

Narrative Theology:
A Literature Review

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Purpose of Review

It was after several years of full-time ministry as pastor to students and young adults that I first began to feel the tension. There were things I understood and believed about God, and therefore what it meant to be a Christian and part of the Church, that didn't seem to translate very well into how our particular congregation was going about the tasks of evangelism, discipleship, ministry, and worship. But I couldn't really articulate why. Try as I might to reconcile the two, theology and practice, it seemed like I was fighting an uphill battle. At every turn I felt as if what was most important was merely what worked rather than what ought to be. Though I was given relative freedom to conduct ministry as I saw fit, eventually the desire to try and understand, articulate, and possibly remedy this tension won out and I stepped out of full-time ministry to engage in full-time theological education.

After coming to Fuller and deciding to pursue a masters degree which allowed me to balance my courses between theological studies and missiological/ecclesiological studies, I began to take an interest in the field of narrative theology. Interestingly, I don't remember any class or professor which dealt specifically with this field. Rather, as I began to hear certain words, phrases, and authors used and referenced, I began to realize that a further investigation into this field might yield some of the answers I had been looking for.

Some of the more notable sources which have spurred my interest in the field of narrative theology have been classes with Drs. Wilbert Shenk and Ryan Bolger who introduced me to authors like Lesslie Newbigin, N.T. Wright, and Stanley Hauerwas. Also, a class with Dr. Nancey Murphy entitled, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* was

invaluable in helping me to understand the evolution of the division between conservative and liberal Christians as well as the relationship between that divide and the phenomenon of Enlightenment thinking and philosophy. Finally, classes with Drs. Mark Lau Branson Eddie Gibbs, and Chuck Van Engen were enormously helpful in terms of illuminating the fact that careful theological reflection and faithful ecclesiological practice are two sides of the same coin, neither being able to exist faithfully without the other. It was the conglomeration of these courses, professors, and authors (a phenomenon which is sadly only possible when students at Fuller make a conscious decision to study in both the School of Theology as well as School of Intercultural Studies) which gave rise to my hope of the possibilities of narrative theology.

This literature review, then, serves as a precursor to a larger aim of a masters thesis. Before venturing specifically into the how's and why's of why I think a narrative approach to theology might help to resolve the tension that I (and many, many others like me) felt when I was engaged in full-time student ministry, I felt it necessary to have a thorough understanding of just what it meant by the term "narrative theology." In researching the major books and authors on this topic, I compiled the list below and set out to interact with each text by asking three primary questions:

1. How does this author understand narrative theology?
2. How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?
3. What questions am I left with after reading this particular text?

There are quite certainly other questions that could, and ought, to be asked with regard to this topic and these authors, but these were the questions which I felt would be most beneficial as I look ahead to narrowing a topic for a masters thesis. I am also not

ignorant of the fact that I may have indeed been asking questions which the authors themselves did not intend to answer. Therefore, certain books were more beneficial than others for my specific purposes. But on the other hand, I found that all the books I surveyed helped me to sharpen my understanding and perception of what other authors were saying. I only mean to say here that all of the reading was valuable; none of it was wasted or arbitrary.

The following book reviews then are my attempt to summarize the answers each text provided to the questions I was asking. I have also included brief synopses of the contents of the books as well as concluding remarks which highlight the overall value of the texts for the questions I was asking and the primary ways in which I believe they will prove useful for future work.

Literature Review Bibliography

- Frei, Hans W. 1974. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press. (324 pgs.)
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Total Pages Reviewed: 1977

The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church
George W. Stroup

Synopsis

As I read Stroup's book I got the impression that his was a position of someone who was excited about exploring the emerging concept of narrative theology, but who also was very leery of letting go of more traditional approaches to theology. Indeed, writing originally in 1981, one could expect little less. He focuses a great deal on the idea of Christian identity and tends to emphasize the role that narrative theology might play in that regard. Additionally he tackles issues of revelation, hermeneutics, and the authority of Scripture, all with regard to narrative theology and narrative shaped identity, both personal and corporate.

