

NARRATIVE THEOLOGY AND APOLOGETICS

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I begin with a story. The professor spent quite some time one afternoon explaining an unusual assignment. It was not the normal research project, reaction paper, or book review. "No research is necessary," Professor Rogers responded to quizzical looks and tentative questions. "Simply write a narrative that expresses your theology. Create theology in story form."

The setting: graduate school in the mid-1970s. The most befuddled student: me. How in the world could I fulfill this requirement, I wondered? By now quite skilled in cranking out research papers of the usual sort, I was set back decades by this new assignment. Theology in story form? It sounded like theology in buzz groups (a low point in my scholastic pilgrimage). I remember neither what I wrote nor what grade I received. (I do not know whether to attribute this to psychological repression or God's grace.)

At my first encounter with narrative theology, I resented feeling forced to deal with what I saw as a professor's passing fancy. The veritable explosion of literature on narrative theology shows, however, that my judgment was as poor as the paper I delivered to Professor Rogers. The subject forces itself upon us simply by virtue of the wide following that narrative enjoys. I propose, therefore, to explore several facets of the current theological milieu, the place of narrative theology in that context, and ways in which evangelical apologists should respond.

I. THE EMERGENCE OF NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

Most point to H. Richard Niebuhr's essay, "The Story of Our Lives," as the mustard seed that grew into narrative theology. The chapter emphasizes the early Church's storytelling as the locus of revelation. The Church is not a group of disinterested spectators. As the Church recites its history, a confessing community moves by faith from observation to participation. Revelation, says Niebuhr, occurs in "internal history, the story of what happened to us, the living memory of the community."¹

A large tree grew from Niebuhr's tiny seed. The narrative theme penetrates many theological disciplines: systematics, hermeneutics, ethics, preaching, pastoral care. Narrativism's common theme is a "categorical

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¹ H. R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941) 90.

preference for story over explanation as a vehicle of understanding.”² This implies, however, no clear and distinct notion of “narrative” or “story.” Sorting out the various senses of these words is now, in one writer’s words, a cottage industry.³

The literature presents various attempts to categorize narrative approaches. One analysis, helpful for our purposes, distinguishes the “pure” narrative theology associated with Yale from its “impure” cousin at the University of Chicago. On this analysis, pure narrativists like Hans Frei, George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas are “antifoundational, cultural-linguistic, Wittgensteinian-inspired descriptivists.” The pure form sees narrative as autonomous. Narrative possesses a unique status as a genre particularly suited for expressing Christian faith. The purists, in a word, see concrete Christian narrative as the embodiment of Christian truth and the basis for living in Christian community. Generally, therefore, in evaluating narrative, purists resist using the abstract reasoning relevant to other fields.

Their impure relatives, people like Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy and Sallie McFague, are “revisionist, hermeneutical, Gadamerian-inspired correlationists.” They, too, prefer story over explanation. Yet although they recognize narrative as an important and neglected literary form, impurists see connections with other types of literature. They begin with concrete stories but move beyond them as well. Impurists agree that we should not translate narrative entirely into the categories of other disciplines, but they do look for some connections. They believe it is legitimate to investigate narrative by adapting the critical techniques long favored by liberal scholars.⁴

Both groups stress narrative, but they differ on how this central concept relates to other forms of expression and rationality. The purist “thinks that the story has its own linguistic pasture, ought to stay in the field in which it is tethered and retain its distinctive scent.” The impurist, however, believes that “the fences have been knocked down, that the story has gotten out and around, and that it now carries the aroma of the whole countryside.”⁵ In the present article I will engage purists primarily.

Hans Frei embodies the purist approach to hermeneutics.⁶ He tells us that Biblical stories present the world into which Christians once placed their lives. Narratives gave life its place and meaning. Near the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, people began to see modern society as the prime reality. Now interpreters place the Biblical story into our modern framework—our world of getting and spending, of geopolitics and geoeconomics. They direct attention not to the story itself but to something the text refers to. In a variety of ways they separate meaning from narra-

² P. Lauritzen, “Is ‘Narrative’ Really a Panacea? The Use of ‘Narrative’ in the Work of Metz and Hauerwas,” *JR* (1987) 333.

³ *Ibid.* 322. A helpful though somewhat dated essay is G. Fackre, “Narrative Theology: An Overview,” *Int* 37 (1983) 340–352. This entire issue of *Interpretation* discusses narrative.

⁴ G. Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *JAAR* 55 (1987) 688.

⁵ *Ibid.* 697–698.

