites 1989:65-66).

In this way, there is a move away from the modernistic perspective with its emphasis on reason and objective observation to a post modernistic perspective. The latter takes seriously the subjective observation of human experience as it is expressed in narrative. Narrative is the form consciousness assumes in its experience of the world, which suitably expresses "the tensed" unity of the three modalities of past present and future (Crites 1989:76-77).

In order to understand the primordial status of narrative in human experience Crites makes a distinction between *sacred stories* and *mundane stories*. Sacred stories-

*not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because men's sense of self and the world is created through them*

and they -

*orient the life of people through time, their life time, their individual and corporal experience and their sense of style, to the great powers that establish the reality of their world* (Crites 1989:70).

These are powerful stories which are never directly told because they shape consciousness rather than being an object of consciousness (Stroup 1981:76).

Mundane stories are stories -

*that are told, all stories directly seen or heard* (Crites 1989:70)

stories that people recite, stories which are set within a determinate world (*mundus*) and frame of consciousness and by which people explain where they have been, why things are as they are, and so on (Crites 1989:70-71).

Hence, the *narrative quality of experience*, as Crites describes it, has three

dimensions:

*the sacred story, the mundane stories, and the temporal form of experience itself: three narrative tracks, each constantly reflecting and affecting the course of the others* (Crites 1989:81).

The encounter between the Biblical Story and the human story (to which I referred earlier) is expressed in Crites' claim that all stories are imbedded in sacred stories:

*From the sublime to the ridiculous, all a people's mundane stories are implicit in its sacred stories, and every mundane story takes soundings in the sacred story* (Crites 1989:71).

An important aspect of Crites' article is found in the *mediating form* that exists between the sacred stories and the mundane stories -

*the form of the experiencing consciousness itself* (Crites 1989:72).

According to Crites, the form of active consciousness, i.e. the form of its experiencing, is in at least some rudimentary sense narrative.

Through Crites' article new possibilities of meaning are given to the role of narrative in the expression of human experience.

### 3.2 NARRATIVE AND UNDERSTANDING

For our present study the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, as outlined in Wahrheit und Methode (1986), is particularly interesting.

Bons-Storm (1989:86) divides Gadamer's work into the following three steps:

1) There is a distance between the author (couple) and the reader (pastor). The pastor must become aware of his own *Vormeinung* or *Vorverständnis* with regard to the text (the person, couple, family, community, society). This *Vormeinung* or *Vorverständnis* takes on the form of prejudices, or preconceived ideas (*Vorurteile*) (Bons-Storm 1989:86;

see also Tracy 1984:80). Gadamer (1986:273) then asks how one can be freed from this *Bannkreis* of prejudices or preconceived ideas. They seem to be unavoidable, since each person is formed by his own socialization process and culture. Each pastor carries the burden of his tradition with him. The solution is to expose oneself to one's prejudices so that one can be aware of them, but it does not do away with the fact that one has prejudices.

It is essentially unconscious prejudices that prohibit openness towards the text (couple) (Bons-Storm 1989:86; Müller 1991b:187; Gadamer 1986:274).

2) The second step is that the pastor must open himself to the stimuli of the text. The text stimulates the reader and the pastor should allow himself to be influenced by the text. The stimulation of the text can have different effects on the pastor: interest, resonation of feelings, rejection or shock. These reactions are important, because it brings prejudices to the level of the conscious. The pastor should him-/herself also be convinced by the uniqueness of the message. This process can be risky since it may demand change from oneself. The natural reaction is therefore to avoid the stimuli from the text (Bons-Storm 1989:86; Müller 1991b:188), a possibility of which the pastor should be aware of.

3) Only when the pastor has opened himself to the text can real conversation take place between the pastor, with his more or less conscious prejudices and openness, and the text (couple), with its theme.

Tracy (1984:84ff) adds two steps to those of Gadamer:

1) Tracy wants to apply a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. He wants to focus his suspicion on the unconscious purposes that exist in the conversation between the pastor and the text (couple). Furthermore, he wants to trace methodologically the ideological and the psychological distortions in the opinions and contributions of the persons involved in the hermeneutical conversation (Tracy 1984:86). In the process of the communication process one should be aware of the distortions brought about by ideologies, education, sexism, sexual prejudices, etc. In the interpretation of the text these distortions, which exist in both parties, should carefully be taken into consideration to ensure good communication (Bons-Storm 1989:87; Müller 1991b:189).

These distortions have to be exposed. It is of great importance that the pastor should be suspicious not only when listening to the other person's story, but also when he is listening to his own story.

2) Finally, Tracy (1984:87) adds that the pastor not only has to deal with the subject of the text, but with an "informed" text (couple). That is, a subject or theme that is packed in the form and structure of the text. Thus, the pastor and the couple find themselves in a particular context.

Another important figure for Practical Theology is the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (born 1913). His work went through different stages of development with influences from phenomenology, existentialism, language theory, psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstruction, textual theories, metaphor and narrative. He follows the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition of which explanation (*Erklären, Auslegung*) and understanding (*Verstehen*) form a central part. He overcame the dichotomy of these two aspects that was maintained by Dilthey (Ricoeur 1981:49, 92, 149-152, 165; Heitink 1993:138). Explanation was understood as part of the natural sciences, while understanding was considered to belong to the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaft*) (Ricoeur 1981:36). Interpretation takes place between text and reader; it is the dialectical process that takes place between structural analysis on the one side, and self appropriation on the other side (Ricoeur 1986:111-112, 145-146, 153). Ricoeur's *hermeneutic of suspicion* (Ricoeur 1965:40-44) represents his attempt to retain both science and art, whilst disallowing either an absolute status. Hermeneutics seems to him to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience. The first addresses the task of 'doing away with idols,' namely, becoming critically aware of when we project our own wishes and constructs into texts, so that they no longer address us from beyond ourselves as "other." The second concerns the need to listen in openness to symbol and to narrative and thereby to allow creative events to occur "in front of" the text, and to have their effect on us (Thiselton 1992:26). It seems to me that Ricoeur's insight here is an essentially valid one. It is simply too easy when reading a (biblical) text, especially one that we are familiar with, to do so with a rigidity and complacency that tends to "freeze" its meaning irrevocably. To approach the text with suspicion - to query whether what the text appears to say really does correspond with its true message - seems to be both a valid and necessary hermeneutical process. I need to apply suspicion to myself - am I imposing a meaning upon this text? And a suspicion to the