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

At no point does Stroup attempt to define the term "narrative theology." In point of fact, the third section of his third chapter is entitled, "*Problems of Definition.*" He asserts that "Two questions of definition are particularly important: to what kind of genre does narrative refer, and what is the relation between narrative and history?" (89) In keeping with his primary and unifying theme throughout the text, the shaping of Christian identity, Stroup says, "The issue is not simply whether 'narrative theology' requires that theology assume the form of a story. The decisive issue is whether narrative does indeed play an essential role in the articulation of personal identity." (88) And in Stroup's opinion, it most definitely does.

In my own words then, I would conclude that what Stroup intends to get across is that narrative theology is vital because its nature corresponds to the nature and shaping of human identity.

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

Stroup's work and emphasis on the formation of Christian identity is very helpful with regard to this question. He says, "To understand Christian narrative properly is to be able to interpret one's personal identity by means of the biblical texts, history of tradition, and theological doctrines that make up the church's narrative." (96) Taken together with what he says elsewhere, Stroup seems committed to the idea that we understand ourselves narratively, as part of a story or stories. Therefore, it is only logical that Christians seek to be shaped by the narratives of biblical history as well as those of their own church involvement.

Although Stroup does not use the language of ecclesiological practice and spiritual formation, he still seems to be asserting that narrative approaches to theology, over and above purely systematic ones, carry more inherent potential. As he asserts,

The real test of Christian understanding is not simply whether someone knows the content of the Christian tradition and can repeat it on demand but whether he or she is able to use Christian faith as it is embodied in the church's narratives to reinterpret personal and social existence. (96-97)

What Questions Am I Left With?

In the preface to his volume, Stroup comments,

...narrative theology appears to open new channels of conversation between the systematic theologian, the biblical scholar, the social scientist, and, most importantly, the layperson who long ago gave up on the theologian as a resource for understanding the Christian faith. (6)

I couldn't agree with him more and was deeply saddened that he left just how these conversations might come about to the imagination of the reader. Even more importantly, he never hints at just what the product or end result of these new conversations could or ought to be. What is the goal of it all? Are we simply to be better Christians, more moral, better able to articulate Christian faith?¹

Also in the preface Stroup admits that even at the conclusion of the volume there will be lingering "...criteriological questions[s] – what criteria are at work in my description of the content of the Christian narrative." (7) Stroup supposes that these questions could only be answered by a more thorough exploration into Christology.

Conclusion

This will be an important resource for future work on narrative theology. Most helpful are Stroup's thoughts on the relationship between the category of narrative and the formation of Christian identity both on the personal as well as on the ecclesial levels. His sections on the relationship between narrative and revelation and the authority of Scripture are also valuable auxiliary themes. This book will be a valuable springboard for beginning to think about how one moves from understanding the importance of narrative in the theological task to more practical and pedagogical issues that link theology and practice.

¹ I think there could be a substantial link here between Stroup's work and that of Stanley Hauerwas, particularly in his, *A Community of Character*.

Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology
Gerald Loughlin

Synopsis

Loughlin divides his work into three main sections. In the first he briefly, but creatively interacts with the history of Scriptural interpretation and some more notable authors such as Barth, Frei, and Lindbeck. In the second he is more concerned with issue of truth, reality, and inspiration. In the final section Loughlin turns his attention to matters of ecclesial formation and the soteriological implications of narrativist theology. His epilogue is, in a word, weird. It is replete with figuration and imagery. His main aim seems to be linking a narrative approach to theology to the practice and sacrament of the Eucharist.

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

In this book, Loughlin aims to help his readers “understand narrative theology as one thematic among many, which at best emphasizes what is presupposed in all theology.” (ix) In his opinion, “Not all theology need make the emphasis, but all theology should presuppose what a narrative theology emphasizes: the priority of the story of Jesus Christ.” (ix) As best as I can surmise, Loughlin seems to be saying that narrative theology is basically a mutually nourishing relationship between the stories which form the Church (Scripture), and the Church which enacts and lives out those stories. He says, “Those who read and that which is read are mutually related in the event of reading. The Scripture makes the Church and the Church makes the Scripture; they are mutually constitutive.” (36)

Loughlin further contends that “unlike most modern theology, narrative theology does not look to the world and its possibilities, but to the actuality of God’s story as it is

told in the Church's Scripture." (35) Rather than trying to God into the stories, narratives, or even metanarrative of the world, narrative theology seeks to understand the reality of the world by fitting it into Scripture.

