Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167)
Friend and Counselor

by James M. Houston
Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute
Founder of Regent College, Professor of Spiritual Theology (retired),
and Lecturer at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University

Aelred of Rievaulx was born at Hexham, an area considered remote in today’s England, but a rich cultural center of Northumbria in his day. Neither English nor Scottish in its independence, its frontier character enabled Aelred’s family to exert ecclesial influence over both countries as devout and godly priests. With such moral exemplars, it is understandable that priestly celibacy, enforced elsewhere by the Gregorian Reform, was so slow in entering into their realm of influence; it must have seemed unnecessary.

Aelred’s Life
Ethelred was his real name, but adapted to the Normans he became Aelred. Moreover, his Latin name could express being “all or every, counsel.” In a reconciling cultural situation between old and new ways, Saxon or Norman, both the place—Northumbria and Yorkshire—and the man—Aelred—placed him to be “blessed” in peace-making. Becoming a Cistercian greatly helped, for this new reforming order, which we previously discussed in our article on Bernard of Clairvaux, was respected for its new ideals. Aelred was devoted about his friendships, and we would probably have known nothing about him without The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx, written by his faithful friend Walter Daniel. [1] Featured in Aelred’s own book, Spiritual Friendship, Walter Daniel had been his devoted friend for seventeen years.

At the end of his Letter to Maurice, his superior, Walter Daniel describes how near the end of his life, Aelred was suddenly and savagely attacked by a monk who had gone berserk and had cast the frail old man into the hearth fire. Rescued quickly by the other monks standing around, Aelred responded:

No, no, I beg; no, my sons, do not strip your father of the vesture of suffering. I am quite all right, I am not hurt, I am not

The context, then, in which Aelred sets “spiritual friendship” is in “taking their beginning from Christ, advancing through Christ, and then are perfected in Christ.”

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Thoughts to Ponder

Crossing the River to The Celestial City

John Bunyan (1628–1688) was a tinker by trade who lived near Bedford, England, and after his conversion to Christianity became a Baptist preacher. He had only two or three years of education, but was thoroughly versed in the Scriptures and Luther’s commentary on Galatians. Bunyan spent twelve years in prison for preaching without a license, during which time he wrote, The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to That which is to Come, published in 1678. Commonly called Pilgrim’s Progress, this allegory of the Christian life is one of the greatest spiritual classics in history and has long been considered one of the greatest works of English literature. It has been translated into over one hundred languages. Although the excerpt below is original text, it is available in updated versions for the modern reader.

The following scene describes Christian and his companion, Hopeful, as they pass through the river of death and enter into the glories of heaven:

Now, upon the bank of the river, on the other side, they saw the two Shining Men again, who there waited for them. Wherefore, being come out of the river, they saluted them, saying, “We are ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for those that shall be heirs of salvation.” Thus they went along towards the gate. Now you must note that the city stood upon a mighty hill; but the pilgrims went up that hill with ease, because they had these two men to lead them up by the arms: also they had left their mortal garments behind them in the river; for, though they went in with them, they came out without them. They therefore went up here with much agility and speed, though the foundation upon which the city was framed was higher than the clouds; they therefore went up through the regions of the air, sweetly talking as they went, being comforted, because they safely got over the river, and had such glorious companions to attend them.

The talk they had with the Shining Ones was about the glory of the place, who told them that the beauty and glory of it was inexpressible. “There,” said they, “is the Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the innumerable company of angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect.” “You are going now,” said they, “to the paradise of God, wherein you

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Evangelicals are gospel people and Bible people. Indeed, as their critics might put it, they are hot gospelers and Bible thumpers. The gospel they proclaim is news so good they feel compelled to share it: it is the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And what they declare about Jesus Christ—the gospel—they learn from what God has told the world about himself, using human language, in a collection of ancient documents providentially preserved and revered by Christians everywhere as the Holy Scriptures. As evangelicals celebrate God’s love in redemption, so they celebrate God’s wisdom in providing a sure source of knowledge about it. The authenticity of the gospel is established by the authority of the Bible. Evangelicals agree with Martin Luther and John Calvin that the Bible is the standard by which all other religious authorities must be judged. They also believe with John Wesley that the Scriptures are “a most solid and precious system of divine truth, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom.” In the two centuries since Wesley’s death, evangelical theologians have defended the truth-telling character of biblical revelation against both accommodationist theologies and destructively critical methodologies of various types. Carl F.H. Henry’s God, Revelation and Authority (1976–83) remains unsurpassed as a theological epistemology and epitome of the evangelical case against these skeptical trends.

In recent years, discussion of biblical authority has moved from revelation and inspiration to interpretation. And yet, if the study of the Bible is the soul of theology, as the Second Vatican Council says, and if the first task of the preacher is to listen for and expect to find the Word of God in the charter documents of the Christian faith, then we cannot sidestep the uniqueness of the Bible as the definitive expression of God’s truth, nor can we stop making an issue of asserting it.

Perhaps the most widely attested affirmation of biblical authority among evangelicals over the past generation is the statement found in Article 2 of the Lausanne Covenant (1974):

We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written Word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. We also affirm the power of God’s Word to accomplish His purpose of salvation. The message of the Bible is addressed to all mankind. For God’s revelation in Christ and in Scripture is unchangeable. Through it the Holy Spirit still speaks today. He illumines the minds of God’s people in every culture to preserve its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole church evermore of the many-colored wisdom of God.

According to this definition, the Bible is a divinely inspired disclosure from God, a revealed message that, in its very givenness, is noninterchangeable (“the only infallible rule of faith and practice”), and
Post-what? It’s not all that long ago that we had to learn about postmodernism, and many of us found it to be a pretty wiggly idea. Now we’re supposed to learn about postliberalism. Couldn’t we just declare ourselves to be post-postliberal and spare ourselves the agony of learning the name of another theological label that only people in seminaries and universities will ever use anyway until it is replaced by the next fad?

As understandable as this attitude may be, the truth is that the term “post-liberal” refers to a way of thinking that is bringing about large-scale changes in today’s church. Sometimes some of the most powerful ideas, whether for good or ill, come in obscure packages, and we ignore them at serious risk. For example, we may have heard about the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, but I suspect few of us have read him, and even fewer have been able to understand him. Hegel’s writing is hard to follow and seems to be well suited for the ivory tower. Who would have thought back in the early 19th century that a hundred years later his ideas would contribute to events that changed the entire world. Hegel’s philosophy was a crucial influence on Karl Marx, and the rest is history. So, we need to be very careful; sometimes an apparently meaningless and unnecessary label may conceal an idea that, without the label, is bringing about major changes in the world.

This is the case for postliberalism, an outwardly pretty empty term. Behind this label is an attitude that is influencing the church in many ways right now, and, sad to say, most of them are negative. Even though the name does not tell us much at first glance, it does reveal that a group of theologians has decided that a new era in theology has come about, a notion that already should put us on alert, and many Christian leaders, both evangelical and non-evangelical, are becoming a part of the movement. Consequently, even though this article may be one of the few places that you encounter “postliberalism” by name, the nature of this theology may be influencing what you read in your Sunday School quarterly, what your pastor preaches, and in which ministries your home church does or does not engage. There is much talk today of the “Emergent Church” movement, and many of the traits of this school of thought are derived from postliberalism under a very thin guise. Most seriously, under the illusion of manifesting a greater appreciation for the Bible, it ultimately undercuts the assurance of the gospel.

The theology that we call “postliberalism” began with two well-known theologians at Yale University, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. I met Hans Frei once when he gave the three-evening Rockwell Lectures at Rice University in 1974. This was the time when popular theology in the United States was just recovering a little more self-integrity from so-called “secular theology”—not to mention the disastrous “God-is-Dead” movement—and process theology was enjoying its years in the sun.