text - is the text really saying this? Both poles of suspicion are valid and necessary if we are to hear afresh what God may seek to communicate to us. Ricoeur is in a way merely reminding us, in a startling manner no doubt, of the reality of the hermeneutical circle. We must approach the text critically and suspiciously in order that its message may truly be heard, and so that our own pre-conceived understandings and certainties do not mask the truth.

Ricoeur concentrates on the challenge that the text represents in spite of the cultural distance and foreignness of the text. As a believing philosopher he stands critical towards faith, which he considers as a post critical, rational and interpreting faith searching for a second naivety. We live in an age of suspicion in which the immediacy of faith escapes us. We have lost a certain simplicity of faith and we try to find a second naivety through a process of interpretation. A post critical faith does not mean that we do away with faith, but it implies an interpreting rediscovery of faith. This means that the cultural distance and distance of meaning between the reader and the text must be bridged. We approach a text with our own preconceived ideas and the text also influences our preconceived ideas (Ricoeur 1986:101-133).

Understanding, according to Ricoeur, is not placing oneself subjectively in the shoes of the author of a text and understanding the historical context of the text, but are those events which take place between the reader and the text. Texts are autonomous and the meaning is found within the text. Because the interpretation is "subjective", an element of "objectivity" must be brought into the process of interpretation. This is done through structural analysis of the text (Vos 1996:25, 29-30, Pieterse 1993:87).

The hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition originated and developed out of the interpretive approach which emphasises the subjective dimension of the living context of people in reaction to the objective reality of the positivistic approach (Pieterse 1993:71). With this theory he joined the interpretation of the text with the social reality (Heitink 1993:138). Proceeding from this data, which emphasises the meaning of the whole, and the data that the process of understanding is for Ricoeur primarily a creative activity, he places particular emphasis on the meaning of the narrative and the metaphor (Vos 1996:24).

Ricoeur establishes a link between the methodology of text interpretation and human actions by understanding human actions as analogous to those of a text. Spoken communication is put down in writing. Communication of actions is laid down in fixed socio-cultural structures bound to time. The writing down of human actions forms social patterns. These social patterns can be interpreted as documents (it reminds one of Anton Boisen's "living human document"). Meaningful human actions have, as texts, meaning only after the moment of the action. They have a content which has to be identified and interpreted. As a text, human actions have an influence on its reader-participants. Like texts, meaningful human actions also have unintended consequences, they have their one life, and can be interpreted differently in different contexts. Meaningful human actions, like texts, are addressed to anyone who can read, i.e. interpret. They are open for practical interpretation in each historical context and situation. Consequently, human actions can be made the object of (scientific) interpretation (Ricoeur 1981:203; see also Pieterse 1993:87-88).

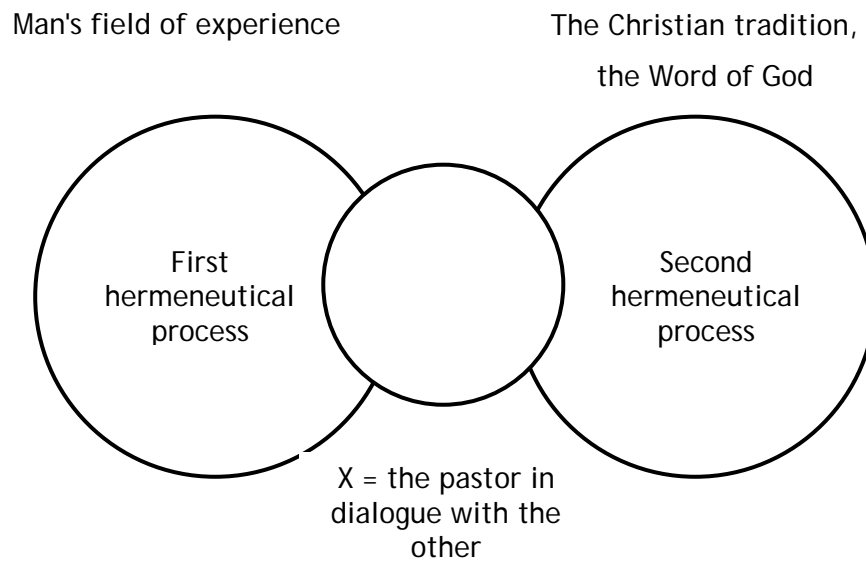
This methodology developed by Gadamer and Ricoeur is of great importance in Practical Theology as a theological science of action in terms of studying Christian actions of faith as scientific model.

### 3.3 PASTORAL CARE AND A NARRATIVE UNDERSTANDING

Tieleman (1993:25-26) claims that it is in the interest of pastoral care to dispose of an anthropologically orientated language of faith which gives expression to life and faith experiences. In this way, these experiences are clarified through the question of meaning. The story is not just about meaning, but about the coherence that is experienced and which is brought into expression. The coherence and interconnectedness between the understanding of one's own life narrative and the symbols of faith must be brought to the surface in the pastoral conversation.