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

Loughlin's most helpful comment on this subject is found in the preface of the book. The author insightfully notes that "If narrativist theology has a polemic – a design on other ways of doing theology – it is that theology has no foundation other than the community that tells the story by which it is told."² (x)

In his opinion, it's not that people and communities ought to be shaped by stories and narratives, it is that they always are.³ For Loughlin, there can be no separation between theology (narrative or otherwise) and ecclesial formation. He says, "the story of Jesus opens onto the Church's story, so that the two stories are one story." (82) Even more, there can be no separation between ecclesial formation and personal spiritual formation. The author goes on to say, "entering the story, becoming a character within its storied world, is then a matter of becoming part of the body that embodies the story." (86-87)

² It is both plain and powerful in my opinion that this observation should help to appease both liberals who tend to emphasize the importance of experience in doing theology as well as conservatives who emphasize the importance of Scripture in the same enterprise. Here, Loughlin seems to be pointing toward the notion of a Scripturally formed and shaped community who sees no need to separate the importance of Scripture and experience, but instead hold them in constant reflective tension. Admittedly, what must precede an appeasement of this sort is the relinquishing of a foundationalist understanding of epistemology in favor of a more holistic one. We must free our grip of all those things to which we cling and put our faith, hope, and trust in that are not God himself.

³ Personal thought to be used later: The task of the theologian, not to mention Christian pastors, leaders, and mentors, is to 1) tell the stories well, 2) help the people addressed by the stories move through the processes of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation as they fit not the stories of Scripture into their lives, but their lives into the stories of Scripture.

What Questions Am I Left With?

As with many of the books on my reading list, I am left with many questions with regard to practical implementation of this compelling and persuasive argumentation. What does forming communities based on Scripture look like? More broadly, I wonder what this might entail ecumenically. I know of no churches which actually function out of the kind of system Loughlin describes. I wonder if they would be accepted or shunned by the Christian church community? If they were accepted, what would their relationship with other churches and denominations entail and look like? If they were shunned would that curtail their effectiveness? Even if it did, would that have to be a bad thing?⁴ A general question I have in the back of my mind, which I suppose I didn't actually expect to be answered by any of these books is, is this is a better way for theology to be done, and if the Church is such a vital part, what are the implications for Seminaries and advanced theological education and training?

Conclusion

This book will be both extremely important and valuable for my future work. One of the greatest features of the book is the way Loughlin helps the reader better grasp what authors like Frei and Lindbeck were after and what some of the implications of their writing are. It will also be an invaluable resource in helping to connect the ideas of theology, ecclesial practice, and spiritual formation. Both the creative way in which Loughlin presents his material as well as the breadth of topics he addresses make this one of the best books on the reading list.

⁴ It is no secret that God is a fan of using the down and out, discredited and scorned minority to accomplish his ultimate purposes.

The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age
George A. Lindbeck

Synopsis

Writing primarily for the benefit of so-called “liberal” Christians, this book is Lindbeck’s attempt to help them move beyond their traditional stance of experiential-expressivism, to a more ecumenically beneficial one which he calls, “cultural-linguistic.” After discussing the difference between these two models, Lindbeck goes on to investigate the usefulness of his cultural-linguistic model of doctrinal formation with regard to a theology of religions, theories of doctrine, and concludes by testing his theory in terms of the doctrines of Christology, Mariology, and infallibility. His final section is entitled, “*Toward a Postliberal Theology.*”

