

A review of *The living human document: revisioning pastoral counseling in a hermeneutical mode*, by Charles V. Gerkin, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984),

reviewed by Brian McKinlay

In its first sentence, Gerkin states the question motivating this book: "how can pastoral counseling be at the same time both an authentically theological and a scientifically psychological discipline?"^(p. 11) Gerkin explores the inter-relationships between theology and psychology, seeking an alternative to the personalising emphases of recent clinical pastoral tradition, on the one hand, and the more classical theological language sought by writers such as Oden, on the other.^(p. 19) Gerkin calls his alternative a "hermeneutical theory of pastoral counseling".

Drawing on general interpretive theorists, particularly Gadamer, Gerkin explores the possibilities, "that come into view when the life of the self ... is seen fundamentally as the process of interpretation."^(p. 19) The counselor is a listener to stories and a bearer of stories - the stories interpret each other. Gerkin sees pastoral counseling,

as the process of interpretation and reinterpretation of human experience within the framework of a primary orientation toward the Christian mode of interpretation in dialogue with contemporary psychological modes of interpretation.^(p. 20)

This contrasts with pastoral psychotherapy in which Christian language is muted.

Gerkin takes as a paradigm Anton Boisen's concept of pastoral work as the study of "living human documents",^(pp. 37ff) in which it is crucial that theologising not lose touch with concrete human experience. A challenge in counseling is to know what can be changed and how that change is brought about. Drawing on Gadamer, Gerkin posits that,

"the fusion of horizons of understanding may offer a clue. That way of imagining the relationship offers the possibility that it is in the richness, the delicate balance and respect experienced intersubjectively with both counselee and counselor open and vulnerable to the intrusion of the new that some fresh possibility for a changed way of being a person ... may be opened."^(p. 46)

Gerkin's approach is inter-disciplinary and eclectic. Having set out his thesis, he explores its relationships with theology and psychology. He takes the Bible as a source of paradigms, images and themes, "for counseling is the relationship undertaken in the light of the gospel, not simply a statement of the gospel ...".^(p. 57) Tillich and Moltmann are used as mentors, to provide a theological appreciation of

human life and pilgrimage enabled by the Spirit. The pastoral counselor, "will place final confidence in the power and work of the Spirit rather than in whatever human influence he or she may be able to exercise."^(p. 70)

Gerkin draws the psychological connections of his model from "object relations theory" described by D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) and others, especially contemporary theorist Otto Kernberg. Kernberg describes ways in which positive and negative emotional abilities to interact become attached to the self to form positive and negative interpretations.

The theological and psychological perspectives are drawn together in a difficult discussion on "the hermeneutics of the self in the life of the soul", in which Gerkin examines the forces at work in "the self's formation of a consistent pattern of interpretation"^(p. 100)

The remaining third of the book discusses methodologies and problems involved in applying the hermeneutical theory in counseling practice. Between his own pre-understandings of the client's situation and the client's own pre-understandings is where Gerkin expects that, "the Spirit may be expected to be active."^(p. 124) The hermeneutical circle comes into play as a sorting through stories gradually brings greater understanding^(p. 138ff) within a transitional space.^(p. 153)

Though he seeks to avoid reductionist analytical categorisation of a client's needs or ascription of classical Christian norms of interpretation, Gerkin cannot of course avoid preunderstandings.¹ Writing of the importance of preunderstanding when approaching a hermeneutical task, Bernard Lonergan commented that we cannot claim to find meaning in a text if we approach it on the basis of "the principle of the empty head"². The intelligence, judgment, and experience of the interpreter (or counselor) mediate the interpretive task.³ The need for such judgments (less required in a Rogerian non-directive counseling model) and the selection of an explicitly Christian preunderstanding are points at which Gerkin is most vulnerable to criticism.

¹ On the place of preunderstandings in hermeneutics, see, for example, Anthony C. Thisleton, *The two horizons*. - Carlisle: Paternoster, 1980, pp. 107-114.

² Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in theology*. - London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972, p. 157.

³ Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight: a study of human understanding*. - London: Longmans Green, 1958, p. 578

Changes sought through counselling, Gerkin says, will be those, "that relate the self more fully and transformatively to all creation, both human relationships and relationships to physical and material things."^(p. 158) New stories and interpretations may be brought to the fore in many forms.^(p. 161ff)

Hermeneutical pastoral counseling, Gerkin says, occurs in the context of human life as a pilgrimage, within a community with a common vision. It is only one aspect of a larger context of care provided by the community of faith.^(pp. 177-8) Gerkin acknowledges connections between his model and the classical tradition of spiritual direction.^(p. 194) Counseling approaches differ according to the extent of the counselee's appropriation of Christian symbols and meanings. Integration and wholeness, altered behaviour and relationships, greater clarity of meaning, and openness to transcendence will signal the end of the counseling process. In particular, Gerkin proposes as a "primary normative criterion ... the restoration of persons to some sense of participation in their identity as children of God and heirs of the Kingdom."^(p. 188)

Gerkin is thus forthright in taking Christian truth-claims as the ultimate test of authenticity and in seeking Biblically encouraged pastoral outcomes. Feminist critics, in particular, doubt the reliability of scripture as a normative source of the story of the people of God. Fiorenza argues that received Scriptural traditions have been ideologically adapted to marginalise women and others and to undermine the earliest practices of inclusive church.⁴ Elaine Graham criticises Gerkin for assuming, "the unimpeachability of the Christian community ... in identifying the 'Christian tradition' as definitively binding on contemporary practice."⁵

Gerkin's work is valuable in presenting a model of practice oriented towards interpreting life stories and building communities of faith around those stories and the story of Christ. In a later book⁶ Gerkin deals with the search for moral and ethical norms to support a hermeneutical counseling process. But in this discussion he does

⁴ E. F. Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*. - London: SCM, 1983.

⁵ Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*. - London: Mowbray, 1996, p. 118.

⁶ *Prophetic pastoral practice: a Christian vision of life together*. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1991.

not provide a basis on which to interpret each "living human document" that is sufficiently well developed to escape criticism.