According to Heitink (1990:123) the giving of meaning forms an inherent part of Pastoral Care. In this meaning process the hermeneutical process plays an important role. The pastor acts as a guide in this process and together with the couple search for the meaning of their life narrative in the light of God's narrative. Pastoral Care then means accompanying people as they come to understanding in the light of Christian faith (Veltkamp 1988:229).

The great challenge of Pastoral Care is how to listen theologically to the story of people in the pastoral conversation. The purpose is indeed to seek a way to come to understanding and to change in the light of the Story (Veltkamp 1988:198-199). Thus a theological analysis should take place, bringing together the story of people with the Story of God. Bons-Storm calls this a hermeneutical adventure (1989:85). She illustrates schematically this search for points of contact between the human narrative and the narrative of God as follows (Bons-Storm 1989:63):



According to this the pastor positions himself in the point X. We consider that the point X represents the point of contact between the traditions concerning God and the world of experience of a couple. But at the same time, we cannot simply expect that point X represents the biblical point of view, because we make a specific choice out of the story presented to us. We could have chosen other aspects of the story and made other conclusions (Bons-Storm 1989:69). Thus, this point X represents a specific representation of God (Bons-Storm 1989:70). This specific image of God is culturally constructed through our theology and anthropology. Pastoral care could be described as the analysis of narratives. The story of a Christian is always one part self analysis (how man understands himself within specific events), one part the analysis of the other (how he understands other people), and one part analysis of the Story of God (how he understands God). Pastoral Care, as the interpretation of salvation, is as theological hermeneutics concerned with the listening process in which the pastor guides someone to an understanding of himself in the light of the Story of God. During this listening process the pastor should pay particular attention to the images and concepts of God in the story in order to see if the



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person's understanding of God is positive and constructive or restraining and destructive (Louw 1993a:84-85).

The pastor and the couple sit next to each other as living human documents, as life stories that must be read, analysed and understood. In the pastoral context a certain meeting and a fusion of stories should take place. The pastor and the couple must not be absorbed by one another, but they should touch each other, and should bring each other into movement (Bons-Storm 1989:113).

Without having the pastoral situation specifically in mind, Stroup (1981:91) explains this as a collision of stories when he says -

*the narrative of the Christian confession or autobiography emerges from the collision between individuals and their personal identity narratives and the Christian community and its narratives.*

The challenge of pastoral care and the pastor is to make this 'collision' fruitful. The pastor finds himself on the cross roads of the hermeneutical circle (Bons-Storm 1989:63). Allowing for a connecting of stories to take place, and not a fusion, is not an easy task. It takes more than technical competence with the Bible and prayer. He can only facilitate this process if he himself as a person has an authentic experience of the coherence of his own narrative and the symbols of his faith. Occasionally the pastor is able to create a totally new dimension to the pastoral conversation through a semantic shift. This requires a sensitive and creative spirit on the side of the pastor (Philippians 1:9). This is where pastoral care is more than just a science. It is also an art - an art that can only be mastered by somebody who stands in an authentic and continuing relationship of faith with God.

An example of the use of a biblical story as possible intervention can be found in the story of Nathan and King David (2 Samuel 11, 12:1-15). Often such interpretations are intended to clarify a dilemma or difficulty faced by the client. David noticed the beautiful Bathsheba bathing : He looked, and he wanted her. Learning that she was married to Uriah, the Hittite, David had Uriah sent to fight for Israel in one of its on-going border wars. David made sure that Uriah was sent to a dangerous part of the front with orders to the commander to make sure that Uriah would be killed. David's plan succeeded, and upon

the death of Uriah, David took Bathsheba as one of his wives. Nathan, David's advisor and counsellor, who had observed all this, came to the king and told him a story:

*There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him. David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man !..." (2 Samuel 12:1-7, NIV).*

The power of this and other stories (of faith) told over the centuries means that it will be useful to identify the sources of power in stories. The psychologist Kilpatrick (1986) has summarized the sources of power to change people - transform people's lives both morally and emotionally - that exist in narrative. Using the story of Nathan and David, as well as other examples, I will review the contributions of Kilpatrick.

1. **Transport.** *The first and perhaps most essential service which a story provides is transport. To enter a Story we must leave ourselves behind, and this, it may be argued, is precisely what is needed to get a proper ... perspective on ourselves (Kilpatrick 1986:88-89).*

In many aspects, this point is diametrically opposed to rationalistic and cognitive forms of therapy. These approaches assume that the autonomous, self-conscious self is the legitimate centre from which to approach psychological change. A story, through the mechanism of transport, causes one to suspend this self and its autonomy, in order to empathize with or psychologically join with the characters in the story. It was because David did this that Nathan's story was able to have the impact it did. If Nathan had directly brought up the moral issues or relevant abstract principles, he probably would have aroused David's defences and perhaps his wrath.

2. **Normative Standards.** *Enduring literature is concerned with enduring standards of conduct. Either implicitly or explicitly characters in stories are judged by these norms. Although great literature does this without being didactic, it cannot seem to do without the norms ... Unless there are moral codes which are taken seriously, the violation of these codes can produce no dramatic tension* (Kilpatrick 1986:89).

Here, Kilpatrick identified what appears to be a cultural universal: the existence and support of moral codes as a necessary structure against which the action of a story takes place. Many of these codes are the same across cultures. One consequence of this is the universal dramatic tension caused by betrayal, murder, adultery, rape, lying, greed, cowardice, unfaithfulness, theft, and so on. It is precisely David's violation of such standards that gave Nathan's story its impact.