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

It is almost humorous that although *The Nature of Doctrine* is one of the most oft cited works for those who discuss narrative theology, Lindbeck doesn’t so much as mention the field itself. Rather, it seems to be the case that his work gave rise to the term for those who tried to carry forth his work. It is possible to see hints of what was to become narrative theology when Lindbeck says things like, “To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms.” (34)

Lindbeck does speak of intratextual theology which may be something of a cousin to narrative theology. The author says, “Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.” (118) I would conclude then that Lindbeck’s ideas with regard to the cultural-

linguistic dimensions of religion and intratextual theology are worthwhile topics in the quest to understand narrative approaches to theology, but there also seem to be enough differences so as to be weary of confusing them as the same things with different names.⁵

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

Again, this is not a topic Lindbeck specifically addresses. We must rather try to infer things from what he does say. His most direct statement in this regard is, “The proclamation of the gospel, as a Christian would put it, may be first of all the telling of a story, but this gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action.” (36)

Here, Lindbeck explicitly links theology and practice. In saying what he does, the author aims to communicate that theology, or at least our espousal of it to others, matters little unless we can exhibit concrete examples of that of which we speak. In Lindbeck’s terminology, languages and cultures create and shape a certain kind of reality. If there is a problem with our experience of reality, the fault rests with our failure to live out appropriate cultural norms and to use appropriate language. To flip it and state it more positively, the author is saying that there must be congruence between our life and actions and our theology if we are to present it as in any real sense, true.

⁵ I worry, for instance, that in the end Lindbeck is not actually worried about the truthfulness of the Scriptural stories, or God’s power to work in and through them for the transformation of people and of the world, but that his ultimate hope rests on the anthropological phenomenon of the way in which cultures and languages shape our worlds. In that case, God and his actions become quite arbitrary if we can only commit ourselves to using the right/best language and embodying the right/best cultural expression that we can dream up. Even if Scripture is used as the basis for doing these things, there still must be, in my opinion, an ultimate hope and reliance on God’s miraculous power to change hearts and minds, something language or immersion in culture cannot ultimately do.

What Questions Am I Left With?

It remains unclear to me what place Lindbeck assigns to the supernatural power of God and the significance of Jesus' life, teaching, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. His focus was so much on doctrines and how we speak about things that I am not sure what importance he assigns to the reality and meaning of these things. Also, though I can understand why Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory of religion could be more ecumenically beneficial, he fails to provide any insight as to how to work towards practically bridging those ecumenical gaps with this theory. Finally, although the author states that "there is no way of testing the merits and demerits of a theological method apart from performance," (134) he doesn't go on to speculate as to what communities who seek to "perform" his proposed theological method might actually look like.

Conclusion

Since this text apparently has served as a major point of reference for so many others who have written on the topic of narrative theology, it was an important one to have read and understood (still not sure just how completely I have fulfilled the 2nd requirement?). Especially as I intend to point out the promise of narrative theology for the reuniting of liberals and conservatives, as postliberals and post conservatives, this book by Lindbeck will be an important resource. Perhaps one of the greatest values of this particular volume is that it will give me a liberal (or postliberal anyway) ally in terms of my emphasis on the necessary link between faith and practice, theology and formation.

Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology
Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, editors.

Synopsis

This book is not like the rest on my reading list in that it is a collection of essays by notable authors as opposed to a more thorough work from one author. More than a dozen authors are surveyed in this book of about twenty essays. However, the editors, Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones lump the selections into three general categories: *Narrative Rediscovered*, *Narrative as a Critical Tool*, and *Narrative's Theological Significance*. Hauerwas and Jones offer an insightful introduction that summarizes the main points of the contributing authors as well as offering some of their own thoughts on the place and significance of narrative.

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

Because of the type of book this is, there is no real way to articulate what narrative theology entails. Rather, the point of the book is to expose readers to the multi-dimensional way in which various theologians understand the topic. However, Hauerwas and Jones do have this to say.