I called on Dr. Frei at his guest lodgings one afternoon just to chat, and I was impressed by the genuine interest he showed in the contemplations of an idealistic first-year Ph.D. student. I had just
become engrossed in the philosophical underpinning of Karl Rahner’s theology, and Dr. Frei manifested a lot of interest as I recounted what I had learned. Then he asked me a question that genuinely surprised me: “But how do you get from there to the incarnation?” Looking at it from a Rahnerian perspective, I did not have an answer at the time, though as an evangelical Christian, it did not bother me at the moment that I could not speak for Rahner in this respect. What really intrigued me was the fact that this impressive contemporary theologian would put the incarnation (a supernatural event if there ever was one, and one that would continue to be impeached by many other theologians) ahead of philosophical speculation. I did not know at the time that Frei and his colleagues were in the process of delivering a whole new paradigm, which reversed many of the trends that had de-theologized theology for the previous fifteen years. This was the year in which his ground-breaking book, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, came out.

The Maze of Terminology

To understand the meaning of “post-liberal” theology, we need to acquaint ourselves with a number of theological labels. Obviously, if it is post-liberal, we need to be clear on what “liberal” means in this context. In ordinary conversation, it is common for us to pit “conservatism” against “liberalism.” In such a general bifurcation, it is not really possible to say what those terms mean, other than that presumably conservatives hold on to more traditional beliefs than liberals. Thus, I need to specify my terms quite a bit more.

One term that will become crucial in this discussion is the word “orthodox,” by which I am not referring to the Eastern branch of the Christian Church, but to a basic adherence to the true doctrines of Christianity. Orthodoxy in this sense can span Christian groups ranging all the way from Roman Catholicism to Tennessee Mountain Charismatics. Perhaps a happy synonym for “orthodoxy” might be what C.S. Lewis had in mind when he talked about “mere Christianity.”

One orthodox subgroup is constituted by evangelicals, who are Protestants who emphasize the need for personal salvation in Jesus Christ, and who hold to the Bible as truthful in all that it affirms, frequently invoking the term “inerrancy.” For purposes of this essay, there is no need to distinguish between evangelicals and fundamentalists. In our context, evangelicals are the epitome of conservative Christians.

Now let us take a closer look at what “liberalism” means in this connection. In the history of theology, liberalism has a fairly specific meaning. It is closely tied to developments in biblical studies that brought up serious questions concerning the reliability of the Bible, but ultimately is not dependent on it. In other words, you could be a theological liberal even if you affirmed an inerrant or infallible view of the Bible (though I must hasten to add that I do not think that you would excel in logical consistency if you took that route). The most central characteristic of theological liberalism is the reformulation of Christian doctrine into general moral exhortations, either for an individual or for society. Thus, liberalism sees the doctrine of the cross not as the reconciliation between God and the human person in a substitutionary atonement, but as an example of how people should live in self-sacrificial love. In this more specific delimitation, liberalism was a powerful presence in German theology in the late 19th century, and in American theology, particularly in the Northeast, in the early 20th century. The so-called “social gospel” is a typical representative of theological liberalism.

While liberalism was flourishing in many circles, evangelicals maintained

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The above-described categories can now help us to establish a possible goal for postliberal theology: to find a way of doing theology that is true to the message of the Bible, remains orthodox in the general sense of the term, but does not fall into the various traps perceived by postliberal theologians in either liberal theology or evangelicalism.

Theology Built on Vapors

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their own identities and often went to great lengths to repudiate liberalism by scholarship that directly confronted the errors of liberal biblical criticism on its own ground. But liberalism also had its own problems. For one thing, the basic optimism necessary to advocate the moral betterment of the human race was devastated by the inhumanity and cruelty of World War I. Simultaneously, Karl Barth, coming out of the liberal theological world, called for a fresh look at the actual teachings of Scripture and thereby initiated the movement of neo-orthodoxy.

Neo-orthodoxy and postliberalism appear to be very similar, but postliberals wish to see themselves as quite different, and so we need to say a few more words about neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy, as espoused by Karl Barth, tried to call the church back to the essential beliefs of historic Christianity, such as sin, the atonement, the Trinity, and salvation. But even though it promoted orthodoxy, its method was rather free-floating because it accepted the conclusions of negative biblical criticism, and thus—Barth’s own protests notwithstanding—constructed a set of beliefs based on an inadequate foundation. In other words, it may have been orthodox, but it was neo-orthodox because there was no controlling authority. Consequently, neo-orthodoxy lost no time in redefining itself with every new theologian who somehow claimed that label, and it is utterly unsurprising that the “God is dead” movement had its roots in neo-orthodoxy. For example, Paul Van Buren earned his doctorate under Barth in Basel, writing his dissertation on the theology of Calvin, and then proceeded to publish a book that declared that, due to the philosophy of logical positivism, the word “God” is dead. The founders of postliberalism looked at the fate of neo-orthodoxy and realized that a theology apart from biblical grounding bears the seed of its assured and hasty self-destruction.

Therefore, a more refined definition of “postliberalism” is that it is a new method of doing theology that opposes the watered-down concepts of liberalism and embraces the content of the Bible. It attempts to be orthodox and biblical, but for reasons we will describe below, it repudiates evangelicalism as much as liberalism.

Back to the Story!
The above-described categories can now help us to establish a possible goal for postliberal theology: to find a way of doing theology that is true to the message of the Bible, remains orthodox in the general sense of the term, but does not fall into the various traps perceived by postliberal theologians in either liberal theology or evangelicalism. To expand on this goal and its implementation, let us invent a little story.

Imagine that you receive a document narrating certain events, which can be of great personal value for you. This document relates that a very wealthy man went to his bank and established an account in your name that contains $1 million. All you have to do is to go to the bank, sign
your name, and the million dollars are yours. Let us assume for the sake of this illustration that there is good reason to believe that the story is true, and that, consequently, all you need to do is respond to it. What difference this event would make in most of our lives! So, what would you do? Clearly, the rational option would be to go to the bank and to claim this benefit.

To continue with this fable just a little more, let us suppose that this event has happened to numerous people over several generations. During the first few generations, people simply accepted the story, went to the bank, and rejoiced in their good fortune. However, several generations later, people started to ask questions about this story. They wanted to know:

1. Is this story really true?
2. Who first came up with this story?
3. Is this really $1 million or does the expression “$1 million” merely refer to some good fortune that makes us feel good but is not constituted by a genuine amount of legal currency?
4. Where is this bank?
5. Is the bank a genuine bank or is it a symbol for something else?
6. Is this rich benefactor a genuine person, and if so, who was he, or is he possibly a symbol for something else?
7. Is this story a report of an actual event, or is it perhaps a composite of several earlier stories that have been brought together?

Now, let us say that many people spend time trying to find the answers to these questions, but the one thing that they do not do is to go to the bank and claim their money.

On the other hand, there are a number of people who take this story extremely seriously. They insist that this story is true, and they spend a lot of time defending all of its components. They prove the authenticity of the story, the reality of the amount, the identity of the bank and the rich benefactor, and why going to the bank and claiming your money is the most rational thing to do. But again, the one thing that these folks do not do is simply go to the bank and claim the money.

In a nutshell, this story illustrates Hans Frei’s perception of the fate of Scripture in the scholarship of the last 500 years. There was a time, such as during the Reformation, when people, such as Luther and Calvin and their followers, accepted the accounts of Scripture as true. Despite the variations found between, say, the Old and New Testaments, or certain apparent difficulties in reconciling all of the content of the Bible, they believed that the Bible was one coherent narrative and that a person could bring the entire story together and live according to it. The story was true; therefore, it referred to something that was real; and thus, rather than questioning the story, it was their obligation to live in the light of the story.

But biblical scholarship started to raise questions about the nature of the biblical story. Beginning with Baruch Spinoza and continuing through the Enlightenment, deism, the 19th century, and right into the present, more and

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What “Product” Are You Managing?

by Kerry Knott
Chairman of the Board, C.S. Lewis Institute

It was the Spring of 1982. As I was nearing the end of my marketing studies at Auburn University, I sent resumes to virtually every business consulting firm and dozens of major corporations inquiring about openings for “product managers.” My plan was to get a job overseeing the development and marketing of a product. It became readily apparent after a couple of months that I was aiming a bit high. The only marketing jobs I was offered were sales jobs that didn’t excite me at all. So, I decided to make a trek to Washington, D.C., where I had friends from a George-town University summer program. I drove up, and after a week of knocking on doors with no good result, joined a friend for a softball game on the Mall. I played a good game, and a teammate asked if I could play with them the next week. I mentioned that since I hadn’t found a job, I was heading home the next day. He said, “I have someone you need to meet.”