3. **Revelation.** *Characters in stories regularly fall away from these standards and often need the assist of a revelation (not necessarily religious in nature) to realize how far they've fallen. Although the norms are available for everyone to see, it sometimes requires a dramatic incident for us to see them. Consequently, the revelation often comes in the form of an accident, an illness or some other misfortune. One of the great possibilities of the story is that the hearer or reader [or viewer] of it may also have an experience of self-recognition* (Kilpatrick 1986:89).

It is important to note that this revelation - or illumination - is not the result of a cognitively rational deduction nor the result of arriving at a more cognitively consistent set of moral principles. Nor is it the result of deep or complex psychological insight dependent upon psychological theory or concepts. In this context, Kilpatrick noted that "I once was blind, but now I see" is more than just a line from an old hymn. Such a sudden seeing, insight, or revelation can often lead to transformation. From David's subsequent actions, it is clear that he had a sudden revelation of what he had done.

4. **Transformation.** *Radical character improvement is a common motif in formative literature. That is, character change is often viewed in terms of transformation rather in terms of development. Moral [and psychological] growth is not perceived as upward progress through stages but as the result of*

*more sudden or dramatic shifts - a change of heart or a change of vision* (Kilpatrick 1986:89).

Kilpatrick gave the example of Scrooge; he noted that moral improvement is often understood (by ordinary people) as characterized by such sudden changes. It is a result of suddenly seeing things in a different light. Obviously, from this perspective, stories, art, myths, and other mediums are a good way to challenge people to psychological and moral change. David's transformation was expressed in his response to the story. He said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13), and he repented.

*5. Images. Not the least important element in great stories is simply the presence of powerful images, images striking enough to be lodged in memory and retrieved in moments of crisis and confusion : a prodigal son scrambling for his food among pigs; ... a Sydney Carton [in A Tale of Two Cities] giving up his life for others. In short, the moral imagination, like any other form of imagination, is engaged by images* (Kilpatrick 1986:90).

Fairy tales often contain many such powerful images : an example is the image in *Snow White* of the wicked queen's vanity, symbolized by "mirror, mirror on the wall." Kilpatrick's emphasis on images links his approach to the tradition of the "moral imagination".

*6. Identification. Stories allow us to identify with models of virtue and courage in a way that study or discussion does not ... Identification allows for a kind of ethical action which, although vicarious, seems crucially important for moral transformation. We can make an analogy here to athletic training. One becomes good at sports not simply through receiving instruction [nor even just by practice] but also through identification and imitation. We need pictures and stories of heroes from the world of sports because training is difficult, and we need constant reminders that what we are trying to do can be done* (Kilpatrick 1986:90).

An example of the power of such identification is reported in the life of Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic of the 16th century. As a child, she read the stories of the early Christian saints, mostly martyrs. These popular reports included many famous examples of women who gave their lives for the faith. At the age of seven, Teresa and her

younger brother left home together and set out for Islamic territory with the purpose of becoming martyrs. Fortunately, they were turned back by adults.

The importance of identification is supported by psychologists who recognize the importance of transference, identification with the aggressor, or of direct modelling of the behaviour of others. Nathan's story shows this with his dramatic "you are the man" (2 Sam. 12:7).

*7. Personalization. Stories personalize moral issues, removing them from the level of abstraction to the level of immediacy. Tolstoy's Ivan Illych, finds there is a great difference between his placid acceptance of the formula "all men are mortal" and his dreadful realization "I am going to die." (Kilpatrick 1986:90-91).*

Obviously, David responded to Nathan's personalized story. Within the counselling session, such personalization has a much greater capacity to influence than talking to the client about the *DSM-IV-R* diagnostic category.

*8. Narrative understanding. Stories encourage a narrative understanding of the self. An implicit assumption underlying the character ethics tradition is that life is not unlike a story and we not unlike characters in a story. That is, however difficult to elucidate, there is something like a point, purpose or plot to life. One of the great services which a story may render, then, is to help us explain what that point might be. In addition they help us to locate ourselves within a tradition of people who have been tested as we find ourselves tested or who have acted as we hope to act (Kilpatrick 1986:91).*

The value of viewing one's life as a narrative has been held up by many besides Kilpatrick, but the emphasis on how stories locate a person in a tradition is one that contemporary commentators have often overlooked. For example, the young Teresa of Avila setting off for martyrdom was quite aware that she was acting in a tradition. Finding and reinforcing a strong story-based tradition for the client therefore is an important contribution of narrative therapy.

### 3.4 A NARRATIVE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

Gerkin (1986:22; see also Gerkin 1991) argues that the Practical Theology to be constructed is, methodologically speaking, best termed a *narrative hermeneutical practical theology*. This approach to Practical Theology assumes two aspects as being of primary importance:

(1) Meanings attached to situations involving humans and human actions (*communicative actions of faith*) in these situations are always grounded in some narrative structure. They emerge from some structure or cluster of stories as to why things happen and what they mean.

(2) Questions concerning how those situations involving humans are interpreted are therefore of primary importance in understanding and responding to any human situation. Interpretation connects the particularity of presenting situations with the long story that tells how situations are to be understood. Interpretation not only precedes human action; human actions are themselves expressions of interpretations.

With reference to the hermeneutical aspect of Practical Theology we have no alternative but to begin with our present situation. Pieterse (1991a:44) calls this the *reality* and the *praxis* of God. It is God who takes the initiative in this *present* situation. Through his grace and love He turned/-s towards man and revealed/s himself as a living, acting, revealing and speaking God. He did this especially through Jesus Christ and the Bible. Revelation and the Bible should be connected, and it is through the Holy Spirit that the Bible as the *Word of God* is revealed and interpreted. In the pastoral context all the role players are in a *hermeneutical service* between Bible, Christian tradition, pastor and participants.