We are concerned with suggesting that narrative is neither just an account of genre criticism nor a faddish appeal to the importance of telling stories; rather it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions. (5)

Taken together with the fact that they also assert that “narrative and story appear to provide a cure, if not a panacea, to a variety of Enlightenment illnesses: rationalism, monism, decisionism, objectivism, and other ‘isms,’” (1) it seems fair to conclude that the editors of this volume see narrative theology as a unique way to go about theology

which both avoids the pitfalls of modernity and is simultaneously more congruous with the nature of Scripture as well as reality.

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

Not one of the authors who contributed to this book said anything directly about this topic. It must suffice, then, to note that the vast majority of authors surveyed seem to agree on the fact that life indeed takes a narrative shape and, even further, that our lives are shaped by narratives. I suppose that if this is the case, we could only conclude that a narrative approach to theology, in keeping with the quality of formation of life, is better equipped to both expose reality and shape individuals and communities.

What Questions Am I Left With?

Curiously, I am not sure the book answered its title, *Why Narrative?* Or if it did, it only did so insofar as the theoretical dimension of the question is concerned. The reader is left wondering about the pedagogical and practical answers to the question. Further, the book lacks any concluding and unifying remarks on the material which was presented.⁶ Therefore, the reader is left wondering what to do with the vast array of thoughts, opinions, and research which has been presented them.

Conclusion

If for no other reasons than its breadth and diversity, this book is invaluable for the study of narrative theology. In this one resource the reader has access to most of the major philosophers and theologians who have researched and written in regard to the field of narrative theology. It will be of primary usefulness to me as I seek to understand and articulate why narrative approaches to theology are so important. It will also serve as

⁶ Perhaps this is due to the fact that the editors created the book to be used as a class text and the class discussion would have filled this void.

a partner as I work through questions with regard to how narrative theology relates to various dimensions of theology such as apologetics, biblical criticism, and soteriology.

A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic
Stanley Hauerwas

Synopsis

Hauerwas divides this book into three primary sections, each one related to the others, but intelligible on its own. In the first part of the book Hauerwas discusses what he calls, “The Narrative Character of Christian Social Ethics.” By this he means to imply that, for the Christian, “their most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story.” (1) In the second part the author works of the philosophical implications of his claims by examining the relationship between church and world. The final chapter takes up the issues of family, sex, and abortion as Hauerwas attempts to illustrate the unique way in which communities who emphasize being a certain kind of people, living out a certain kind of story ought to approach topics such as these.

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

Whereas some authors emphasize merely the presence of narrative as a genre of Scripture and therefore its need to be treated in a certain way, Hauerwas points out that

the significance of narrative for theological reflection is not, however, just to make a point about the form of biblical sources, but involves claims about the nature of God, the self, and the nature of the world. We are ‘storied-people’ because the God that sustains us is a ‘storied-God,’ whom we come to know only by having our character formed appropriate to God’s character. (91)

Consequently, since people are formed by the stories they hear, resonate with, and adopt as their own (or find themselves a part), narrative theology is an exercise in telling God’s story, embodying that same story, and inviting others to experience and participate in it.

Hauerwas goes on to note the nonreductionistic benefit of narrative theology. He claims that “approaching Christian convictions via their narrative character involves an attempt to do constructive Christian theology and ethics in a nonreductionistic manner, so that questions of truth may be rightly asked.” (94) I take his point here to be that whereas systematic approaches to theology tend to want to codify and define Christian truths and values for all time, narrative approaches are less rigid and more adequate to take into consideration issues of culture and context; they are, in that sense, nonreductionistic.

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

I believe that what Hauerwas is after is the idea that the whole point of narrative theology is the creation of a certain kind of community and a certain kind of Christian. At the same time, it seems to be the case that he believes that only the right kind of community and right kind of person can participate in the theological task appropriately and fruitfully. He says, “Moral growth involves a constant conversation between our stories that allows us to live appropriate to the character of our existence. By learning to make their lives conform to God’s way, Christians claim that they are provided with a self that is a story that enables the conversation to continue in a truthful manner.” (133)

That Hauerwas would say something like, “What is crucial is not that Christians know the truth, but that they be the truth,” (150) further illustrates just how bound up the ideas of narrative theology and Christian formation are for him. The Church is that particular community called to embrace and live out the story of Scripture, most perfectly and profoundly embodied in the person of Jesus. In fact, “Jesus is the story that forms the Church.” (50)

What Questions Am I Left With?