⁶ H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974).

tive. This is the “great reversal,” the “eclipse”: Scholars now adjust the Biblical narrative, interpreting it to fit a new and different world that has its own narrative.⁷

Instead, Frei argues, the meaning of Scripture for Christians lies in its stories, not in something outside those stories—for example, historical events it supposedly reports, personal experiences it allegedly describes, contemporary truth it purportedly teaches. The text is not the servant of something “out there” that is more important. The locus of meaning is the story.⁸

In theology, George Lindbeck defends a cultural-linguistic view.⁹ He sets his view in contrast to two antagonists: the “cognitive” model of theology (doctrines make truth claims about metaphysical realities), and the “experiential-expressivist” model (doctrines present religious experiences or attitudes in symbolic form). The liberal experiential-expressivist model assumes that pure, prelinguistic experience stands behind doctrine. Such liberals can see all religions as different linguistic descriptions of “the same” experience.

Lindbeck lobbies primarily against the second model. He argues that narrative makes human experience possible. The Christian story creates and forms the Christian community. The theologians’ job is to invite others to share their linguistic world. “For those who are steeped in them [i.e. in religious texts], no world is more real than the ones they create. A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.”¹⁰

Stanley Hauerwas applies narrative to ethics. He defends a character-based ethic over against a rule-based ethic. The Church, he says, is a unique society possessing its own history and identity. The Church must not be a means to social justice or some other agenda. It is instead a community of people shaped by a common story. The people of God think theologically and ethically in distinctive ways because they can only perform these functions in the context of a particular heritage. The major issue is not how Christian individuals should resolve ethical dilemmas but what sort of people Christians should be. Christian ethics is learning to live as a “peculiar people” in light of a distinct narrative, the story of Jesus. It is learning to retell the narrative not just through historical investigation but by being the people who embody that story—that is, by becoming a people of Christian character.¹¹

⁷ Ibid. 130.

⁸ Similarly Jesus is unique, a singular. He is not the embodiment of a general religious ideal—a “holy man.” We must not explain Jesus by a set of rational or philosophical categories. We meet Jesus in the Biblical story as it is and in the stories of the lives of Christians.

⁹ G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

¹⁰ Ibid. 117.

¹¹ S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981).

II. THEMES IN PURIST NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

Summarizing even the major themes developed in the work of the narrative purists is impossible. We can cull, however, several themes relevant to our question from a potentially much longer list.

First, the purists take the linguistic turn. They emphasize the regulative role of language. They see language shaping reality and experience, not the other way around. Doctrine creates experience: "Luther did not invent his doctrine of justification by faith because he had a tower experience, but rather the tower experience was made possible by his discovering (or thinking he discovered) the doctrine in the Bible."¹²

Second, the purists stress concreteness, not abstractness. Biblical meaning lies in the text itself with all its unique, historical particulars, claims Frei. Traditional ethics, says Hauerwas, posits an autonomous individual abstracted from her community, solving ethical dilemmas using principles supposedly universalized from all concrete stories. This is unworkable on several counts. Christian ethics must steer a new course, affirming instead the value of a "community of character."

Third, given this thrust toward the concrete, and following Wittgenstein, the purists see language as functioning uniquely in particular settings. Words do not have universal meanings. Meaning is use, and use depends on the language game. Obviously for narrative theology the concept of "narrative," functioning somewhat like a language game, denotes a basic reality in which meaning inheres. Frei sees the Biblical story, not abstract philosophy, as the locus of Christian meaning. Lindbeck argues that doctrine defines the grammar of the linguistic system that in turn makes experience possible. It does not point to ontological realities as pre-linguistic, Schleiermachiian experience allegedly does.

Fourth, given all this the purists emphasize the uniqueness of Christian truth. This runs counter to the usual rational tendencies among western intellectuals. For several centuries our culture has sought universal principle, truth, experience, or rationality. The meaning of Biblical stories is not universal truth to which they and all great religious literature point, says Frei. Unique meaning permeates each particular story.

Finally, abandoning a grand scheme of universal rationality the purists opt for pragmatic justification. For Hauerwas, consequences warrant a narrative ethic: An ethic is viable if it encourages patience during frustration and wisdom in confusion. Beyond giving witness to the Christian story by representing the story in our lives, no further justification is possible.

III. NARRATIVE THEOLOGY AND THE POSTMODERN DILEMMA

Why has Niebühr's mustard seed grown and attracted so many birds? Identifying historical causes, especially at close range, is hazardous. One fact cannot go unnoticed, however: The rise of interest in narrative has co-

¹² Lindbeck, *Nature* 39.

incided with the demise of modern paradigms of rationality. Modernism, scholars agree, began with Descartes' turn to the subject—the shift in focus from cosmology to epistemology, from the object of knowledge to the subject. The Cartesian model for knowledge challenges a rational animal to accept only absolute proof. The modern spirit stresses classical foundationalism, individualism and rationalism.¹³

As an embodiment of a modern commitment, the pursuit of the Enlightenment ideal began as a quest for universals of reason. It followed a classical foundationalist method and exhibited a potent faith in objective reason. At our point in history two centuries later, however, the Enlightenment intellectual program, rooted in the modern spirit, is experiencing epistemological crisis. The great modernist expedition is lost and running low on supplies.

