

2321 Theory & Practice 2: Lecture 8
CHRISTIAN APPLICATIONS OF COGNITIVE THERAPY
William Backus & Chris Thurman

Dr Ian R. Ridgway

INTRODUCTION	2
A. THE TRUTH MODEL OF WILLIAM BACKUS	2
B. THE TRUTH MODEL OF CHRIS THURMAN	5
SECTION 1) LIVING WITH LIES (one chapter)	5
Ch 1: THE TRUTH ABOUT THE LIES WE BELIEVE	5
SECTION 2) THE LIES WE BELIEVE (five chapters)	7
Ch 2: SELF-LIES.....	7
Ch 3: WORLDLY LIES.....	7
Ch 4: MARITAL LIES	8
Ch 5: DISTORTION LIES	8
Ch 6: RELIGIOUS LIES	8
SECTION 3) LIVING WITH TRUTH (two chapters).....	9
Ch 7. THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH	9
Ch 8. THE TRUTH ABOUT CHANGE.....	10
a. Living in pain.....	10
b. The pain worsens	10
c. From pain to pleasure	10
d. The plateau.....	11
SUMMARY	11

INTRODUCTION

Two Christian applications of cognitive therapy that we will focus on in this week are the **truth models** of William Backus (1985) and Chris Thurman (1989). Truth is at the forefront of these methods which must strike any contemporary reader as being somewhat outdated, particularly any notion of truth which claims that truth is not necessarily relative. Yet, both Backus and Thurman contend that such truth can be known and can be used to deal with troubling emotions and emotional disorders.

A. THE TRUTH MODEL OF WILLIAM BACKUS

Backus' book *Telling the Truth to Troubled People* is 'a manual for Christian counselors'. The presentation in the *Introduction* indicates that Backus is in favour of integration and opposed to rejecting empirical findings of [presumably] psychology. He also states that he provides 'an eclectic counseling model which is based on "truth therapy"' (Backus, 1985: 10). He explains that the basic tenet of cognitive therapy -'what people believe and tell themselves determines their behavior and their feelings about life'- is 'the axis on which Christianity turns' (p. 10). That axis is further defined as 'belief, faith is the key to everything!' (p. 10).

[First, one should be suspicious of the claim that a secular therapy espouses what is in fact the axis of the Christian faith, not necessarily reject it because we also believe in common grace, but be a little sceptical. And is it true that Christian faith teaches that what we believe *determines* our feeling and behaviour?

Second, is it true to say that faith is the key to everything? 'For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works lest anyone should boast' (Eph 2: 8). God's creative action in the Father, redemptive accomplishment in the Son, and sanctifying achievement through the Spirit is the axis on which the Faith turns. Not our faith, not our works but God's faithfulness and mercy.]

In chapter 8 Backus calls truth, 'the fiery core of counseling'. He quotes Jn 8: 32, 'and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free' which is often quoted by us all but has an interesting context because it was directed to those who Jesus discerned were trying to kill him! After speaking about absolute truth and the need for counsellors to experience truth in their own lives he lists 4 modes of the Truth.

First, Jesus the Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14: 6).

Backus believes Jesus is called the Truth because He revealed the Truthfulness of God regarding His promises. For the Hebrew, truth is doing what you say you will do, it is being faithful to your word. God promised a Deliverer and sent Jesus to be our Saviour. He fulfilled His Word, hence, Jesus is the Truth of God revealed in human flesh.

Second, Backus understands the gospel to be the Truth (e. g., Gal 2: 5, 14).