I know Hauerwas has been accused of this on several fronts, but I believe he needs to say more about how the Church is to guard itself from becoming sectarian. I side with him in his assertion that the Church need not be sectarian in order to live out what he proposes, and even further that if the church were to live it out truly it could not help not being sectarian. Yet it remains true that the churches which most resemble Hauerwas' model seem to end up as sectarian groups. I wonder if he has certain methods which might be employed to avoid this? The most glaring question is how to go about this task. How are we to educate and train people in such a way, without removing them from a culture latent with individualistic tendencies, language of personal rights and freedoms, and options galore? What would partnerships between churches and institutional bodies of theological education look like in this paradigm?

Conclusion

I have long been an admirer of Stanley Hauerwas. I not only resonate with the passionate and punching way he writes, but I find his theology to be both biblically faithful and culturally challenging. More than that, his emphasis on the place and role of Christian community has been incredibly enlightening and formative personally. In this book, he does a tremendous job of describing what a story-formed community might look like, why it is important, and how it might engage with some of the more challenging issues that all communities face. This book will be of most use as I explore the why questions with regard to narrative theology and will undoubtedly serve well as I try and articulate the link between how one way of doing theology yields a certain kind of faith and community and another way yields quite a different one.

Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction
Michael Goldberg

Synopsis

Goldberg tackles the issue of narrative theology head on. Not only does he attempt a definition of it, but he is quite cognizant of the many different ways that others conceive of both the narrative genre of Scripture as well as narrative as a theological category. His entire introduction is given to helping the reader understand what gave rise to narrative theology and the place he believes it to hold in the theological enterprise. Then, he deals with the differences between fable, myth, and narrative. The next two chapters are an experiment a la McClendon is using biography and autobiography as theology. The final two main chapters are spent discussing the role of biblical narrative and the justifiability of narrative theology as a practice.

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

Of narrative theology, Goldberg says, “virtually all of our convictions, nonreligious as well as religious, are rooted in some narrative, and that frequently, our more serious disputes with one another reflect rival accounts. A theology to which this kind of idea is central I shall call a ‘narrative theology.’” (36) Narrative theology, for Goldberg, is not necessarily one choice among others for theologians looking for a way to get about their task.

Rather, it is the claim that a theologian, regardless of the propositional statements he or she may have to make about a community’s convictions, must consciously and continuously strive to keep those statements in intimate contact with the narratives which gave rise to those convictions, within which they gain their sense and meaning, and from which they have been abstracted. (35)

In my own words, then, what Goldberg is after is seeing attention to narratives as a necessary precondition for whatever else theology aims to accomplish. It is both the

explicit narratives within Scripture and the implicit narrative of Scripture, which remain primary and serve as the starting point for other theological reflection.

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

First, because Goldberg is so concerned with interacting with the views and contributions of so many other authors, and second, because his aim is primarily to help people understand the relationship between narrative and theology, Goldberg never addresses the link between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation. As close he comes is to say, “To the extent that narrative theology can join questions of ‘praxis’ to those of meaning and truth, it will have a rational basis, and to that extent, be justifiable.” (231)

This, I think, is a major statement in the direction of the relationship I am looking for. Whereas modern theologians would have seen their theology as justifiable on its own merits of rationality, logic, and apologetic gusto, Goldberg is saying narrative theology doesn’t work like that. He is saying that narrative theology seeks its justification not abstractly or objectively, but concretely and subjectively. For this author, theology has to do with life and living and if it does not, it fails to be true, or at least good, theology.

What Questions Am I Left With?