Several significant movements are writing paragraphs in the Enlightenment's obituary. In philosophy, Reformed epistemologists are decisively demonstrating the self-referential incoherence of classical foundationalism. In philosophy of science, approaches that reflect a renewed interest in history are highlighting more holistic views of scientific practice. The arguments found in these fields show why the consensus of modernity is under severe rational stress. Scientific and religious knowledge that passes the Enlightenment high rational standards is proving elusive. Either those standards go or we have no knowledge.

In theology, as in science, a postmodern ethos is gradually filling the void left in modernism's wake. Several features typify the postmodern paradigm of knowledge.

First, postmodernism shifts from classical foundationalism to a holistic model of justification. W. V. O. Quine, a prophet of postmodernism, has convinced the contemporary world that "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body."¹⁴ The Cartesian model, which builds the house of knowledge on apodictic rational foundations, gives way to a new model, the web of belief. Quine says we assess many knowledge claims in large sets, as whole theoretical constructs. Like spider webs, some threads in these constructs touch the branches (our experiences of the world) at the edges while other threads (beliefs at the center of the web) attach only to each other.

This holistic view of justification comports with a persistent postmodern habit of accepting multiple perspectives or conceptual schemes at every level. Postmoderns generally assume that different points of view can legitimately function in the world. Thomas Kuhn's paradigms provide the best-known example of this.

At certain levels, of course, we should acknowledge the validity of multiple perspectives. When several theoretical constructs of limited scope

¹³ See N. Murphy and J. McClendon, "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5 (1989) 196.

¹⁴ W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *PhRev* 60 (1951) 38.

cover only some facets of a broader reality, several perspectives can work together. During an epidemic, for instance, public health officials work to interpret biological causes while psychologists seek to understand emotional consequences. With broad-ranging and comprehensive theoretical constructs like worldviews, however, rival conceptual grids that cancel each other out cannot all be true.

The critical issue, therefore, is whether we can evaluate comprehensive paradigms. In religion, rationalists believe we can assess one theoretical construct as better than another, making reasoned judgments about relative epistemic status. Fideists believe, however, that when theoretical constructs have a very wide scope (as do worldviews) we cannot identify a rationally or evidentially superior paradigm. This conceptual relativism or perspectivism is the view that all human knowing, even at macroscopic levels, depends on conceptual schemes, theoretical constructs, or cognitive perspectives and that rationally grounded choices of the "truer" perspective are impossible. The status of perspectivism is critically important today. In the postmodern era, conceptual relativism erodes confidence in knowledge just as skepticism did in the modern.¹⁵

Second, postmodernism takes the linguistic turn. Whereas moderns think language describes experience after the fact, postmoderns see it shaping human experience before the fact. Language arises from its use within a particular web of belief or conceptual net. Meaning is unique to that web. Experiences of the world for those who adopt one network of belief do not correspond exactly to experiences of those who see the world through another language-shaped paradigm. Thus postmoderns agree that learning a language is also learning from a language. One does not merely learn a new set of symbols corresponding exactly to the words of one's native tongue. One enters a different conceptual world embedded in the vocabulary of a new language.

Third, postmodernism stresses a community orientation over against modernism's individualism. In Wittgenstein's view no merely private language is possible. A group shares the language that embodies its common conceptual net. The group gains its identity and cohesion in part by using the same language. Narrative hermeneutics, theology and ethics all partake of this postmodern theme: The Christian Church adopts a common language that forms it as a community.

As all this implies, narrative theology is at home in the postmodern milieu. In fact some see narrative theology as a response to the ruins of specifically Enlightenment, generally modern themes. Narrativists see the Christian story as the net of Christian beliefs. They recognize explicitly the linguistic turn. They deliberately adopt a community orientation to theology and ethics. Thus narrative theology is a way to conceptualize Christian theology in the postmodern context. One critic concludes that narrative's ability to fill the void left in the wake of modernism's miseries and collapse explains in part its popularity: "The category of narrative

¹⁵ Murphy and McClendon, "Modern" 204.

appears to be almost a panacea for the ills afflicting contemporary theology and ethics."¹⁶

How does narrative theology respond to the demise of modernism? Jeffrey Stout poses the postmodern dilemma in this way: Since modernism broke down the medieval dependence on authority as an epistemological category, Christian theology faced a new predicament. Its distinctiveness had previously depended on appeal to a unique divine authority. The Church in the modern context could choose either to state its beliefs in ways compatible with modernism or to remain true to its own distinctives. On the former tack, taken by liberals, Christian theology lost its distinctiveness. It became just another way to say what all religions say. On the latter path, chosen by conservatives, Christian theology lost its relevance. It celebrated its unique character but remained out of touch with the modern situation. Concludes Stout: "Religion could not be both distinguishable *and* thoroughly integrated."¹⁷

Narrative theology solves the dilemma. Clearly, narrative theology acknowledges the first horn of the dilemma by asserting the uniqueness of Christian belief and practice. Given the narrativists' stress on the experience-shaping role of language, the particularities of the Christian story obviously make Christian theology distinctive. Narrativists emphatically reject liberal tendencies to turn Christian theology into just another description of an essentially universal human religious experience.