This new friend, Lenny, invited me to join Morton Blackwell, then the head of Public Liaison in the Reagan White House, for an inner tube ride down the Shenandoah River that weekend. Morton “interviewed” me as we floated down the river, and suggested I meet him at the White House early Monday morning. Morton referred me to another friend at an issue advocacy group in Springfield, Virginia. I interviewed there Monday afternoon. The last question they asked was, “If we hired you, how soon could you be in New Mexico?” I said I would drive home the next day and get on a plane the day after that. He said, “You’re hired.”

And so began my long journey into politics and later a lobbying career.

I spent five months working on campaigns in New Mexico, then in 1983 I headed up a year long, state-wide campaign in Alabama. The next year—1984—I was hired by an unknown college professor named Dick Armey to run his campaign for Congress. Armey won in a squeaker, and I came to Washington with him. I ended up spending fourteen years as Armey’s Chief of Staff on Capitol Hill, and got to play a significant role in developing the Contract with America in 1994 and in enacting several major pieces of legislation.

I left the Hill at the end of 1998 and joined Microsoft to manage their Capitol Hill outreach. After four interesting years, I was hired by Comcast to start their Government Affairs department, and now I manage Comcast’s federal, state, and local government affairs activities.

As I look back on my career, what strikes me is that my original goal of becoming a product manager actually came to fruition. It just wasn’t the way I had planned. I became a manager of a state-wide issue campaign at age 22; a manager of a successful congressional campaign at age 23; and Chief of Staff to a Member of Congress at age 24, where I helped manage issue campaigns, re-election campaigns, and later a national effort to redefine the Republican Party and bring serious change to the nation. At Microsoft and Comcast, I was heading up large legislative and public relations campaigns. Had I succeeded in landing a junior product manager role out of college, I suspect it would have taken...
me a decade to amass the kind of experience I got in just a few short years. Clearly, God knew what He was doing when He orchestrated that tubing trip.

During those years while my professional life progressed, I began to realize that some other aspects of my life needed attention. While I was raised by godly parents in a small town in Alabama, I started drifting away in my early teens and even more so after my father passed away when I was fifteen. I never doubted the existence of God or the saving message of His Son, but my life didn’t reflect those beliefs in many practical ways. I developed spiritual calluses that soothed my conscience, all the while allowing me to drift further and further away from Him.

In the early 1990s, after breaking up with a girlfriend, I fell into a state of unhappiness with the direction of my life. I was still motivated by work—I was clearly a workaholic back then—but something kept gnawing at me.

I decided to go away—by myself—for a period of introspection and study. I rented a small house on the Outer Banks of North Carolina; took a few books, including the Bible; and started reading, praying, and examining my life.

One of the books I read was Stephen Covey’s *First Things First*. While this was not a “Christian” book, it had a profound message: it doesn’t matter how fast you climb the ladder of success, but what wall the ladder is propped against. Where you’re going means much more than how fast you get there.

I spent the rest of the week praying and studying the Bible. I read *What the Bible is All About* by Henrietta Mears, in which she takes each book of the Bible and explains the context, the history, and how the book fits into the overall story. For the first time in my life, I understood the Bible as one integrated whole, with a continuous story line of redemption. For a while, I had known deep down that I should be living my life for Christ. But the week I spent alone gave me the push to change.

I rededicated my life to Christ and vowed to make major changes in my behavior. While I’m still making mistakes, I’m confident now that God is leading me to become someone useful to His Kingdom.

A few years later, I asked my then-girlfriend (now my wife), Michelle, about any ideas for Bible study groups. I didn’t have a men’s group for honest sharing and building spiritual bonds. Michelle had just received a postcard from the C.S. Lewis Institute seeking people to join a new discipleship group. I joined this group, which became the testing ground for the C.S. Lewis Fellows Program a year later. I made a wonderful new friend in Tom Tarrants, and I proudly joined the inaugural group of Fellows. From that class and Michelle’s Fellows class two years later, our lives have been enriched by solid friendships, tremendous counseling and mentoring, and a deeper understanding of apologetics and discipleship.

Part of living my life for Christ is remembering that I’m always working for Him. That means working diligently and faithfully, and being honest with my boss, my co-workers, and most of all myself. I try to treat people fairly and with respect, and not shade the truth or dance near the line of ethical or legal behavior. There are plenty of temptations in the lobbying world—we’ve all read about the high-profile unethical lobbyists—but I try to be “salt and light” in this difficult environment. I stay in touch with several other solid Christians in similar positions to provide a sounding board about living as we should in this environment, and I have a small accountability group that keeps me on track in other ways. These kinds of

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upset; this son of mine who threw me into the fire, has cleansed, not destroyed me. He is my son, but he is ill. I am indeed not sound of body, but he in his sickness has made me sound in soul, for blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.’ And then taking his head in his hands, the most blessed man kisses him, blesses and embraces him, and gently sought to soothe his senseless anger against himself, just as though he felt no pain from his own sickness and had been touched by no sadness because of the injury done to him. [2]

Today, we might call this “hagiography,” but there is a memory there that is precious.

From all accounts Aelred seems to have come from affectionate parents and boyhood friendships. Possibly at the age of twelve or fourteen he was adopted into the court of David, King of Scotland, as companion to the king’s son, Henry, and two other stepsons. His life at court expanded into yet other friendships, as well as Norman manners, speaking French, fluent in Latin, and so having ready access to Cicero’s dialogue On Friendship, which remained an abiding literary influence.

With very strong emotional sensibility, he was caught between needing to please others, and yet needing to please God most of all. For at eighteen he was invited by the first Cistercian abbot of Rievaulx, William, formerly a secretary of Bernard of Clairvaux, to join the founding community in 1132. Aelred was torn between remaining with his friends in the Scottish court and going into the woods of north Yorkshire. So he waited two years before he did so. Early he learned that friendships are ambiguous, keeping us from God’s service, as well as deluding our understanding of “spiritual friendship.” [3]

By 1147, Aelred had been elected abbot of Rievaulx, which grew to about 600 monks under his leadership. Over the years Aelred rose to considerable prominence in England, and his counsel was sought out by church leaders and royalty. He corresponded with the Pope and heads of state, was called in to meditate difficult church and political disputes, and was known as “the second Bernard.”

How Aelred Experienced “Spiritual Friendship”

Before entering the monastery, Aelred took great pleasure in Cicero’s On Friendship, for it spoke in natural terms of the delights of friendship. But in the process of his “conversion” to a new way of living as a monk, Aelred read and re-read Augustine’s Confessions. [4] There he learned “what delight had I, but to love and be loved” (Conf. ii, 2). Then Aelred confesses one day, “I found to my surprise that it [i.e., Cicero’s book] did not please me as it used to do. For there was nothing there that had been sweetened with the honey of the beloved Jesus, nothing there seasoned with the salt of Holy Scripture. Without these [Cicero] could not hold my heart.” [5]

About 1142, Bernard of Clairvaux asked Aelred to write his Mirror of Charity. Bernard encouraged his son in the faith to write this treatise as an apologetic for the new monastic way of living in the Cistercian order. In this work, it would be made clear that human relations were not just “natural,” and the craving for love not just a human need. For Aelred, following Augustine’s Confessions, it was forgetfulness of God our Creator, error of mind, and reversal of love in loving self before others that distort our affections and make us miserably frustrated in relationships. [6] As Aelred had once fed on a memory of distinguished ancestral heritage, he now focused on the biblical awareness of being “created in the image and likeness of God.” Because God has created us in love, “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.” For the root of love is to will what another wills; it is becoming selfless. To consent then to
what God loves and wills is a new orientation, a paradigm shift indeed!

This “spiritual art” is not abstract; it is learnt concretely. We see this demonstrated in how Aelred reacted when he was thrown into the fire by the madman. For twenty-five years, Aelred daily lived what he also taught. It is all about the reordering of our loves, from “concupiscence” (or love of self) to “caritas” (or love of others), drawn by “affectus,” that supreme devotional attachment to God.

