



BOOK REVIEWS

Duane R. Bidwell, *Empowering Couples: A Narrative Approach to Spiritual Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 144 pp.

Duane Bidwell has done it again! He has written a readable, practical, concise book that integrates the work of several pioneering scholars into a unified approach. I say “again” because, if you liked his previous book *Short-Term Spiritual Guidance* (Fortress, 2004), which integrated short-term counseling and spiritual direction, you will like this book, which integrates narrative therapy and the insights of noted couple researcher John Gottman and his associates. Like *Short-Term Spiritual Guidance*, this book is also rich in clinical vignettes, clear thinking, and complex thoughts put into concise, simple formulations. *Empowering Couples* is the kind of book that the average busy pastor can use to gain a fresh perspective and a road map to follow as she or he navigates the challenging task of caring for conflicted couples.

Narrative therapy has come on the scene in the last twenty-five years, since the pioneering work of Michael White and David Epston in 1990. It has had a major impact on providers of pastoral care and counseling, who were already aware of the power of stories through their exposure to biblical scholarship and narrative theology and their awareness of the growing globalization of the pastoral care and counseling disciplines. I would estimate that narrative therapy has become the theoretical model of choice for pastoral care and counselors in the twenty-first century. Yet, I am not aware of any significant work that has been done to date in applying the concepts and principles of narrative therapy to couple and family therapy. So, in this sense Bidwell’s book is pioneering. Yet, like most pioneering works, it only touches on some topics. More work needs to be done. I hope that this book will start a conversation that will expand our understanding of how to use narrative therapy in a systems context.

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After laying out his theological norms and tipping his hat to Christian spirituality, Bidwell describes his “SMART” approach to couples’ care. The SMART program embodies five principles or concepts from narrative therapy. In each chapter, Bidwell describes the method and illustrates its use with a real clinical example. Embedded in each chapter, he also invites the reader to “follow along” by trying the method out in a section called Try It Yourself. Each chapter then ends with a brief discussion of the implications of this method for pastoral care and counseling in general. The five methods that constitute the five steps or phases of the SMART program are: externalizing the problem, mapping the influence, attending to teamwork, reclaiming partnership, and telling a new story. Some of these titles are a rephrasing or a refocusing of narrative therapy concepts. For example, finding the “alternative stories” in narrative therapy has been refocused as “attending to teamwork.” Like all concise, easy-to-use approaches to complex problems, the SMART program may sound a bit simplistic and formulaic. That is its strength and its weakness.

Empowering Couples is a fairly short book, but Bidwell packs a lot into it. It is really quite impressive, but, of course, some subjects are given short shrift compared to others. I wonder, for example, if the subject of the “desert fathers and mothers” was really necessary. This could have been a fine book if it focused on narrative therapy and the work of Gottman without a brief detour into the desert spirituality of the early Christian monks. By necessity, this detour was rather brief. If he had delved deeper into the subject, Bidwell might have noted, for example, that Evagrius Ponticus, one of the earliest desert fathers, understood passions more as obsessive thoughts (there were eight of them, a preview of what would later become the Seven Deadly Sins), and he might have noted that Evagrius said that these evil thoughts were caused by demons. It seems to me that what Evagrius was suggesting was an early example of “externalizing the problem.” Some modern believers still employ demon talk to explain their personal or couple problems. In response, most of us would wonder if they were avoiding personal responsibility for their problems or their role in the relationship’s problems. All of this begs the question, then, of how externalizing the problem can be used in a way that maintains the principle of personal responsibility—or is Bidwell suggesting that personal responsibility is no longer a useful moral concept in the twenty-first century? In other words, there are still some thought-provoking, interesting, and challenging issues to explore as we attempt to bring narrative therapy into a theological context.

I applaud Bidwell for opening the door on this conversation. I applaud and celebrate *Empowering Couples*. It is a readable, practical, concise book that brings together at least two current, cutting-edge ideas/thinkers: narrative therapy and Gottman. Most spiritual caregivers, especially those who work with couples and families, will find this book immediately useful and helpful.

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