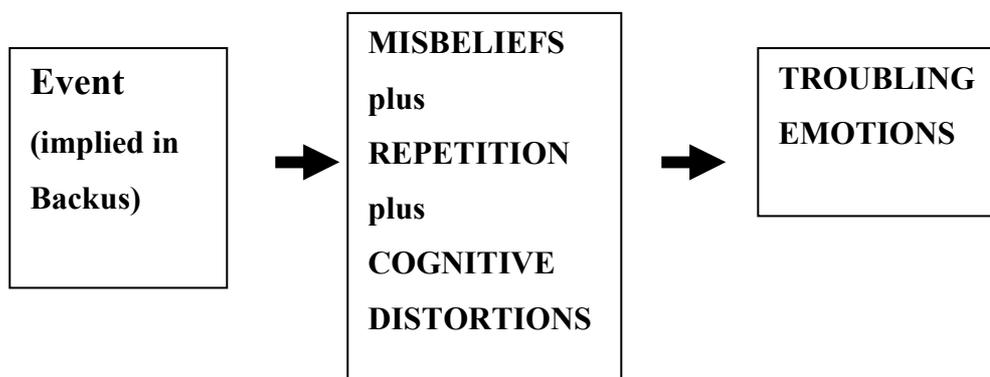
He is a good Lutheran! Lutherans tend to understand that the heart of the Scriptures (Ss) is the **gospel**, that is, the good news about Jesus. Both Lutherans and Anglicans stand up when passages are read from the gospels in congregational settings. The gospel reading is typically read by a deacon or by a pastor or priest.

Third, the Ss are the Truth (Jn 17: 17) largely because they have come to us through the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit (Jn 14: 17; 15: 26). 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God [God-breathed]' (2 Tim 3: 16).

Fourthly, Backus believes that the truth is any statement 'whose meaning fits the way things really are' (p. 69). This use refers to empirical means—he mentions human senses and reason—that are used to establish the truth or otherwise of various facts. Such truth is subject to further correction and by the inscripturated Word of God.

Backus then chooses to deal with troubling emotions such as anxiety, resentment, irritation, and depression. He defines emotion as 'a response of a number of physical systems to something we believe' (p. 72). I hope you notice that Backus is now speaking about belief as if objective truth and subjective belief are in fact closely connected. There is undoubtedly a connection but Backus seems to avoid saying what it is and slides back and forth between one and the other.

He believes that troubling emotions are perpetuated when we continue to repeat misbeliefs to ourselves, the so-called 'internal monologue' (p. 73).¹ (He identifies a passage from Martin Luther's writings on the Lord's Prayer in which he uses 'misbeliefs'.) The three misbeliefs in depression are: 'I'm no good'; 'My life is no good'; 'My future is hopeless'. These are taken from Beck as are a list of 5 cognitive process errors. These three misbeliefs are countered by truths such as: 'You are a creature of infinite worth and value'²; 'Even a depressed person can find meaning and reinforcement in activity'³; and 'God's word says that the future is not hopeless'. According to Backus, these truths cannot simply be stated but the CT has to change his present beliefs 'only on the basis of argument and evidence' (p. 76). In summary, Backus working model is a standard cognitive model much influenced by Ellis and Beck. Note following diagram.



¹ I hope you recognize this as classically Ellis' REBT approach.

² Is this in fact true? Are we creatures of *infinite* value?

³ Much easier to say this than to do it!

Major problem with all cognitive models is, how do we know that emotion did not lead to misbeliefs and to cognitive distortions?⁴ CT works but not necessarily all that much better than medication, interpersonal therapy, or behaviour therapy.

B. THE TRUTH MODEL OF CHRIS THURMAN

Thurman's book (1989) *The Lies We Believe* has 8 chapters numbered sequentially through three main sections:

SECTION 1) LIVING WITH LIES (one chapter)

Ch 1: THE TRUTH ABOUT THE LIES WE BELIEVE

Thurman opens his book with a case-study about Janet, who is depressed because everything seems to be going wrong in her life. Husband and she are not getting on. Like the other night she stayed up late folding clothes. He didn't offer to help even though he knew she had to get up early, feed children, get them off to school. When she asked him to help he exploded with anger. This type of reaction is typical of him at the moment. Also Janet is over-weight and hates herself for putting on all the extra kilograms. Yelled at the kids when she dropped a glass pitcher of orange juice over the kitchen floor and the kids walked the juice into the lounge. Felt a failure as a mother. At work, she is worried she will make a mistake. Doesn't feel close to her colleagues and she feels the same about the members of her church too. Even believes that God is disgusted with her because she doesn't do all the things she should be doing. She certainly knows she is disgusted with herself.