Aelred describes progress in loving God as “Sabbath rest.” He identifies three Sabbaths: in the first, the converted conscience is free of guilt, resting in divine acceptance and forgiveness; in the second, growing in love to others, brotherly affection grows and deepens in a peaceful community; third, love of self and love of neighbor lead onward to the love of God as the ultimate object of love, fully resting in God. [7] “Spiritual friendship” is thus “a Sabbath rest” of devotion to Christ. All other relations of friendship radiate from that center at rest.

“God is Friendship”

About 1148, Aelred wrote his first draft of Spiritual Friendship, some five years after the Mirror of Charity. But it was another fifteen to eighteen years before he completed its final draft. Looking back, Aelred interpreted all his life as having been a narrative of friendships: worldly friendships that held him back from his spiritual growth and delayed his monastic calling; then later a ministry of spiritual friendships that enriched his monastic life. So now he can stand back from Cicero, in the light of scripture and of the fathers, to clarify his own life’s journey in the Abraham style of friendship that is in “walking with God.”

In his first dialogue Aelred can now say that “it is clear that Cicero did not know the virtue of true friendship, since he was totally ignorant of its source and object, namely Christ.” [8] Sin, the flaw of all natural friendships, was foreign to Cicero, whereas for Aelred, the best kind of friendship is the one which is growing redemptively and spiritually all the time, in mutual support before God. The context, then, in which Aelred sets “spiritual friendship” is in “taking their beginning from Christ, advancing through Christ, and then are perfected in Christ.” “And so, praying to Christ for his friend, and longing to be heard by Christ for his friend’s sake, he reaches out with devotion and desire to Christ himself. And suddenly and sensibly, natural affection passes into spiritual love, as though touched by the gentleness of Christ close to hand.” Thus, “from that holy love with which he embraces his friend, he rises to that by which he embraces Christ.” [9]

Essentially, what Aelred was now sharing was from John’s Gospel, that “no one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13), as Christ did. [10] Perhaps unique in his teaching, he was affirming a continuum between godliness and the social expression of God’s love in human friendships. Aelred’s friends were quite prepared to believe that one should love one’s friend as one loved oneself. But Aelred contradicts this idea: no, we should have a low regard for oneself, and a high regard for one’s friend. Actually the growth of such a friendship requires the deepening of one’s humility.

What about the difficulty that friendship is full of anxieties, fears, and griefs? It is very difficult at times to keep on being a faithful friend. But Aelred responds by looking at the apostle Paul. Was he a fool to volunteer to carry the burdens of others, to such an extent that he was constantly in pain and afflictions on their behalf? What are the rewards of such pastoral friendships? “Such,” responds Aelred, “has not learned yet what friendship is who wishes any reward other than itself.” The true reward lies not in the human friendship,
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but in the richer relationship gained in contemplating the love of God. Indeed, states Aelred: “I confess that I am convinced that true friendship cannot exist among those who live without Christ.” [11]

Lacking his Christian convictions, and imposing modern psychological categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality, some gay advocates today want to create Aelred in their image and likeness, as their patron saint. Clearly they do not understand the theological premises in both his books, as Liz Carmichael states so well in Friendship, Interpreting Christian Love. [12] Instead, Patrick McGuire seeks to demonstrate that Aelred probably practiced homosexual acts in the Scottish court, and that later he remained conscious of its dangers. [13] Elsewhere he describes evidences of late twelfth century homosexual practices. [14] John Boswell explored this topic previously, but he implies that our contemporary sexual confusions were similar to previous forms of self consciousness. [15] This is surely historical anachronism in the worst sense. Actually, in his writings, Aelred emphasized virginity for the single and chastity for the married, and he warned of the dangers of both heterosexual and homosexual sin to one’s soul.

We do need to have ethical boundaries in the cultivation of “spiritual friendship.” We may need lots of patience, a forgiving spirit, humility, and much compassion. But Aelred strongly affirms that we can never let a friendship compromise our own moral conduct and damage our souls. For Aelred, five vices are fatal: constant nagging and upbraiding; reproach; pride; leaking confidences; and treacherous wounds. Discernment in the choice of friends is still important when we have a general benevolence of heart for all. To test for faithfulness, to know motivation and discern false motives, to sense the sensitivity of the other, and to appreciate the openness to learn and grow, are all important.

For the last ten years of his life, Aelred was often sick and in pain. Significantly, the last treatise Aelred composed was Dialogue on the Soul, possibly about a year before his death in 1167. [16] It is appropriate, for his mortality was coming to an end, and his body was painfully racked from arthritis. Aelred started his monastic life thinking he was a no-body, “a kitchen hand” no good for anything else. But the love of God has a way of stretching us to develop abilities we never dreamed we might be called to develop. And certainly that was true of Aelred.

As a teacher, he exemplified remarkable openness in allowing his questioners to doubt, to contradict, to hold diametrically opposite views, all in the interests of sustaining friendships. Error he tolerated, pride he could not. Perhaps his greatest contribution is that heaven is all about the communion of saints with their Lord. For when he died, after a painful ten years of suffering, the monk who washed his dead body thought he had never seen a lovelier sight than the beloved Abbot in his final repose. [17] Striking, then, in all the data we have about Aelred’s life is the role of memory, itself a tribute to his friendships.

Notes
shall see the tree of life, and eat of the never-fading fruits thereof; and when you come there, you shall have white robes given you, and your walk and talk shall be every day with the King, even all the days of eternity. There you shall not see again such things as you saw when you were in the lower region upon the earth, to wit, sorrow, sickness, affliction, and death; ‘for the former things are passed away.’ You are going now to Abraham, to Isaac, and Jacob, and to the prophets; men that God hath taken away from the evil to come, and that are now resting upon their beds, each one walking in his righteousness.” The men then asked, “What must we do in the holy place?” To whom it was answered, “You must there receive the

Profiles in Faith: Aelred of Rievaulx

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[9] Ibid, 2.18, p. 74.

comforts of all your toil, and have joy for all your sorrow; you must reap what you have sown, even the fruit of all your prayers and tears, and sufferings for the King by the way. In that place you must wear crowns of gold, and enjoy the perpetual sight and visions of the Holy One; for there ‘you shall see Him as He is.’ There also you shall serve him continually with praise, with shouting and thanksgiving, whom you desired to serve in the world, though with much difficulty, because of the infirmity of your flesh. There your eyes shall be delighted with seeing, and your ears with hearing the pleasant voice of the Mighty One. There you shall enjoy your friends again that are gone thither before you; and there you shall with joy receive even every one that follows into the holy place after you. There also you shall be clothed with glory and majesty, and put into an equipage fit to ride out with the King of Glory. When he shall come with sound of trumpet in the clouds, as upon the wings of the wind, you shall come with Him; and when He shall sit upon the throne of judgment, you shall sit by Him; yea, and when He shall pass sentence upon all the workers of iniquity, let them be angels or men, you also shall have a voice in that judgment, because they were His and your enemies. Also, when He shall again return to the city, you shall go too, with sound of trumpet, and be ever with him.”

Now while they were thus drawing towards the gate, behold, a company of the heavenly host came to meet them; to whom it was said by the other two Shining Ones, These are the men that have loved our Lord when they were in the world, and that have left all for his holy name; and he hath sent us to fetch them, and we have brought them thus far on their desired journey, that they may go in and look their Redeemer in the face with joy. Then the heavenly host gave

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Thoughts to Ponder  
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These pilgrims are come from the City of Destruction, for the love that they bear to the King of this place.

Then I saw in my dream, that the Shining Men bid them call at the gate; the which when they did, some from above looked over the gate, to wit, Enoch, Moses, and Elijah, etc., to whom it was said, “These pilgrims are come from the City of Destruction, for the love that they bear to the King of this place.” And then the pilgrims gave in unto them each man his certificate, which they had received in the beginning; those, therefore, were carried in to the King, who, when he had read them, said, “Where are the men?” To whom it was answered, “They are standing without the gate.” The King then commanded to open the gate, “That the righteous nation,” said he, “that keepeth truth may enter in.”

Now I saw in my dream, that these two men went in at the gate; and lo, as they entered, they were transfigured, and they had raiment put on that shone like gold. There was also that met them with harps and crowns, and gave them to them; the harps to praise withal, and the crowns in token of honour. Then I heard in my dream that all the bells in the city rang again for joy, and that it was said to unto them, “Enter ye into the joy of your Lord.” I also heard the men themselves, that they sang with a loud voice, saying, “Blessing, honour, glory, and power be to him that sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb, for ever and ever.”