Given this, one might wonder how narrative could embrace the second horn of the dilemma: contemporary relevance. In an important sense, however, narrative theology does accept the challenge. Christian narrative need not prove a pure theology or general moral truth. Christians need not interpret the meaning of narrative. The stories cut past all that. Narrative embodies truth. It does not point to anything outside itself. Christian theology is relevant in that it short-circuits the search for text's "real" meaning. Christians may live practically in light of their story. They may begin immediately to build the Church by listening to and responding to the gospel. In the current theological setting, scholarship is chaotic and its practical implications unclear. But Christian practice need not await intellectual justification or historical proof. Christians may just live as aliens in the world.

The purist narrative response to Stout, therefore, goes this way: Christian faith is distinct from modernity. The life and thought of the Church stand on foundations entirely different from the footings that support secular society. So the Church makes no attempt at integration. It intends instead to be itself, an outpost of an outsider civilization. The Church lives its own life before the world, inviting disenchanting worldlings to join its ranks. Though not pertinent to life as the world sees it, Christian thought is practical to life as Christians live it. Christian theology is relevant

¹⁶ Lauritzen, "Panacea" 322.

¹⁷ J. Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 140.

because it fulfills its mission: shaping a community of peace. Above all else the Church seeks simply to be itself.

IV. EVANGELICAL APOLOGETICS IN THE POSTMODERN MILIEU

How does evangelical apologetics fit into this situation? Evangelical apologists generally populate one of two groups, either impurists or purists (if we may import the distinction used of narrativists). The impurists see Christian apologetics using the rational principles common to world-views, disciplines, or cultures. Obviously this includes those who use natural theology or emphasize evidences. The purists believe that Christian thinking is distinctive. They hold that non-Christian theoretical constructs do not use the rational guidelines that Christians rightly use. If the rational principles embedded in Christian and non-Christian thinking seem similar, they still differ in significant if subtle ways. So purists insist on finding a distinctly Christian starting point for apologetics. Obviously presuppositionalists of various hues adopt this strategy.

Evangelical theologians and apologists of both sorts have to a large extent remained in the modern milieu.¹⁸ Classical and evidential apologists, the impurists, tend to see Christian defense appealing to a particular set of correct arguments that lead to specific conclusions. Their assumption that we can use objective premises and universal rationality to reach absolute and indubitable conclusions bespeaks the Enlightenment paradigm. (This is especially evident in popular apologetics, but traces remain in most of our work.)

Presuppositionalists, the purists, understand the pervasive influence of presuppositions in any theoretical enterprise. Thus it might seem that they should have evaded the Enlightenment commitment. Yet the ethos of presuppositionalism is still modern. It rejects the postmodern view of multiple perspectives in favor of the single, Christian perspective. The one right form of rationality is not the humanist reason of the Enlightenment but Christian reason. In this sense presuppositionalism agrees with the Enlightenment in holding to one right rationality even though it rejects the Enlightenment view of what the one right rationality is.

An interesting juxtaposition of essays perfectly illustrates presuppositionalism's ambivalent relationship to modernism. Frei responded to an evaluation of narrative theology written by Carl Henry. In the first essay, several of Henry's themes resist modernism. He rejects an Enlightenment ideal of interpreting the Bible without assumptions. Philosophical speculation, it turns out, dramatically affects historical and Biblical criticism. He argues that Biblical authority does not depend on verification by historical criticism but on Biblical attestation.¹⁹ Here Henry, the purist, affirms the independence of Christian thought from the hegemony of Enlightenment

¹⁸ W. Kelber argues that theologians in general, evangelical and otherwise, fail to recognize the linguistic turn; cf. "Gospel Narrative and Critical Theory," *BTB* 18 (1988) 131.

¹⁹ C. F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987) 3, 8.

rationalism. He recognizes the power of a presupposed perspective on Biblical interpretation. Any self-respecting narrative purist would agree.