A big question which remains is whether or not Michael Goldberg is in fact a Christian. His bio does not note him as one, he never goes on record as saying that he is, nor does he speak of church involvement or use personal examples. At the same time, his familiarity with Christian concepts, categories, authors, and topics is unbelievably deep if in fact he is not a believer. Good as that question is, I am not finally convinced of its

importance for my research. With regard to the content of the book itself, I have lingering questions about the charge people level against narrative theologians for being trapped by relativism. Goldberg attempts to address this, but I am not sure his discussion really settles the matter. A final intriguing question is, if attention to narrative(s) is to undergird and guide the rest of theology, how do we ensure that this happen? How will we know when and if it does not? In exactly what sense ought attention to narrative(s) influence the theological agenda? And of course, what does all this have to do with forming churches and Christians?

Conclusion

In terms of really getting at what narrative theology is or ought to be all about, I'm not sure if I could have asked for a better book. Goldberg's approach is both straightforward and articulate. He takes into consideration all the other major authors on the topic and brilliantly weaves there thought together as he adds his own. More than any other book or author I have read, Goldberg seems uniquely capable of discussing what makes narrative theology justifiable as an approach to theology and in what sense it ought to stand in relationship to other elements of the theological task. While this book will not be of significant importance in terms of articulating the link between narrative theology and Christian formation, it will be indispensable for supporting a case for giving narrative the attention it deserves as we go about doing theology and educating future theologians and Christian leaders.

*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative:
A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*
Hans W. Frei

Synopsis

Perhaps no author or text was more frequently referenced and alluded to in my quest for an understanding of narrative theology than Hans Frei and his, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Interestingly, narrative theology is never a topic Frei specifically addresses. Rather, his aim is to help his readers understand 1) what is meant by a narrative reading of Scripture, 2) the grand evolution of the loss of that sort of reading, and 3) what some of the implications for theology have been.

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

One of the most helpful comments by Frei with regard to what might be meant by a narrative approach to theology is found on the very first page of the first chapter.

Long before a minor modern school of thought made the biblical 'history of salvation' a special spiritual and historical sequence for historiographical and theological inquiry, Christian preachers and theological commentators, Augustine the most notable among them, had envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories. (1)

Based on the fact that Frei dedicated the rest of his book to helping the reader understand how this was lost, we can infer that it is to a situation such as this that he would be pleased to see the Church return. Perhaps, then, we would be on safe ground to conclude from Frei's work that a narrative approach to theology entails no less than seeing our way past the detour of modernity⁷ in order to return to a more ancient approach to understanding, interpreting, and utilizing Scripture.

⁷ Stephen Toulmin in his, *Cosmopolis*, describes the modern philosophical period not as a progression from which postmodernity philosophy follows, but as a detour from which it must recover.

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

As with the specific topic of narrative theology, this is something which we can only infer from what Frei has written. What is quite clear from Frei's writing is that there is indeed something of a trickle down effect in terms of how the theological task is carried about. There are those who devote their lives to thinking about, writing about, and teaching theology. In a thorough and insightful way, Frei is showing how and why theologians went about their task in the way they did in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The trickle down effect comes into play when we consider that it has been these same theologians who are responsible, in large measure, for teaching and training the pastors and leaders of the Church in the world. So, although Frei doesn't utilize the categories of narrative theology, church practice, or spiritual formation, his entire project assumes the relationship between these things and inasmuch as he assumes a return to treating Scripture as realistic narrative would be a good thing, he is also suggesting that there would be necessary, and good, implications for ecclesial practice and the shaping of Christian faith in general.

What Questions Am I Left With?

I was overwhelmed by the way Frei was able to articulate the evolution of biblical hermeneutics throughout the two main centuries of the Enlightenment in both Western Europe and in the United States. It would be fascinating to imagine what an actual dialogue between Frei and the other theologians and authors he interacts with in this book would have been like. One-sided as this conversation is, it is impossible not to be struck by the congruity of Frei's cultural observations and the reality of the evolution of biblical hermeneutics. I am left wondering how many other factors played into the issues Frei

addresses; certainly his treatment is not exhaustive. I must also wonder, does a project like this actually enable us to be more conscious about the ways culture influences our theology? Is this something that can actually be overcome? Is it something that we actually ought to try and overcome?