Now just as the gates were opened to let in the men, I looked in after them; and behold, the city shone like the sun; the streets also were paved with gold, and in them walked many men, with crowns on their heads, palms in their hands, and golden harps to sing praises withal.

There were also of them that had wings, and they answered one another without intermission, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord.” And after that they shut up the gates; which, when I had seen, I wished myself among them.

universal (“addressed to all”). The Bible is also declared to be totally truthful, “without error in all that it affirms.” For the past hundred years, the common term for total truthfulness has been inerrancy. Biblical truthfulness was carefully elucidated in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), followed by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (1982).

Some evangelical thinkers prefer not to employ the word inerrancy at all since its proper use requires such careful definition and nuancing. But this is hardly a telling objection since all of our words about the Bible must be just as carefully qualified and defined. The Bible, we say, is inspired, but not in the same way that a Shakespearean sonnet can be said to be inspired. Again, the Bible is infallible, but not in the sense in which Roman Catholics hold ex cathedra pronouncements of the pope to be infallible. The Bible is also authoritative, but not in the way that Muslims invest authority in the Qur’an. The care with which the two Chicago statements define inerrancy encourages exegetical honesty in the context of a clear affirmation that biblical assertions are true, and that no view that contradicts such assertions can possibly be right. These statements have gained strong, if not universal, support among evangelicals, and they remain helpful benchmarks for Bible-believing Christians.

Historic Affirmations
Recognition of the total trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is not, as many critics allege, a modern notion foisted upon the Bible by latter-day theological fiat. Rather, it is the consensus of ancient Christian writers represented in the East by Gregory of Nyssa (“Whateoever the divine Scripture says is the voice of the Holy Spirit”) and in the West by Augustine (who in his Confessions [13.29] has God say, “O man, what my Scripture says, I say”). Moreover, this historic Christian affirmation conforms to the Bible’s own witness about itself.

James Barr doubts whether Bible writers wished to teach anything about the nature of Scripture, remarking that “St. Paul was able to write essential theological letters like Galatians and Romans without spending much time on the nature of biblical authority.” However, as F. F. Bruce observed, in both of these letters (Rom. 9:17; Gal. 3:8; 3:22) Paul hinges a key argument on a personifying of Scripture, treating it “more or less as an extension of the divine personality.” This is a remarkable figure of speech, but Paul’s language must be understood this way or it makes no sense at all. How can an inanimate object, a written text, “say” or “foresee” anything? Obviously what Paul meant was “God, as recorded in Scripture, said.” He was expressing, and thereby teaching, his conviction that Scripture as such has a compelling validity and normativity precisely because it is God who speaks through it. Clearly Paul meant his readers to bow to his own teaching the same way, as did the other New Testament writers with regard to theirs; so for the church to treat apostolic writings as completing the biblical canon is totally in line with the apostle’s own mind. It meshes, too, with the mind of Christ, who sent and equipped the apostles to write authoritatively about himself. We do not worship the Bible itself, but we do submit to Scripture because we submit to Jesus Christ. This is, as John Stott has said, a test of our loyalty to him.

How To Interpret?
But now the pressing question is: How am I to interpret the Bible? What are the right principles for understanding the biblical text? While the Bible is the self-revelation of God and therefore carries with it the “scent of truth” in all that it affirms, we should not imagine that a manuscript of it was delivered fresh from heaven to the printing press! No, the Bible was written over a millennium of time in scores of documents by dozens of human authors from various
cultural backgrounds, using a wide variety of styles and literary genres. As the author of Hebrews puts it, God spoke “at many times and in various ways” (1:1). Thus we do no honor to Holy Scripture by minimizing the historical particularity of its parts, nor by defending its integrity with respect to claims that it never makes about itself.

The Bible was inspired in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—and everyday Greek, at that. Because the Christian faith can be expressed within all cultures, the meaning of the Holy Scriptures is universally translatable. Today the Bible displays “the many-colored wisdom of God” in many renderings for hundreds of people groups throughout the earth. Yet the very success of modern Bible-translation projects has given fresh urgency to the interpretive task.

Martin Luther set the direction for sound hermeneutics when he declared that “the Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth and therefore his words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense.” Interpretation must first aim to recover the original meaning and truth-intention of the biblical text through careful use of what is nowadays called the grammatical-historical method. Among evangelicals, no one speaks more clearly on this than Walter Kaiser, who distinguishes between the normative meaning of the biblical text and its deeper, fuller significance that is brought out through exposition and application.

In the reader-oriented interpretive theories set forth by philosophers of language such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, the locus of meaning is the understanding of the interpreter. “Meaning” here signifies not what the document meant as communication from the writer to his envisaged readership, but what it means when there is a “fusing of horizons” (that is, an enlarging communicative impact and rapport) between the biblical writer and the contemporary reader. These thinkers, and those who follow them, use the word *meaning* to signify “significance” in Kaiser’s sense.

Evangelicals can gain important insights for the study of the Bible from the sociology of knowledge and contemporary literary analysis, which alerts us to how the presuppositions we bring to the text can decisively shape the result of our study. Dieter Georgi, for example, has shown how both pre-World War I and present-day scholarly efforts to fabricate the “real” Jesus—understood variously as the child of the goddess Sophia, a Galilean social revolutionary, or a wandering Cynic philosopher—all reflect “the evolution of the bourgeois consciousness.” The ideological commitment and social location of the revisionist scholars involved distorted their judgment of evidence and so skewed their portrayals of Jesus. While their conclusions are frequently paraded as the “assured results” of objective scrutiny, the claim is unwarranted and invalid.

**Self-Conscious and Self-Critical**

But when we say this about eccentric revisionists, we should not imagine that Bible-believing Christians come to the Scriptures with unbiased blank minds, unaffected by their own context and presuppositions. To be faithful biblical interpreters, we must all become both self-conscious and self-critical about our prior commitments, subjecting them both to the searching light of Scripture itself and to the wider witness of the Christian family to which we belong.

Thomas Oden’s clarion call for contemporary theology to return to the rich exegetical tradition of ancient Christian orthodoxy is one of the most encouraging developments of our time. It will not suffice merely to have our New Testament in one hand and the latest word from current biblical scholarship (even if it comes from our favorite evangelical press!) in the other. We must also learn to “read alongside:” the church fathers, reformers, and theologians of ages past. None of their interpretations is inerrant, and we must subject them all—along with our own—
to the divine touchstone of Holy Scripture itself. Still, the Holy Spirit did not abandon the Church with the death of the apostles. As we prayerfully listen for what the Spirit is saying to us today, we will do well to heed what he has been saying to the people of God throughout the history of the church. The massive consensus of thoughtful Christian interpretation of the Word down the ages (and on most matters of importance there is such a thing) is not likely to be wrong.

The role of the community is crucial both in understanding how the Bible came to be recognized as canon and in appropriating its message today. The Enlightenment model of the Bible student as a Lone Rangler, out on his own away from the church as he seeks truth, inevitably leads to distorted, if not heretical, conclusions. A renewed appreciation of the Bible as the book of the church should make us more aware of our need to explore it in and with, rather than without and apart from, the larger Christian fellowship.

Those who seek wisdom in the Bible will not find it as long as they sidestep the Bible’s declarations of fact and ignore what Scripture tells us about the world and its history as well. The Scriptures do not present themselves in a cultural-linguistic cocoon or as a self-contained aesthetic object to be studied and admired as one religious book among many. The narrative structure of the Bible itself, from Creation to the world’s forthcoming end, makes the imperious claim to be the one true story in the light of which all other stories—and indeed, the reality of the universe itself—must be understood. The postmodern flight from the cognitive content of biblical truth, and the revamping of it as a system of symbols with subjective significance only, is a form of theological suicide that leaves the believer with nothing but a warm-tub feeling to present as “good news” to a lost world.

The reality of Jesus, in particular, cannot be reduced to a language game or a literary construct. The Word did not become “a text” but sαξ, flesh, something unmis-takably, historically concrete. Because this is true, the “story of Jesus,” when canonically understood as including everything from Genesis to Revelation, is dissimilar from all other stories and cannot be explained as anything less than the last word about this world and God’s plan for it.