The hermeneutical questions, the questions of meaning and value, as well as the questions of decision and action, are presented to us in terms of the present. We ask the hermeneutical questions because we seek a way ahead in our situation that is consistent with who we are, as defined by our appropriation of the foundational Christian story of our existence. We also seek a way ahead that is responsive to the actions of God upon us. Thus we do not go to the narrative tradition empty-handed. We go with our questions and our needs in our present situation. If we faithfully retrieve the images and themes of the

tradition, we are reminded afresh of who we are in the light of those images and themes. But we must do our retrieving search with appropriate suspicion - suspicion of ourselves and the distortions of our interests, and suspicion of tradition's interpretations of the foundational story of the people of God. Thus each time we go to the narrative tradition, seeking a fresh understanding of who we are and who we are called to be, the tradition is put at risk, tested against our experience as we are tested against it.

Our hermeneutical inquiry is not, however, confined simply to retrieval from the tradition. It also involves our effort to respond to and appropriate in our actions the redemptive activity of God in the present, as God, by the power of the Spirit, acts on our behalf to draw us and all created life toward the realization of His promise in the Kingdom. It is in response to this redemptive activity of God that our search for interpretations of our present situation finds those openings of possibility that would not otherwise be available. This can open a new way ahead for us. Here our perception of the possibilities of divine transformation of our situation is tested against our realistic appraisal of what is possible, given our situation and who we are in it. Here our memories of God's action in the past remind us never to rule out the element of surprise.

Through our hermeneutical inquiry in both directions, i.e. toward the past and the future, we are enabled to see our present situation through new lenses. We are enabled not only to see more clearly the normative imperatives that the Christian story presents to us, and not only our covenant obligations that direct our actions, but also to receive a fresh vision of our future as made possible by the redemptive action of God.

We want to suggest that our human praxis, personal or corporate, is both an outcome of our hermeneutical reflective inquiry and a new situation calling for continued practical theological inquiry, decision and action. The purpose of Christian action is to enable us to move ahead in our individual and corporate lives under the guidance of the Christian story of who we are, who we are called to be and what the God of that story is bringing about.

The process of practical theological thinking is a never-ending one. Our situation is an ever-unfolding one. It is in the midst of this story set in time that we discover the unfolding of the story of God (Gerkin 1986:72-74).

With reference to already existing definitions, especially that of Müller (1996:5) and of Gerkin (1986:54, 61), and in the light of the direction that this study will take, the following definition is proposed:

*Practical Theology is the systematically, empirically structured and critically reflective, ongoing hermeneutical process which attempts theologically to clarify and transform human actions as narratives both within and without the Christian community of faith, in accordance with the Christian Gospel, in order to open the future of that story to creative possibilities. By faith that means nesting the individual and corporate human story finally within the biblically grounded narrative of God who is both transcendent of the human story (God's "otherness") and active within that ongoing story (God's suffering, gracious, redemptive presence). This narrative hermeneutical perspective involves a process of the interpretive fusion of horizons of meaning embodied in the Christian narrative with other horizons that inform and shape perceptions in the various arenas of activity in which Christians participate.*

### 3.5 THE PRACTICE OF HERMENEUTICS IN THE PASTORAL CONTEXT

After explaining the importance of hermeneutics and narrative, I will now look more closely at the role of hermeneutics in the pastoral context from a narrative perspective.

The question could be asked from what position does a pastor speak or listen in a story-telling universe where all tell stories and all stories are valid though not necessarily true, because no one speaks from a transcendent vantage point. In such a universe, the best he can hope for lies in the avowal of the position he takes. By doing so, the pastor can make himself aware through questioning and challenging the beliefs and assumptions that influence the selecting processes.

The process of Pastoral Care is one of questioning and challenging the unacknowledged assumptions and beliefs of persons held in the grip of life problems. The practice of asking story-connecting questions challenges every level of story that the persons involved have been assuming and experienced during the course of their lives. To question and challenge a story, even as one listens respectfully to it, is to introduce unrealized or forgotten connections between that story and the stories and events which,



though seemingly unconnected have left the person experiencing guilt or powerlessness as they attempt to make their story proceed according to their intentions.

An approach of questioning and challenging within an attitude of validating the person's point of view comprises the hermeneutic stance of the pastor. Intrinsic to the validating role of the pastor with respect to the person finding his voice, is that of offering within a series of challenging, yet respectful conversations, words that give voice to hitherto inchoate experiences. Such words are never imposed from some "knowing" point of view, but put forth as if only to demonstrate that such experiences can be described and shared through the "magic" of language. In the give-and-take of such conversations, the person may gain the confidence to find her own words to her experiences. If such pastoral care is to be understood as a literary genre, it could perhaps be called conversational autobiography.

Hermeneutics, as already explained, has to do with the point of view with which one examines a given text to elicit the beliefs and assumptions that have influenced the selection of the material included. Hermeneutics stems from the realization that in a universe every conscious agent perceives his world from a certain vantage point from which he can never escape. Any examination of a text to determine the limits necessarily imposed by a certain stance requires that the textual critic seeks to be aware of and avow the point of view from which he himself perceives and critiques the stance of the text in question. In short, the hermeneutical stance represents an acknowledgment that in a world in which there is no privileged or absolute vantage point, everyone has his view as he deals with a universe of view points. A hermeneutic appropriate approach to the practice of Pastoral Care in such a universe is one that affirms the validity of all points of view as possibilities - even in dealing with a conviction that excludes the validity of other points of view. A therapeutic hermeneutic would not reject or disallow such a conviction, but it would question and challenge the viability and the consequences of a person's seeking to maintain relationships with others on the basis of such a conviction. It is a hermeneutical stance that validates all points of view, insofar as they are points of view as opposed to objective or revealed truth. Such a stance is derived from the therapeutic observation by means of which a person is thrown into doubt concerning the validity of his opinions. Once thrown into that position, he is virtually forced to defer to the opinions and descriptions of others regarding not only what he perceives but regarding himself as well.