Henry expresses concern, however, about Frei's commitment to cognitivism. Does Frei think the stories of Christian faith refer to a real, objective world? Does narrative theology imply that the "historical actuality should be considered unnecessary to the interpretation of any narrative literature"? Henry decries narrative theology's "flight from history to the perspectival that enjoins no universal truth-claims." He worries that it "ignores intellectual analysis to maintain an assured connection of confessional premises with objective reality and valid truth." Could not realistic fiction achieve what realistic narrative putatively accomplishes (viz. shaping a people and directing their lives)? Leon Urish' *Exodus*, for instance, served Zionism. Is the Bible realistic fiction of the same sort? Henry argues that theology needs an Archimedean lever to rise above mere narrative and "establish historical factuality and objective truth."²⁰

Frei's response is considerate but fundamental: "I have a much harder time than Dr. Henry thinking in clear and distinct ideas."²¹ Frei's own preference is for "a way that looks for a relation between Christian theology and philosophy that disagrees with a view of certainty and knowledge which liberals and evangelicals hold in common."²² Here, Frei implies, Henry shares the modern paradigm with the liberals whose compromise of evangelical faith Henry emphatically rejects. In some senses Henry shows he is Descartes' heir.

On the one hand, evangelical apologists do believe the gospel is distinctive, that Jesus is the only way to God. As presuppositionalists rightly remind us, this entails some truth claims that are not beholden to the axioms of non-Christian thought. On the other hand, however, we also seek to show the world that Christian truth is objectively true. This requires, it seems, appealing to standard notions of rationality that every right-thinking person in every cultural milieu shares. So which is it?

Perhaps here is the beginning of a solution: Maybe we can distinguish the formal sense of modernism from the material sense. Perhaps Henry is right to reject only the material claims, the contentful assertions of modernism. Meanwhile, however, the formal structures of modernist thinking, the epistemological methods and rational principles, being worldview-neutral, can still serve us. This distinction separates the evangelical modernist from the liberal. The liberal is modern both formally and materially, but the evangelical is modern only formally. In this way the evangelical claim to uniqueness arises in the material arena. The actual claims of evangelicalism do not fit the antinatural bias of modernism. In the formal arena, however, by positing universal logical forms, rational principles and epistemological

²⁰ Ibid. 8, 12–13, 19.

²¹ H. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987) 22.

²² Ibid. 24.

paradigms we can lay claim to relevance. We assume we are using a rationality common to all right-thinking human persons.

This distinction does help. It explains why evangelicals and liberals are so opposed to each other in what they actually claim and yet are kissing cousins in their commitment to the modern spirit. Postmodernism, of course, decisively rejects modernism both formally and materially. Narrativists see their approach as an alternative to modernism at both levels. Narrative's themes provide the foundation for a point of view that is both distinctive (because the Christian language game or narrative uniquely shapes the life of the Church) and relevant (because the story applies directly to practical living without submitting to scholarly interpretation first).

Which way to go? Having posed three options (modernist liberalism, modernist evangelicalism, postmodernist narrativism), let us add this factor: Enlightenment modernism is under collapse on several fronts. This forces pressing questions to the fore: Is evangelical apologetics necessarily committed to modernism? Could evangelicalism adopt postmodernism—perhaps the narrative option? Is a narrative evangelical apologetic desirable or even possible?

First a caution: People often lose out by jumping on faddish bandwagons too quickly. History teaches us not to adopt either narrativism or postmodernism prematurely. The caution is well taken, but it may not be germane. Maybe a worst-case scenario is now unfolding. Perhaps we have developed our apologetic strategies using Enlightenment thought forms (even if only in a formal sense) only to see them beginning to crumble around us. Have we lashed evangelical apologetics to the deck of a sinking modernist ship?

The question poses for us two alternatives: Either we should show how a modern or Enlightenment or at least nonpostmodern paradigm of rationality can still function today, or we should consider whether a postmodern, perhaps narrative, evangelical apologetic is possible.

V. NARRATIVE AND TRUTH CLAIMS

Before we adopt a "narrative apologetic" several problems confront us. The first issue, maybe the most severe, lies at the heart of Henry's problems with narrative theology: cognitivism. Does a pragmatically justified community narrative function merely to regulate the life of that society? Can it point to something beyond itself? Is a view that does not insist on doctrines somehow referring to "real reality" (excuse the redundant Schaefferism) authentically evangelical? Could an atonement be effective that lacks connection to history as normal historians know it? Did Jesus have to die in history, or is the story enough?

Henry's worries about narrative theology at this point are well founded. Several narrativists seem unclear.²³ Frei rejects "logocentrism," the ten-

²³ See W. Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?", *Modern Theology* 4 (1987) 41-50.

dency to ascribe ontological status to the referents of religious language. Yet at times Frei alludes to the matter of grounding gospel texts in history. He emphasizes, however, that in “realistic narrative” the key is preserving the unity between the meaning and the story itself. Frei is far more interested in this relation of story and meaning than in the connection between story and history. The narrative is “history-like”—“whether or not these stories report history.”²⁴

Frei’s responses to Henry reveal his different agenda:

I indeed can’t do without some philosophical equivalent to natural theology, some philosophical equivalent to epistemology, let’s say, but I have to piece it together eclectically and provisionally. . . . Using the term “God” christianly is in some sense referential. But that doesn’t mean that I have a theory of reference to be able to tell you *how* it refers. It is also true in some sense other than a referential one: it is true by being true to the way it works in one’s life, and by holding the world . . . to account by the gauge of its truthfulness. . . .