Evangelicals have always insisted that the historicity of biblical events be taken seriously because the soteriological essence of Christianity demands this. As Geerhardus Vos, among others, has argued, if Christianity were a philosophical system aimed at the spiritual enlightenment of humankind, or a code of ethics to be used as an instrument of moral salvation, then it would make little difference whether its founder were born of a virgin, walked on the water, healed the sick, or rose from the dead.

An Offensive Message
But the Christian message declares something altogether different. We confess, in the words of the Creed of Nicaea, that the Lord of eternity, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God…for our salvation came down…and was incarnate…” A space-time crucifixion of the incarnate Lord was followed by a space-time resurrection, a space-time outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and a space-time spread of the gospel and the church, which still goes on. Christianity must be seen as a historically continuous fellowship in which all enjoy a salvation that was won for them in Palestine on a certain date nearly two millennia ago. The historical claims of the Christian primary documents must therefore be acknowledged as true, and true not just “for me,” but true for all persons everywhere.

Admittedly, this is an offensive message for a culture that magnifies local consensus above any notion of objective public truth and that prizes pluralism and relativism as the reigning orthodoxy of the day. But we should not imagine that the scandal (continued on page 18)
of biblical particularism is a greater burden for us than it was for Elijah at Mount Carmel, Paul on Mars Hill, or William Carey in Calcutta. Because of who God is and what he has done, we can only say, on the basis of the commission we have received, “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

What is the ultimate alternative to a reverent, if also discerning and even properly critical, engagement with Holy Scripture as the message of divine achievement, promise, and command? It is the kind of intellectual nihilism that reduces the Christian faith to the sum total of our dreams, fantasies, and self-projections, “a God who looks like me,” to quote the title of a recent book. Following the lead of Feuerbach and Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud described this outcome with glaring precision at the beginning of the present century:

Fundamentally, we only find what we need and only see what we want to see. We have no other possibility. Since the criterion for truth—correspondence with the external world—is absent, it is entirely a matter of indifference what opinions we adopt. All of them are equally true and equally false. And no one has the right to accuse anyone else of error.

Contrary to this outcome, evangelicals affirm that the Bible can be trusted to be totally reliable on its own terms: its history is historical and its miracles are miraculous, and its theology is God’s own truth. But what is the source of such confidence in the truth-telling character of Holy Scripture? How do we know that the Bible is the Word of God? The Reformers of the sixteenth century faced this question. They could accept neither the magisterial authority of the Church of Rome, which made knowledge of the divinity of the Scriptures depend on ecclesiastical tradition, nor the radical individualism of certain mystics who were so enamored of the Spirit that they saw little need for the written Word. Luther and Calvin pursued a different path. They stressed the coinherence of Word and Spirit—that is, the objectivity of God’s revelation in Holy Scripture and the confirming, illuminating witness of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

The Belgic Confession declares that the Scriptures carry within themselves the evidence of their own divinity and authority (article 5). The self-authenticating nature of the Bible is an important principle of Christians to remember both in our witness to unbelievers and in our dialogue with skeptical critics. There is no neutral ground, no independent epistemological platform, on which we can stand and decide for or against the Bible. Skepticism about it is natural to our hearts, and only as God opens our eyes to discern divinity in Scripture do we ever come to trust it. Our assurance of its veracity comes only as the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles enlightens our minds and confirms the truths that have been revealed in these sacred texts.

There is a kind of evidentialist apologetic that overrates the receptive capacity of fallen human reason and plays down the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Calvin’s words to those who demanded “rational proof” that Moses and the prophets were inspired are still relevant today:

The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s heart before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded. (Institutes 1.7.4)

Thus the Holy Spirit, the divine author of Scripture, authenticates the prophetic and apostolic word to our consciences. Through the Spirit’s illumination earnest
believers find that the Scriptures are marked by what Huldrych Zwingli called “prevenient clarity” or perspicuity. Each day Zwingli began his Bible lectures in Zurich with the following prayer, which became a model for other ministers in the Reformed tradition: “Almighty, eternal, and merciful God, whose Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, open and illuminate our minds, that we may purely and perfectly understand thy Word and that our lives may be conformed to what we have rightly understood, that in nothing we may be displeasing to thy majesty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

The Lucid Word

The doctrine of the Bible’s perspicuity is one of the historic hallmarks of the evangelical understanding of Scripture. Fundamentally it means that, as was shown above, the Bible is not an obscure conundrum or cryptogram that must be decoded by a team of specialists before it can be understood and applied. On the contrary, in all matters that are necessary for salvation, the Bible is so lucid that laypersons as well as theologians, mechanics as well as academics, can sufficiently understand and appropriate its teachings. The acceptance of this principle underlies the widespread use of so-called inductive method of Bible study and the high regard for the Scriptures from the church’s earliest days as the communal treasure of the entire body of believers.

But the perspicuity of Scripture can itself be misunderstood in a number of ways. It does not mean, for example, that there are no difficult passages or “hard sayings” that continue to baffle the best and most spiritually alert students of the Bible. Not everything in Scripture is equally plain or evidently clear to all. Neither should this principle be equated with the “right of private judgment,” where that motto is used to justify the kind of individualism that reduces biblical meaning to a matter of personal taste.

We should also guard against using the clarity of the Bible as an excuse to undermine rigorous and reverent scholarly work on the text. To be sure, vast numbers of evangelicals can relate to the question asked a hundred years ago by the English Congregationalist pastor Joseph Parker: “Have we to await a comment from Tübingen or a telegram from Oxford before we can understand the Bible?” No doubt there are many tributaries that spill into the reservoir of resentment against technical biblical scholarship. Anti-intellectualism and unreflective piety (substituting emotional fervor for disciplined thought) are two examples. And an even greater problem during the past 150 years has been the gaping chasm that opened in so many centers of learning between the academic study of the Bible on the one hand, and the life and mission of the church on the other. It is hard to overstate the destructive impact of “unbelieving criticism,” that is, scholarship shaped by the ethos and presuppositions of the secular academy. To scholars of this bent we might well apply Jesus’ description of the “experts in the law” of his day: “You have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not go in yourselves, and those who were on their way in, you stopped” (Luke 11:52, NEB). Such scholarship, unhappily, is with us still.

But it would be tragic if evangelicals spent so much time lamenting destructive criticism that they ignored the impressive achievement during the past half-century of Bible-believing scholars who are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and his church and who seek to be faithful ministers of the divine Word. Such men and women of learning and faith stand in worthy succession to the great English biblical scholar J.B. Lightfoot, who once said: “I cannot pretend to be indifferent about the veracity of the records which profess to reveal him whom I believe to be not only the very Truth but

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the very Life.” The learning of exegetes and theologians such as this can only contribute to the building up of God’s people.

A Means of Grace
Evangelicals today have a rich legacy of cherishing the Bible as the Word of God, defining its authority defending its veracity against both secular critics outside the church and religious modernists of various types within. Over the past two generations, evangelical Bible scholars have moved beyond a defensive posture to engage the wider world of thought. Their careful research and interaction with current trends in biblical scholarship have made them a vital resource for the church as well as a significant presence in the academic world. At the same time, we must also confess that evangelicals have often worked in isolation from the wider community of faith, the body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space. We have frequently been bound more to the biases of our culture than to the unadulterated Word of God. And we have sometimes used the Bible as a hammer in our fractious conflicts with one another, forgetting, as Francis Schaeffer reminded us, that harshness does not equal holiness, and that we are always to speak the truth in love.

After his appreciative survey of the recent evangelical renaissance in biblical scholarship, Mark Noll wisely urged that Bible-believing Christians “move beyond the external examination of Scripture to an internal appropriation of its message.” Committed as we are to the truth of God’s Word, we should never for a moment imagine that the Bible is a mere compendium of neutral, albeit accurate, information about God and his dealings with humankind. The Bible, as vivified by the Spirit, is a divinely appointed means of grace, a medium of encounter with the living God. John Bunyan had this in mind when he asked, “Have you never a hill Mizar to remember? Have you forgotten the close, the milk house, the stable, the barn, and the like, where God did visit your soul? Remember also the Word—the Word, I say, upon which the Lord hath caused you to hope.”