Thurman (1989) believes that Janet believes that she is miserable because of her problems with her marriage, her weight, her mothering, being lonely at work and church etc. However, Thurman believes that the real cause of her

⁴ Ellis admits as much but believes that thinking is much easier to change than emotions.

emotional distress is not the problems per se but the destructive lies she is telling herself. Thurman's model is a simple cognitive-type model. However, he deviates noticeably from secular cognitive theory's evaluation of "bad" thinking as "maladaptive" thinking. He does not call thinking that leads to emotional distress "maladaptive" or "irrational" but untruthful.

Thurman says that there are at least 4 lies she was telling herself: making mistakes is terrible. The truth is that humans make mistakes all the time. It's part of being human. This is the "I must be perfect" self-lie. Secondly, she is telling herself that her husband is causing the marriage problems when in fact she is partly responsible. This is the, "It's all your fault" marital lie. Thirdly, being overweight equals being a rotten person when her weight has little to do with her worth as a human being. This is the, "You're only as good as what you do" worldly lie. Lastly, God is disgusted with her when God loves her despite what she does. This is the "God's love must be earned" religious lie.

Thurman believes that Janet's case is not unique that in fact most of us are telling ourselves lies all the time and are paying a high price emotionally for doing so. Brain is like a tape deck. Brain has access to thousands of tapes at a moment's notice which hold all the beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that you have "recorded" during your life. Some of these tapes are truthful, some are lies. Some are conscious and some unconscious. Unconscious ones need to be made conscious otherwise you are at their mercy.

If your mind is dominated by the truth rather than lies, you'll feel more well-being than misery. If lies are more dominant than truth then correspondingly you will experience more misery than well-being. Equal mixture of both will lead to an up-and-down emotional life.

Primary challenge is not to change circumstances around us (although there is nothing wrong with improving them if you can) but to make our mental

tapes as truthful as we can. Lies produce emotional misery. Truth produces emotional health. "As a person thinks in her heart so is she". Good thoughts produce good fruit, bad thoughts bad fruit. Seeds always produce their own kind.

But what is truth and what are lies?

Truth is reality as it is, not what it seems to be. Lies are beliefs, attitudes, or expectations that don't fit reality (p. 24). Thurman shows clearly his biblical commitment in stating that we can know Truth. (Our culture believes that we can only know one's own truth.) Truth, he says, is like an iceberg. We can know the tip of the iceberg through day to day experience and we can know ultimate truth which depends on revelation by a power greater than ourselves.

SECTION 2) THE LIES WE BELIEVE (five chapters)

Ch 2: SELF-LIES

- I must be perfect
- I must have everyone's love and approval
- It is easier to avoid problems than to face them
- I can't be happy unless things do my way
- It's somebody else's fault

Ch 3: WORLDLY LIES

- You can have it all
- You are only as good as what you do
- Life should be easy
- Life should be fair
- Don't wait
- People are basically good

Ch 4: MARITAL LIES

- It's all your fault
- If it takes hard work, we must not be right for each other
- You can and should meet all my needs
- You owe me
- I shouldn't have to change
- You should be like me

Ch 5: DISTORTION LIES

- A mountain out of a molehill
- Taking everything personally
- Black/white
- Missing the forest for the trees
- History always repeats itself
- Don't confuse me with the facts

Ch 6: RELIGIOUS LIES

- God's love must be earned
- God hates the sin and the sinner
- Because I am a Christian, God will protect me from pain and suffering
- All my problems are caused by my sins
- It is my Christian duty to meet all the needs of others
- A good Christian does not feel angry, anxious, or depressed
- God can't use me unless I'm spiritually strong

**Use of ABCDE approach of Ellis to defeat lies in one's life.

1. Thurman calls it "Event". (Antecedent Event in Ellis.) For example, you are in a queue at the supermarket which is for 8 items or less and being in a great hurry you become aware of a customer who has well over the 8 item limit gasbagging at the check out.
2. Self-talk. (Belief) e. g., "Things have got to go my way in order for me to be happy."
3. Emotional reaction to the self-talk (Consequences.)
4. Truthful self-talk (Dispute.)
5. Emotional reaction after truthful self-talk. (Effect.)