Of course I believe in the “historical reality” of Christ’s death and resurrection, if those are the categories which we employ. . . . If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of the literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory-neutral, trans-cultural, an ingredient in the structure of the human mind and of reality always and everywhere for me, as I think they are for Dr. Henry.²⁵

Frei is insisting on the postmodern mode of thinking—a holistic, linguistically flexible, pragmatic style. He clearly reflects discomfort with Henry’s modernism but not necessarily with the referential view Henry uses his modernism to defend. Frei implies that his postmodern paradigm may be consistent with a critical realism such as Henry’s. The issue needs more exploration.

The second problem for any postmodern style is conceptual relativism. Postmoderns benefit when they assign stories only a regulative task (i.e. the job of shaping character and community). This allows different communities their own stories. A regulative view seems to circumvent the problem of finding the right story. In reality, however, the matter begs for attention: Whose story do we follow? Is the Christian narrative essential, or is any story—say, the ahistorical narrative of the Book of Mormon—adequate? Surely the Mormons have shaped a well-ordered community by living out the Mormon story. The dilemma of conceptual relativism haunts the postmodern world. Adopting Wittgenstein’s assumptions about language games immediately raises that specter.

In a helpful essay Alisdair MacIntyre tackles this issue. He starts by discussing Descartes and his program of systematic doubt. Descartes could rebuild knowledge after his allegedly systematic doubt, argues MacIntyre, precisely because his doubt was not truly systematic. Descartes failed to

²⁴ H. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) xiv.

²⁵ Frei, “Response” 23–24.

question significant background beliefs. He did not, for example, suspect his own capacity to use French to describe his doubt process. He failed to see he left untouched some facets of his fundamental philosophical tradition.

By contrast, Hume doubted systematically. He questioned everything—including his background beliefs. With no life preserver to support him as he struggled in a sea of doubt, Hume sank into a skepticism that left him powerless to make sense of life. He even lacked a way to make his own skepticism intelligible. He could see no opinion as stronger than another and in the end wrote these famous lines: “The understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or in common life.”²⁶ Hume’s philosophy left him completely in the dark about what to think, whom to trust, what cause to defend, or what activity to pursue. Given modern requirements, reason could not dispel his doubts. But he noticed that the company of friends put him in better spirits. So he turned to dining and backgammon to heal his epistemological depressions. His philosophy, however, proved utterly impotent to avoid skepticism.

MacIntyre then discusses Kuhn’s postmodern philosophy of science and its ubiquitous paradigms. Prior to the rise of holistic philosophies of science, empiricists of various kinds had hoped to show that science achieved the Enlightenment foundationalist model of knowledge. Kuhn and friends have changed that. Though the notion of paradigms is helpful, when Kuhn asserts the incommensurability of his paradigms he collapses into perspectivism. Critics who accuse Kuhn of irrationalism understand the relativizing implications of this claim. How can one choose rationally between competing paradigms, the critics wonder, if sociological factors strongly influence (even determine?) paradigm choice? Is paradigm choice objective? It seems not. Wittgensteinian conceptual relativism permeated early Kuhnian philosophy of science.

Critics rightly argue that the early Kuhn overlooks the continuity between successive paradigms. In this vein, MacIntyre notes an illuminating parallel between Descartes and Kuhn. Like Descartes, Kuhn avoids Hume’s disease because he does not fully doubt his background beliefs:

What is carried over from one paradigm to another are epistemological ideals and a correlative understanding of what constitutes the progress of a single intellectual life. . . . So Kuhn and Feyerabend recount the history of epistemological crises as moments of almost total discontinuity without noticing the historical continuity which makes their own intelligible narratives possible.²⁷

As Descartes entertained the fiction of total doubt, Kuhn assumes the illusion of a total collapse of paradigms. Contrary to Kuhn’s analysis, MacIntyre argues, science needs the stable background Kuhn’s account leaves out

²⁶ D. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge; London: Oxford University, 1888) 269.

²⁷ A. MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (ed. S. Hauerwas and L. G. Jones; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 153.

(i.e. the scientific tradition) in order to explain scientific progress. Predictably MacIntyre calls this background tradition “narrative”: “The best account that can be given of why some scientific theories are superior to others presupposed the possibility of constructing an intelligible dramatic narrative which can claim historical truth and in which such theories are the subject of successive episodes.”²⁸ With the distinction between the broader narrative or tradition and the more specific model or theory, philosophy of science can describe shifts in paradigms or theoretical constructs without succumbing to conceptual relativism.