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Accordingly, let us propose a hermeneutics of Pastoral Care as one that questions and challenges the tendency of a point of view to become mistaken for the "one and only", even as it validates other opinions. It seems, after all, to be the inexorable tendency of any given vantage point from which a person experiences the world, to settle into a constellation of beliefs and assumptions of how the world is and of one's place within it. Hereby one's own particular perspective falls back into a formative role in relation to consciousness and, as such, is taken for granted. Taken for granted means unquestioned, unexamined. Once a perspective stops being questioned or examined at, it tends toward the objectification of what it perceives.

A narrative paradigm would, furthermore, look for evidence and signs of such formative beliefs and assumptions not so much in affirmative statements such as "I believe such and so about myself and about the world I live in." Rather, it would look for the footprints of beliefs in story form. Such stories are what are meant by myths. A myth, in this view, represents that which embodies or encodes a person's, or even a people's, unquestioned beliefs about the way things are. A myth constitutes the limits of the possible or the attainable in the eyes of its believer. As encoding a person's fundamental beliefs and assumptions about given circumstances, a myth influences the selecting process concerning which events are highlighted as the stories the person includes as summing up herself and her life. This, then, is the "hermeneutical circle" referred to earlier, according to which our beliefs determine our understanding and our understanding determines our beliefs.

The hermeneutics of narrative therapy challenges the power of any received text, the tendency of a person's received story to become taken for granted as the truth of her life. A narrative therapist seeks to raise into the foreground of the person's attention alternate stories, unexpected interpretations of prevailing stories with the person's own experience of given events, in order to challenge the received text or life-story in its constraining role.

Aichele (1988:459) refers to stories that question established beliefs, and which have taken on a mythic power to define, as "anti-mythic," paradoxical stories. He calls them fantastic stories because they challenge in a fundamental way our most unquestioned beliefs. They re-introduce that which had been excluded from our understanding of reality, which was so far removed from our consciousness that we had forgotten that we

had ever excluded it.

In other words, it may not be by directly challenging a person's constraining beliefs that this hold is loosened. Instead, beliefs may best be subverted through the discovery of events or stories that are inconsistent with the received text of the life story to date. Such stories are almost endlessly present, to be drawn from out of the vast realms of unremembered, neglected, minimized, and even repudiated events in a person's life.

Finally, the recognition that we are characters in each other's stories reminds us that the only way we have of transcending the limits of our individual vantage points is through imitation and curiosity. These enable us to appreciate through a glass, darkly to be sure, the stories that others are enacting from their various vantage points. Imagination and curiosity enable us to enlarge our individual perspectives and go beyond them to the degree that we choose to connect ourselves to the plots of those larger epic stories of our communities, our cultures, our humanity, and of the great story of our survival itself, the The Story. By connecting our individual stories to these larger stories and The Story, we can enrich our lives and make them more meaningful by choosing to act as active agents that forward these stories.

We can only continue performing these feats of story-connecting by resisting the tendency to harden for any perspective, even the most encompassing and enlarged ones imaginable, into an unquestionable perspective. We can do this by continually questioning one "hardening" story with another. It is precisely because stories are the way we make known our experiences to each other, that they are the primary means by which we understand each other. As such, their magic is precious. It can only remain magical rather than imprisoning to the extent that we remember that a story always remains only a story. It is ours to invent, to tell, to live (see Parry 1991:51-53).

According to Ganzevoort (1993:285), there are at least five advantages for using a consistent hermeneutical approach in pastoral practice and research.

The *first* one is the expertise of theologians as interpreters of stories in which the most fundamental questions of faith and meaning come to the fore. Over many decades, pastoral counselling has gained many new insights from psychology and psychotherapy. Notwithstanding this profitable input, we are still amateurs in the field of psychology. Therefore pleas are held to focus on our own professional interests and skills, not to deny

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the insights of psychology, but to be a valuable partner in the cooperation and integration of psychology and theology. Theologians are trained in literal and structural exegesis and therefore, by the very nature of their profession, they are hermeneutists. When pastoral theologians develop hermeneutical methods, this can offer a fresh input to both theology and psychology. Pastoral hermeneutics might be an important perspective which integrationalists are looking for.

The *second* advantage is the possibility of resolving the tension between proclaiming (kerygmatic) and client-centred approaches, a tension very apparent in Dutch literature because of the influences from both American and German writers (Bons-Storm 1985; Heitink 1984). Most efforts to solve this tension are compromises between an emphasis on God and his word and an emphasis on the counselee. In contrast, a hermeneutical point of view makes it possible to see both the individual and the Word of God as stories that interact with each other. In this communication, the stories merge and influence one another. Rewriting the person's story then becomes possible. Therefore a hermeneutical theory can clarify the relationship without overemphasizing either side.

The *third* advantage is the fact that a hermeneutical approach gives the partners in dialogue a fundamental uniqueness as interpreters of their own lives. He or she is not an object of care or research, and therefore a real encounter is possible. This also means that pastoral workers or researchers are involved in their work in a comprehensive way, not only professionally, but as whole persons with life stories of their own. This insight helps to prevent biases, but it also leads us to the conclusion that the experiences and interpretations of the counsellor can be of value in a counselling setting. The partner in the pastoral encounter is in similar ways unique and involved. This means that the activity of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the contribution of the pastor. Both counsellor and counselee can be the channel through which God influences the pastoral encounter. Therefore, the story of both partners can be changed and enriched by the encounter with the Third. This fundamental reciprocity and spiritual openness is an important advantage of a hermeneutical approach.