SECTION 3) LIVING WITH TRUTH (two chapters)

Ch 7. THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH

Need more than a knowledge of lies. Just ridding our lives of lies will not necessarily bring happiness and success. We do need to fight the lies but also to know the truth about the truth.

We acquire truth piece by piece like a mosaic rather than all at once in a blinding illumination. Moreover, we never have all the pieces as we usually do with a jigsaw and we never will. Nevertheless, we may seek the Origin of all truth, the One who claimed to be the Truth which leads us to God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Pride and prejudice will often prevent us from knowing the truth. Pride arrogantly says, 'I already know the truth', and prejudice says, 'My mind is already made up'.

Truth may lead to pain. The truth may hurt. Whistle-blowers who tell the truth about organisations such as police pay a high price for their actions.

Also learning to know the truth may need to begin in a readiness to doubt some of the things one has been taught as a child or to doubt the things one has learned as a child.

Some lies are so powerful because they appear to be more exciting than the truth. For example, wealth, health and prosperity doctrine seems so much more attractive than the fact that most of the spiritual giants of the past were much poorer than most of us today. However, the truth will stand forever whereas lies will come to an end.

Ch 8. THE TRUTH ABOUT CHANGE

Thurman outlines a pattern that clients typically go through when they begin to fight their lies and replace them with truth. Important to know the pattern so that we know what to expect.

a. Living in pain.

This is the phase that describes the neurotic person coming to therapy. They behave in certain ways that, even though self-destructive, they continue to practise.

b. The pain worsens

However, beginning to do something about the problem usually leads to one feeling worse. Many human efforts to change in other areas also result in a similar sort of effect. If one tries to lose weight, give up coffee, get fit the immediate response in the body is normally unpleasant. At this point many people give up. However, if one can make a decision to delay gratification, to see the benefits of the long-term rather than the pain of the short-term then one can get through this second phase.

c. From pain to pleasure

Hopefully, after a while one begins to see and feel the benefits of giving up lies and affirming the truth. However, there can still be pain so people can still give up even when things are getting better.

d. The plateau

More joy and satisfaction in the accomplishment of phases 2 & 3. The depth and pervasiveness of the lies faced in phase 1 affect how long it takes to get to phase 4. One must use the ABCDEF (Ellis) approach to defeat lies.

SUMMARY

Thurman's model is very similar to that of Backus' except that Thurman provides both scriptural and non-scriptural support for the truths he wants to inculcate. He consistently used the idea of Truth and truths throughout his presentation. He leaned more on Ellis' general cognitive model rather than Beck's. However, as Jones and Butman remind us, Ellis ideally wanted CTs to adopt his philosophy of life, his religion, so that an 'elegant' REBT practice would result. This aim alerts us to the fact that therapy is always related to some view of life and is never neutral with respect to God. This reality has both positive and negative implications. Negatively it means that if we swallow whole the teaching of someone whose confession is inconsistent with the gospel we may be led into dangerous paths. But positively, we may still learn from those who are religiously far from us while needing to 'guard our hearts with all diligence; for out of them are the issues of life' (Prov 4:23). Also positively, remember that everyone that we counsel who is not a follower of Jesus is being influenced by the implicit message of our ministry even if the name of Christ is never mentioned.

REFERENCES

- Backus, W. (1985). *Telling the truth to troubled people*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Publishers.
- Thurman, C. (1989). *The lies we believe*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.