The true measure of evangelical identity is that we delight in the Bible as fully as we believe in it. Where this is so, our congregations will be characterized by an atmosphere of hospitality to scriptural truth. Our pulpit work will be marked by faithful expository proclamation. The public reading of the Scriptures will again assume a place of honor in our corporate worship. And our personal devotional life will also be transformed. The standard fare of sound-byte spirituality will be replaced by what the Cistercians called “divine reading” (lectio divina), that is, the sustained reading of the Word of God leading to meditation, contemplation, and prayer. In each of these activities we shall approach the Bible, as the late Merrill Tenney put it, in a spirit of eagerness seeking the mind of God, in a spirit of humility listening to the voice of God, in a spirit of adventure pursuing the will of God, and in a spirit of adoration resting in the presence of God.

Thus, with all persons who love and cherish the Holy Scriptures as God’s gift of revelation about himself, with all who recognize and adore Jesus Christ as the center and sum of the Bible, and with all who study the inspired words of Holy Writ seeking the illumination of the Spirit, we shall ever pray in the words of this Advent collect:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of Thy Holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.
more questions were brought up and received negative answers concerning the truth of the story that is related in the Bible. As a result, it became impossible to live according to this story, though theologians found alternatives for the biblical message and, as we observed earlier, in classical liberalism the teachings of the incarnation, sin, and atonement were replaced by moral platitudes.

On the other hand, there were those who resisted this negative assault on the Bible. Evangelicals and conservative Catholics, for example, went to great lengths to prove the authenticity and the trust-worthiness of the Bible. But again, their preoccupation with defending the truths of Scripture substituted for actually living according to Scripture. Their second-order defense of the Bible had supplanted the first-order biblical narrative.5

Let me give you a specific example. I mentioned earlier that at the time of the Reformers Christians accepted the Bible as true. Using a simple correspondence theory of truth, this acceptance implied that the facts to which the Bible refers are real. Does this conclusion then imply that the events of the Bible are historical? Frei says no, not necessarily, because historicity is not the same thing as reality. “History” is a scholarly endeavor, based on scholarly principles and methods and, consequently, as soon as we raise the question of historicity, whether we are trying to provide a positive or negative answer, we are already undercutting the authenticity of the story. Thus, evangelicals, who take their cue from liberals and respond to liberals on their home ground, are missing the point just as much as liberals.

This, then, becomes the essence of postliberalism: to take the narrative of the Bible as it is given, not to subject it to our criteria of truth or acceptability, but to subject ourselves to the story of the Bible as the overarching paradigm for our lives.

In this way postliberalism appears to have achieved the goals of early neo-orthodoxy, namely to repudiate liberal misconstruals of the biblical message, but to retain a solid foundation in the Bible. As opposed to evangelicalism, postliberalism sees itself as avoiding the red herrings of defending a story that does not need to be defended by human beings, and placing ourselves under its authority.

So, to give a simple example of how this way of doing theology works itself out, in a book entitled The Identity of Jesus Christ,6 Hans Frei does not engage in the customary so-called search for the historical Jesus, but he studies what we can learn about Christ’s character by means of the gospel stories. The actual details of the accounts are not crucial; Frei is still open to the critical conclusions of biblical research. He concludes by making a somewhat unkind reference to Albert Schweitzer’s Quest,7 but then quotes with approval Schweitzer’s own assessment: “to know this story is to adopt a way of life consequent upon hearing it and shaped by it.”8

Thus, postliberalism presents us with a story, and our obligation is to subordinate our lives to the biblical story rather than to sit in judgment upon it. It becomes obvious, then, that in this respect postliberalism is heading in the opposite direction from postmodernism. Postmodernism, according to some of its advocates, such as Lyotard,9 distinguishes itself from other thought forms by denying that there is any single overarching story (metanarrative) for all people at all times. What Frei appears to be saying is that there is indeed such a story, namely the narrative of the Bible.

To understand a little more of what it means to have such a grand narrative, we can look at the work of Frei’s colleague George Lindbeck.10 In attempting to clarify the nature of this story and its function in the Christian community,
Lindbeck takes recourse to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analysis of “language games” as they are maintained in their respective forms of life. There are many ways of living and many aspects to our lives, and each of these compartments of life comes with its own “language game.” The term “language game” is not meant to imply that life is frivolous, but that, just as each game that we might play has different rules (soccer has different rules from chess; Twister has different rules from Bridge, etc.), so each form of life comes with its own idiomatic language in its own “grammar,” which is to say, its rules for what is and what is not proper use of language in that particular context. So, Lindbeck states that, 

Any religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework and medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought…. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and good (though it may involve these), or symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.  

Christianity does not constitute an exception. The Christian story provides a conceptual framework that guides us into the correct ways of interpretation and living what we consider to be a proper Christian life.

To sum up this part of my exposition, postliberalism has attempted to repudiate the arbitrary reinterpretation of Christianity of liberalism, and it has avoided the instability of neo-orthodoxy by clinging to the biblical narrative. Or so it would seem.

**The Problem of History**

The apparent success of postliberalism is due to a large extent to the fact that it sidesteps certain questions, which other forms of theology consider to be crucial. Thus, for example, Hans Frei thinks that it is a mistake to consider the biblical narratives to be historical. He concedes that they are very much like history insofar as they depict what really happened a long time ago, but being real and true does not amount to historical in his eyes. He claims that,

historical accounting, by almost universal modern consent, involves that the narrative… must consist of events, and reasons for their occurrence, whose connections may be rendered without recourse to supernatural agency. By contrast in the biblical stories, of course, non-miraculous and miraculous accounts and explanations are constantly intermingled…. Even such miraculous accounts are history-like or realistic if the depicted action is indispensable to the rendering of a particular character, divine or human, or a particular story.
But they are not historical. To apply the tests of historicity to the biblical narrative is to compromise it and to miss its meaning.

But is this a realistic distinction? First of all, it seems as though the assumption that history by its very nature must exclude reference to divine intervention is arbitrary. It is only a gratuitous definition that prevents one from finding evidence for the miraculous in history. Second, it would appear that making an end run around the question of history in the 21st century is to concede the truth of the narrative. During Luther’s and Calvin’s day, the academic discipline of history was not what it is today, when the historical reality of an event is considered to be synonymous with the truth of its account. It does not make sense to say that the event really happened in the past, but that it is not historical. Once the question of historicity has been raised, it becomes impossible to put that proverbial genie back into the bottle. Evangelicals are not insisting on the historicity of the biblical narratives because they have an aberrant fascination with the topic, but because the culture at large questions the truth of the narrative by means of historical criteria.

Furthermore, when Frei concedes that the biblical accounts are frequently “history-like,” he is invoking a nonexistent category. What does it mean for a true story to be “history-like”? It would seem that, other than inventing a word that invokes an irresolvable ambiguity, the term does not contribute anything. If there is an actual event in the past, it is a part of history. If it is not actual, then it cannot be historical, though it can be history-like. But to say that it is actual and history-like without being historical is to invent a meaningless category. The biblical writers certainly saw themselves as penning what we would consider to be history. For example, Luke includes in his gospel specific contemporary references to the rulers of Jesus’ day (e.g., 1:5; 2:1-2; 3:1), and if these are supposed to be true, but do not enjoy at least purported historical status, I, for one, would be lost as to the meaning of “historical.”

The apostle Peter emphasized the factual grounding of the Christian message by stating, “For we did not follow cleverly contrived myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; instead, we were eyewitnesses of His majesty”13 (2 Peter 1:16). Given his restrictive understanding of the nature of history, I would be tempted to turn Dr. Frei’s question back on him: “But how do you get from there to the incarnation?”

Identifying the Story

And thus, by cutting off its anchor to history, postliberalism has not really made progress over neo-orthodoxy, despite its claim of faithfulness to the biblical message. The problem is that the assertion of truths while deliberately dismissing accepted criteria for the testing of these truths becomes meaningless.

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are potentially empirically verifiable are allowed to count as meaningful. But post-liberalism has put itself into a very different position because its assertions can clearly not only be confirmed, but even expanded by conventional historical means. By disallowing a rigorous examination, postliberalism not only makes the truth claim arbitrary, but also leaves us ultimately hanging with regard to the actual content of the narrative.