Conclusion

The greatest benefit of Frei's book for my interests is that it reveals the fact that true objectivity is never possible (and perhaps not even ultimately desirable). An insight I gleaned from a conversation with my professor, Dr. Ryan Bolger, is that what Frei has done in this volume is to expose that there are narratives which shape our theology. What Frei did was to say, "Here's the turn that biblical hermeneutics took in such and such a place and such and such a time and here's why, because this was going on in culture." Without saying it, Frei is illustrating that theology is never done in a vacuum and that there is no such thing as contextless biblical hermeneutics, much less biblical interpretation. It is for this reason, though probably not for this reason alone, that I believe Frei is advocating a return to treating Scripture as realistic narrative.

Biography as Theology
James W. McClendon Jr.

Synopsis

McClendon's book is an exploration of a topic which I have never before heard, "Biography as Theology." After beginning with a chapter on the importance of theology developing an ethics of character, McClendon devotes four of his seven chapters to the telling of certain life stories, those of Dag Hammarskjold, Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Leonard Jordan, and Charles Edward Ives, and the significance of those lives for theology. The other two chapters, one in the middle, and the other at the end, discuss the notion of biography as theology and then what the author calls a "theology of life."

How Does This Author Understand Narrative Theology?

At the outset of the book, in the preface to the first edition, McClendon describes narrative theology as, "the way or ways in which the idea of religion may be expressed in story form." (xiii) He goes on to say, "It seems likely that this book will be regarded as one aspect of that flurry of interest, and it will probably do no harm for it to be so regarded, unless it is therefore seen as an abandonment of serious inquiry into the *truth* of religious stories, or their adequacy to facts." (xiii) That McClendon understands biographical reflection as an adequate means of theological reflection flows from his understanding of character ethics, the role of the self-in-community. He states, "The best way to understand theology is to see it, not as the study about God (for there are godless theologies as well as godly ones), but as the investigation of the convictions of a convictional community, discovering its convictions, interpreting them, criticizing them in light of all we know, and creatively transforming them into better ones if possible."⁸

⁸ I must wonder here, by what standards or criteria do we determine what is "better?"

How does this author understand the relationship between narrative theology and ecclesiological practice or spiritual formation?

Like many of the other books, McClendon does not specifically address this issue. However, he does have this to say,

By recognizing that Christian beliefs are not so many ‘propositions’ to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one that begins by attending to lived lives.(22)

So, again like many other authors, McClendon is definitely acknowledging the intrinsic link between theology and spiritual (and therefore ecclesial) formation. His point seems to be that our lives, both personal and communal, and the convictions and images which mark those lives disclose our (true?) theology.

What Questions Am I Left With?

One major question I am left with, as I am sure many others are as well, is, if we are to utilize biographies to determine theology, what is to stop us from using the lives of non-Christians, or others who call themselves Christians (Hitler), but whose lives do not line up with Scripture (though they would probably line up with their interpretation of it)? More, if we use biography as theology, how could we ever be sure that we have taken everything, or even the right things into consideration in our investigation? Is it not the case that it is the biography of the triune God from which we ought to develop our

theology, our understanding of the character, nature, and purposes of God from after which we are to pattern our lives?⁹

Conclusion

I very much enjoyed McClendon's fresh approach to theology. I find it a welcome and creative dimension of the larger notion of narrative approaches to theology. I wish he had included at least one chapter what dealt with the biography of a community as opposed to an individual just to see what could have been said. This book will be most useful to me in my further research as a background understanding of McClendon's larger three volume work. It will also serve well as a springboard to flipping the traditional understanding of the flow of spiritual and ecclesial formation around. Whereas people typically begin by believing that faith births character, McClendon seems to be saying that perhaps character reveal, and therefore perhaps births faith. The question we may seek to answer then is, can the faith of an individual or that of a community be improved or reborn by emphasizing character formation?

⁹ It seems to me that while biography indeed discloses what ones theology *is*, we would be mistaken to conclude that it discloses what it *ought* to be. But then, this may not be McClendon's point.