VI. NARRATIVE AND EVANGELICAL APOLOGETICS

Where does this bring us? The emergence of narrative theology forces the question: What shape will the next generation of evangelical apologetics take? Should evangelical apologetics today pursue a paradigm shift to post-modernism? Two things seem obvious. First, sustaining the now implausible modern mentality is a significant intellectual burden even though such an approach bears fruit at the lay level. Second, however, if the postmodern turn requires a commitment to conceptual relativism then evangelicals should opt out. Can we get the gain (lifting the burden of classical foundationalism) without the pain (conceptual relativism)?

We should ask whether conceptual relativism is necessary to the post-modern ethos. We might argue along these lines among others. The appearance of total discontinuity between successive paradigms is an illusion engendered by the failure to see more fundamental patterns of thought—what MacIntyre calls narrative. Paradigms or multiple perspectives do in fact differ, but they do not differ absolutely. Kuhn’s claim that paradigms are incommensurate is not true in a strong sense but only in a weak sense. Progress in developing successively better theoretical constructs is possible. We can tell that our webs of belief improve as they incorporate more and more of human experience. A strong sense of incommensurability cannot account for this.

Further, postmoderns argue that the holistic paradigm of knowledge is superior to the modern, foundationalist one. In this they assume we can compare paradigms and make rational choices. When they claim that one paradigm (perspectivism) is superior to another (classical foundationalism), they abandon conceptual relativism and strong incommensurability (which imply that the choice between perspectivism and classical foundationalism is rationally undecidable). A systematic conceptual relativism is not a necessary part of the postmodern alternative as postmoderns practice it. If so, we can explore how apologetics might look in a postmodern context without succumbing to conceptual relativism.

The form of apologetic that seems right to me includes insights of both presuppositional purists (who want to preserve the uniqueness of Christian thinking) and classical impurists (who seek parallels with other disciplines).

²⁸ *Ibid.* 156.

Purists are right to emphasize the power that assumptions exercise over thought. We cannot assume that everyone works with the same net of beliefs. Impurists, on the other hand, correctly recognize the basic patterns of thought and fundamental beliefs that humans do share. Without these, claims like "You must assume Christian presuppositions before you can know anything true" are meaningless. Although conceptual grids do shape facts to some degree, some facts do infiltrate our theoretical constructs, sometimes falsifying and sometimes confirming them. So I choose a flexible apologetic strategy that acknowledges both the variety of paradigms people use and the more fundamental similarities in the knowing process (MacIntyre's tradition or narrative) that permit warranted interparadigm decisions. This implies not a full-blown Enlightenment-inspired foundationalism but a broader, more chastened foundationalism.

If we must work in a postmodern milieu, should we adopt narrative—the currently hot concept—as a central category for apologetics? The narrative commitment poses some problems for evangelicals. We have mentioned several. (1) "Narrative" is at this point unfocused. If I say, "I'm a narrative apologist," I will leave you quite in the dark about what I plan to do. (2) Henry is right to wonder whether narrative can give theology a strong sense of historical rootedness (though Frei's willingness to include reference as part of the significance of language is gratifying). (3) Conceptual relativism threatens those narrativists who salt their diet with too much Wittgenstein.

Narrative poses other difficulties. Is "logocentrism," the search for ontological referents, completely wrong? How should a community function epistemologically? Is pragmatism by itself an adequate test for truth? Is narrative's response to abstract thinking an overreaction? After all, narrativists do use abstract reasoning in their defense of concrete stories. In a programmatic essay like this I have too little space to ask each of these questions in detail but I should eventually discuss them one by one. At this point they seem like significant hurdles.

Despite all this, narrative theology does have some things right. Evangelical apologists would do well to develop their thought and strategy in light of these themes. Our discussion of the narrative commitment suggests not only warnings but also opportunities and insights.

1. *Narrative theology focuses on concrete modes of understanding and communication.* A serious flaw of traditional apologetics is its heavy reliance on philosophical argumentation. Some note how C. S. Lewis seemed so adept with the story—they mention Narnia and the space trilogy. The reason for the abiding popularity of Lewis' books, however, is the concreteness not just of his novels but especially of his apologetic works. Who can forget gems like this: Pain is God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world"?²⁹

²⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 93.

2. *It encourages us to learn how to work in relativistic and pluralistic milieus.* None of us likes this. It is unsettling, like playing a game in Wonderland where rules can evolve without warning. Yet great benefits accrue to those who can thrive in these settings.

3. *It highlights how difficult and complex apologetics really is.* It has always been that. It is more so now. In the postmodern swimming hole some apologists find it difficult to tread water, let alone to swim.