To give a brief illustration of what I mean, let us say that we have prepared a surprise birthday party for a coworker. She has been asked to come to a certain room in our building, but she does not show up. Someone claims that he knows for sure that she is in the building. Still, after she has not shown up for quite a while, it is legitimate to question how our colleague knows that she is in the building. Did he see her? Has he spoken with her? Is there circumstantial evidence of her presence because her purse is on her desk or her computer is switched on? For our colleague to keep insisting that she is in the building without making any attempt at justifying this assertion becomes irrational. In the same way, Frei's assertion that the narrative is true without allowing the normal tests for the truths of such an assertion becomes just as gratuitous.

Let us return to Lindbeck's analysis of religious narrative as similar to Wittgenstein's language games. The point about these language games is that none of them is fundamental. Every language game has its own integrity, and none of them is accountable to any others. Thus, in this context, it would make sense to say that a religious language game is different from a historical language game, and so one ought not to expect the religious language game to conform its statements to the grammar of a historical language game. Consequently the language game of biblical religion has its own integrity and can be "played" without regard to its competitors or critics. Inside of the language game, we can claim the truths of the narrative without apology.14

The problem is that there is no independent standard of truth. Frei may think that the efforts by evangelicals to nail down the exact meaning of propositions and to harmonize apparent discrepancies are artificial, but not to do so leaves us guessing as to which version of the story is the correct one. Frei's response is to be content with a "generous orthodoxy," but this is another meaningless term, which has been rapidly assimilated by numerous theologians. "Orthodoxy," as we observed at the outset, refers to a basic adherence to the true doctrines of Christianity. We may not agree on exactly which doctrines belong to essential Christianity, but, whatever those beliefs may be, you either are orthodox or you are not. The very word makes it impossible for there to be gradations in orthodoxy. If the set of belief becomes flexible, "orthodoxy" is simply not an appropriate term.

Thus it turns out that, just as with neo-orthodoxy, since postliberalism has no controlling authority, and since it does not accept the biblical texts as necessarily flawless, and
since the biblical language game is not accountable to other conceptual reference points, the question of what exactly constitutes the story is left open. How precisely we construe the meaning of the narrative is left to the interpreter, and thus, despite all good intentions to the contrary, we find ourselves all of a sudden side by side with postmodernism after all. George Lindbeck, though denying the charge of relativity, let alone irrationality, asserts:

The sense of what is real or unreal is in large part socially constructed, and what seems credible or incredible to contemporary theologians is likely to be more the product of their milieu and intellectual conditioning than of their science, philosophy, or theological argumentation.15

It is not that Lindbeck promotes this postmodern understanding of the theologian’s work; in fact, he might consider it to be undesirable, but since he presents it as undeniable reality, it becomes an unavoidable factor.

A fascinating negative example of this problem is illustrated in an article by Robert P. Jones and Melissa C. Stewart. They raise the point that it is all very well to call for a return to the Christian’s self-identity by being faithful within the Christian paradigm, but what if your understanding of the paradigm is faulty from the outset? Their case in point is dubious, but that fact only enhances their contention. Jones and Stewart argue that, when one applies postliberal strategy to the Christianity of the American South, one winds up bolstering the flawed theology of Southern Baptists and related movements, which these authors consider to be wrongheaded. So, they contend, postliberalism is helpful as a corrective to liberalism, but potentially harmful in other contexts. Regardless of what one may think of their example, it makes it clear that, without external standards of correctness, postliberalism’s appeal to simply live by the biblical narrative is naïve because it does not provide sufficient ways of identifying which interpretation of the narrative is the correct one.

A Final Admonition
There is something intrinsically appealing in the idea that we dispense with critical issues and merely focus on the biblical narrative and live according to it, and thus it is not surprising that it has lapped over from those who originally were at home in a liberal context, to authors who still accept the label of “evangelical.” A current fashion among evangelicals is the so-called “Emergent Church.” One of its leaders is Brian McLaren, who has achieved a great deal of popularity by teaching that we need to focus on the story of Christ, and that doctrines and standards may only stand in the way of living an authentic Christian life. In fact, one of his more recent books is entitled A Generous Orthodoxy.17

McLaren asks his readers in the Christian church to get beyond their preoccupations with irrelevant doctrines, labels, and categories that only serve to exclude

(continued on page 26)
people and to empower our pride. Instead, we need to learn to accept the fact that the Church is filled with sinners, and that by judging them, we are erecting barriers between people and between us and God. He claims that the mission of Jesus was one of inclusiveness; after all, he welcomed even the woman caught in adultery. The church’s mission is to serve the kingdom of God in the world, which is not synonymous with the church, and that means to leave behind all obstacles. What difference does it make what specific attributes we believe about God, Christ, Scripture, or salvation? Furthermore, he declares that it is a serious mistake to divide the world into those who are saved and those who are not; we do not have the right to think that any human beings, including people of different religions, are lost. Even though McLaren is still called “evangelical” by many people, it appears to me that the two originators of postliberalism have greater respect for doctrines than McLaren, for whom they are not much more than obstacles.

Sadly, whether we are talking about the original form of postliberalism or its even more watered-down pseudo-evangelical version, its ultimate fate can only be the opposite of its intent. By robbing the gospel of its objective content, there can no longer be true grace. The good news is good only because it is preceded by the bad news of our sin and its fatal consequences. What McLaren gives us is not a God of grace or mercy, but a god of indulgence, a god who overlooks our sin because, after all, no one is perfect. But if this were the case, then there could be no rejoicing in the fact of salvation and no assurance of being accepted by God because indulgence is subjective. I can be sure of my salvation because I know that, even though I am a sinner who deserves only condemnation, God gave his word that if I trust in Christ, who died on the cross for me, I will be saved. If all I have left is a vague notion that God abhors categories, I have nothing left to celebrate. I cannot know either when I may have overstepped the bounds, or that Christ’s atonement is applicable to me because I have abandoned rational thought (which would still be true, even if I picked and chose among doctrines based on whether they appeal to me). Historically, when the church lost its affirmative voice, such as just prior to the Reformation, the result was not a time of freedom and happiness, but a time of fear and uncertainty.

It is not the calling of the servant of God to teach what makes him feel good about himself. The Bible exhorts us in 2 Timothy 2:15:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth.

and in James 3:1

Not many should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment.

Whether we consider ourselves postliberal or evangelical, or we eschew labels, there is no shortcut permitted for those who wish to expound the truth of God’s revelation.

Notes

1 I would be able to give a detailed answer a few months later. See my article, “Hegel in Rahner: A Study in Philosophical Hermeneutics.” Harvard Theological Review 71 (1978):285-298.
groups are essential in this day and age, no matter what line of work you are in.

If you live a life of integrity and treat people fairly, it does get noticed, and doors do get opened to serious conversations about the truly important things in life.

I’ve found that I can make a difference by participating in organizations that are teaching and mentoring Hill staffers or other professionals. I enjoy speaking to young Hill staffers, interns, and students who are interested in politics or business, and I plant seeds about living life for the right reasons. I’ve also tried to find a few big projects where I can make a difference, whether it’s helping a small inner city Christian school or helping poor women who are fighting addictions to get their lives on track. As a member of the CSLI board, I can help oversee the expansion of the Fellows program as we plan to reach thousands of committed, energetic disciples of Christ.

Another way my wife and I live out our faith is in our neighborhood. Michelle is known as the “Mayor of 27th Street” because she (mostly) and I (somewhat) organize the annual block party, invite new families to dinner, keep an eye on the elderly neighbors, organize Christmas caroling, and generally try to reach out with the love of Christ to our neighbors.

My wife and I are big supporters of Young Life, and we often host gatherings of high school kids in our home. Lastly, we try to raise up the next generation of believers by focusing on our three young children.

The Lord has been so faithful to bring me along on my spiritual journey. At this point in my life, my main focus is to manage the “product” of living a godly life. I can’t do this on my own. I need to rely on the Holy Spirit and prayer every day. But through God’s help, I hope I can help others who may be lost or drifting like I was not too long ago.
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