The *fourth* point is the possibility of evangelizing in a pastoral context. This point has been criticized in many ways, mainly because it seems to be an attempt to influence an individual when (s)he is temporarily vulnerable. The thin line between witnessing and manipulation is difficult to discern. However, in a hermeneutical approach, we can allow

for an evangelizing component. The meeting of the stories allows for mutual influence. This approach takes into account the individual's right and task to interpret his or her own life as well as the right and task of the pastoral worker to represent the Christian tradition and to connect the stories of life with the Story of God.

The *fifth* and perhaps most important advantage is that a hermeneutical approach allows us to better understand why persons (including ourselves and our partners in dialogue) act and think the way we do. Understanding a person's life story is understanding the meaning of action and thinking. Capps (1984:29) says:

*Understanding a given human action involves identifying the meaning system's inner structure.*

As has been stated above, hermeneutical approaches imply reciprocity and equality. Therefore, understanding in counselling includes understanding ourselves as pastoral counsellors. A hermeneutical approach may not provide new methods and techniques, but at least it offers a fresh understanding of pastoral work. Hermeneutical theories provide insight into the process of counselling and assist counsellors in gaining understanding of what they do as they conduct their work.

### 3.6 NARRATIVE, LIFE-STORIES AND IDENTITY

Why did you come specifically to France? What are you doing in France? Where do you come from in South Africa? I have been asked these questions many times over the past couple of years. In answering these questions about myself, I recite a narrative to identify myself to other people. I recite dates, times and places, family constellation, calling, etc. I give preference to certain events in my history. But my identity narrative does not include all or even the majority of the events that have taken place in my life. These events are recited in a chronological order that includes the past, the present and the future. For certain reasons I select certain events out of this chronological order of my personal history in which the meaning of the whole and hence the identity of the self is constructed on the foundation of a few basic events and the symbols and the concepts used to interpret them.

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Therefore, we can say that a story is not just a way of conveying information, it is a way of interpreting facts. Every story attributes a certain meaning to the events it relates. Sharing a story from my past is an attempt to construct my future. We construct our lives with stories. The stories stored in our memories form the framework of our attempts to discover meaning in life. It also aids our approach to the future. Stories are therefore not merely ways to describe our lives. They are much more than simple descriptions. Our stories give form to our lives. With such form we organize our lives and try to provide handholds which will help us step-by-step to cross the unstable rope-bridge towards our future (Müller 1999).

Ganzevoort (1993) contributes an important aspect to the formulation of the personal narrative and narrative identity. The personal narrative is concerned with the "core narrative" of the individual:

*People tell stories. They do so not only in daily life, but even more in pastoral counseling setting. In fact, they have to, because a story can express what cannot be said otherwise. These stories together form a pattern that we call the personal narrative (Ganzevoort 1993:277).*

In this process of interpreting, every individual develops a narrative identity. That is, in telling the stories of our lives, we create a central character in the story. This is the image of our identity we strive to construct and maintain. Through all the different life stories, there is a continuity, a certain pattern that we can call the personal narrative that frames the interpretation. Therefore, we define life-stories as narrative patterns of interpretations whereby we seek to discover sense, meaning, and value of life and of the events that are occurring. The personal narrative is the central story or core narrative within the different life stories of the person. The stories of life are used to order experience and to answer the fundamental questions: Where am I? What am I? Who am I? The narrative identity answers the question: Who am I?, whereas the other questions and answers contribute to the central story line of the personal narrative (cf. Ganzevoort 1993: 277-278).

In this whole process, the exercise of memory plays a decisive role in the construction of our personal narrative. It is through memory that we select certain events from our personal history and then we use them to interpret the significance of the whole.

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The claim that we as humans are inextricably tied to history simply means that we search for meaning and unity of self in some pattern of coherence in our personal narrative (Stroup 1981:104-105).

*Personal identity is always a pattern or shape which memory retrieves from the history of each individual and projects into the future (Stroup 1981:105).*

*Personal identity is a hermeneutical concept which depends to a considerable extent on the use of memory for the interpretation of the past (Stroup 1981:107).*

The historicity of our personal identity means that we are in the process of becoming, and, consequently, the interpretation of personal history and personal identity is an unending process. This process is never finished because the future is an open horizon toward which one's personal history is moving (Stroup 1981:107).

In the course of a single life a person's identity may undergo severe changes. While personal history does not change, the interpretation given to personal history may undergo radical changes. Concerning this, Bruner (cited by Webb-Mitchell 1995:220) argues that the self is not a static thing or substance, but a configuring (and reconfiguring) of personal events into an historical unity, which is not only what has been done, but what is happening, and what is anticipated to happen.

In this theory of personal narratives, there is a strong emphasis on the individual interpretation and attribution of meaning to situations and events. However, it is not an individualistic approach, because we do not write the personal narrative in a relational vacuum. For every individual there is a range of relationships within the social context. The personal narrative of one touches the narratives of others. The way this social context influences the personal narrative may be understood in terms of a narrative public, which we address in telling our stories. The public is formed by those (real or imaginary) persons to whom we are responsible. We try to tell our stories in such a way that it will be acceptable to our listeners. Their voices are incorporated into our story, so that we can legitimize ourselves in our narratives. We play a role in each other's stories, and we contribute to a shared story, especially in a community of faith; this shared story is then communicated to our children (Ganzevoort 1993:278).