4. *It promotes a flexible apologetic strategy, one that responds to particular needs in specific situations.* Individuals whom we invite to share in the gift of God's grace in the Christian community all differ. Each one has her own special interests, limitations and fears. The validity of a multiple-perspectives approach at a limited level (though not at the comprehensive level of worldviews) offers the apologist some flexibility in argument even though the goal, an experience with Jesus Christ, remains constant.

5. *It allows for more varied sorts of evidence, including religious experiences.* The rational paradigm of classical foundationalism is quite strict in what it counts as evidence. (This, of course, is one of its problems, since the paradigm cannot meet its own criteria.) Shedding this straitjacket gives freedom to include as one piece of a broad reasoning process for the faith other evidence like a dream, a religious encounter, or a personal miracle experience.

6. *It alerts us to the uniqueness of Christian thinking.* We must not allow other systems to set our agenda or define our rational principles. We too often feel pressed to meet all the rational standards of secular paradigms. This is a very serious error.³⁰

7. *It reminds us that apologists often assume much cultural baggage.* At our point in history this baggage includes Enlightenment foundationalism. In contexts where people share this cultural heritage, traditional apologetics, purist or impurist, often proves beneficial. If general culture shifts to postmodernism, however, those we meet may hold cultural presuppositions of which we are utterly unaware.

8. *It suggests possibilities for significant cross-cultural apologetics.* Let us build Christian defense not on traditions that are dying even in the west but on culturally appropriate understandings and strategies. What might apologetics look like in Africa or Asia? I doubt seriously that the Enlightenment will help us here.

³⁰ See the outstanding essay on developing science from a Christian point of view by A. Plantinga, "When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21 (1991) 8–32.

In sum, we need not pay tribute to modernism, defend the Enlightenment, or follow the stingy rational rules of classical foundationalism. These have self-destructed in any case. They are now irrelevant for many we talk to in North America. If they are not applicable here, imagine how much less suitable they are in the Third World.

In view of the Enlightenment's demise, evangelical apologetics must adapt to a postmodern context. This does not mean jumping on bandwagons or chasing fads. It does mean conceiving apologetics so it functions in the contemporary milieu. Despite its popularity and advantages, narrative theology in its present form may not represent our best approach. Somehow, however, evangelicals must acknowledge the issues narrativists seek to address. As postmodern perspectivism emerges in our culture, apologists in North America work in a transitional period where modern and postmodern themes jumble together. Like it or not, from academia to suburbia postmodernism affects the rules of apologetic discussion.

VII. CONCLUSION

I talked with an agnostic recently. He practices law in Minneapolis, specializing in suing companies that make defective products. In one context he is thoroughly modern—at some times skeptical, at others rationalistic. He dismisses offhandedly what I think is good evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. (This reflects his profession. When XYZ, Inc., tries to prove its products are safe, his paycheck depends on his assuming that all such evidence is faulty.) In another area he naively trusts the world around him. He never worries, for instance, about the problem of other minds.

Yet in other contexts he is a perspectivist. I ask him, "How do you know it's bad for companies to create dangerous products?"

"Because no one likes to feel pain. This universal desire to avoid pain grounds morality. For that reason, humans all experience a sense of moral obligation."

"That creatures want to avoid pain doesn't create moral obligation. Antelopes don't like to be eaten by cheetahs, but that doesn't place cheetahs under moral restraint. A sense of obligation to a moral law suggests a moral authority, a moral lawgiver, a Creator whom we should seek."

"Yes, that's your perspective, and it's a good one," he says. "It makes a lot of sense to you, but I choose a different view."

This lawyer exhibits an interesting but exasperating combination of modern skepticism/dogmatism and postmodern perspectivism. He uses radically different rational habits at different levels.³¹ I followed (with little success so

³¹ Pluralism as generally practiced tends to be modern. Pluralists often identify a theme or idea as the real meaning behind all religions, at least until they abandon that theme for the next suggestion. H. Küng uses postmodern perspectivism to argue that no one religion can be right. He then reveals his vestigial modernism, arguing that liberation is the true meaning of all religions. See A. McGrath's discussion of Küng's ambivalence: "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *JETS* 35 (1992) 372–373.

far in this case) an *ad hoc* apologetic strategy designed to handle his various intellectual gears. Situations like this, it seems, call for highlighting the inconsistency of flipping from one rational habit to another as defensive maneuvering requires. This is extraordinarily difficult. Postmodern apologetic practice must face both the perspectivism that erases all truth and the political correctness that arbitrarily reinstates it.

Paul the apostle says we “see” through a glass “darkly.” We evangelicals want to make sure everyone knows we think we can “see.” We have for a long time made this point in modern categories. We must continue to defend this claim, but we can no longer assume Enlightenment terms. In contrast, narrativists warn us that we see “darkly.” This point too is correct. In our postmodern context the wise apologist understands the apostle’s balance.