The point of departure and the basis of the narrative approach is that a unity exists between the past, the present, and the future, and simultaneously contains an inherent tension. We try to express and work with both the unity and tension between past, present, and future through the telling of our stories. A narrative approach to dialogue and therapy is about mining these stories, continuously being told by people, so that eventually they can be reformulated into stories that would give new meaning and impetus to life.

The meaning of the future and the unity of the human story which encompasses the whole "journey", is a discovery which offers wonderful possibilities for better understanding human living. Walter Brueggeman (1993a:120) described the Christian life as "telling a past and dreaming a future". This also suffices as a description of our whole existence. Our stories contain elements of telling and dreaming. The greater the gap between the "telling" and the "dreaming" becomes, the more the tension will increase, and the more the likelihood of pathological behavior. On the other hand, where harmony exists between yesterday, today and tomorrow, there will be integrity, wholeness and maturity.

The storied approach leads to the re-discovery of the unity of human existence over time. The powerful influence of the future is a particular discovery. The discovery showed that the future is not something that will happen somewhere in time to come with no effect on people now. In our hopes, in our fears, in our planning, the future is already alive and therefore part of our present time (Müller 1999).

### 3.7 A PASTORAL NARRATIVE INVOLVEMENT

Müller in his book Om tot verhaal te kom. Pastorale Gesinsterapie (1996) develops a model of a *pastoral narrative involvement* (1996:96-187). I will give a brief overview of this model, because it contains valuable elements for Pastoral Care from a narrative approach, and, therefore, is also useful for a premarital narrative conversation.

This model consists of five movements that serve as a basic guideline and attempt to come closer to the narrative approach by placing the emphasis on conversing and not on technical conversation. The methods consist of subjective choices, but they haven't just been randomly selected. An attempt was made with these methods to promote the third tool, namely conversational questions. These methods which will be discussed, narratively speaking, can be incorrectly applied. They can be applied in a non-narrative structuralistic way. Much depends on the not-knowing position that the pastor assumes. If



this position is not taken seriously, then no method can ensure a healthy narrative approach.

In narrative pastoral work, the story is not only seen as a means of releasing information, but rather as a means of self awareness. This is why people are led to tell and re-tell their stories in such a way that re-interpretation and re-construction can eventually happen. New stories need to be constructed on the basis of which a new future can be envisioned.

This opens up a very natural place for **The Story**. God's story can help a person or family to re-formulate both the story of the past, as well as the story of the future in such a way that new meaning can be found in the present. We can re-interpret our stories using God's story. A painful story of the past can now be reframed to produce a rock under water in the stream, on which one can find secure footing and new hope to reach the opposite bank safely.

We do not work with change techniques in this model, whether psychological, sociological or theological. It is assumed that a story which flows from the past to the future, possesses the necessary change potential.

Müller then proposes a model with five movements (an *Agenda*). The movements alluded to in this model, are not comparable to steps or phases. This is a dance-model and not a strategic one. He considers it logical to move from one to five, but concedes that any other order is just as acceptable. The emphasis falls on circular, rather than on a linear movement. The dance-metaphor gives direction. It begins somewhere and ends somewhere, but is always free and asks for a creative engagement. In this sense, it differs greatly from a strategic phased model.

The therapist's task is therefore to carry out five movements:

1. Help the companion (s) to tell the story of need as fully and broadly as possible.

(This is the story of need)

2. The story of need has a history, which must be told. The stories of the family (family of origin) are normally an important part of this story of the past.

(This is the story of the past)

3. The next step is to discover, together with the companion (s), a future story in the story of the past. The stories which they tell from their past and their childhood years, can be “translated” without much effort into a darkened story of the future. “Need” always consists of a darkened story of the future and with a bit of creativity, the therapist can facilitate a situation within which this story of the future can be discovered in the story of the past.

(This is the story of the future)

4. The story of the past must be re-interpreted. This includes the reframing process. The therapist, with his or her creative artfulness, can invite people to construct new stories on the same framework of facts. By suggesting different themes to the problem-saturated themes, people are invited to begin to create new stories of the past.

(This is the re-authored story of the past)

5. The re-interpretation of the past by itself becomes an invitation to imagine a better future. Whenever the therapist invites his or her companions to converse about the future and dreams about the future, these stories of the future take on form in a natural way.

(This is the imagined story of the future)

Within these five movements he identifies *procedures* which consist of a number of methods and techniques coming from a variety of sources : the circular story (a multiple description of the family system through circular questions), the chronological story (the life cycle model), the graphical story (the genogram, the life time line, the ecomap), the ecosystemic story (seeing the story in the light of The Story), the externalized story (the externalization of the problem), the story of faith (an anthropological orientated story of faith - use of Scripture and prayer), the hypothetical story (the formulating of hypotheses - circular in nature), the ritual story (symbolic communication), and taking responsibility for the story.

The key concept of these stories of this narrative approach to Pastoral Care, is *involvement*. Involvement has to do with the listening and reaction of the pastor to the story of the other, but also it has to do with the extent to which the other person accepts ownership of the events that are described in the story.

This approach of Julian Müller offers a variety of uses in the context of Pastoral

Care, including a premarital pastoral conversation (see next chapter). The concept of *involvement* sheds new light on the relationship between the pastor and the conversational partner.

### 3.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have sought to open for the reader the rich resources to be tapped for pastoral theological thinking from a narrative perspective. The mode of opening up these resources has itself been hermeneutical, a process of interpretation. It is now time to use these resources as we turn to different stories of marriage and of premarital conversations. In this way a narrative hermeneutical pastoral theology can be constructed and made viable in relation to concrete situations encountered in pastoral care, and in this way pastoral work may be undergirded by the recovery of Christian modes of interpretation.