A third way in theology?

The origins of postliberalism

by Gary Dorrien in the July 4, 2001 issue

No theological perspective has a commanding place or an especially impressive following these days. Various theologies compete for attention in a highly pluralized field, and no theology has made much of a public impact. One significant and inescapable development, however, has been the emergence of “postliberal” theology, a major attempt to revive the neo-orthodox ideal of a “third way” in theology.

For nearly as long as modern theology has existed, efforts have been made to locate a third way between conservatism and liberalism. The idea of a third way was intrinsic to mid-19th-century German “mediating theology,” which blended confessional, pietistic and liberal elements. Two generations later, neo-orthodoxy issued a more aggressive appeal for a third way. While insisting that he was not tempted by biblical literalism, Karl Barth began his dogmatics by describing the liberal tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Adolf von Harnack as “the plain destruction of Protestant theology and the Protestant church.” Emil Brunner’s “theology of crisis” similarly maintained that in different ways Protestant liberalism and Protestant orthodoxy both betrayed the Reformation principles of the sovereignty and freedom of the Word of God. Reinhold Niebuhr took a different tack toward a similar end, arguing that fundamentalism was hopelessly wrong because it took Christian myths literally, while liberal Christianity was hopelessly wrong because it failed to take Christian myths seriously.

Neo-orthodoxy was an umbrella term for various profoundly different theologies. It was embraced in the U.S. by thousands of pastors and theologians, who generally got their theology from Brunner and Niebuhr rather than from Barth. American neo-orthodoxy in the 1940s and 1950s typically meant a compound of Brunner’s dogmatics, Niebuhr’s theological ethics, and the scripture scholarship of the biblical theology movement. This movement, a reaction to the perceived sterility of earlier, purely analytic studies, emphasized the unifying themes of scripture and stressed

the revelatory acts of God in history as described in the Bible.

The neo-orthodox movement was stunningly successful in reorienting the field of modern theology. The biblical language of sin, transcendence and the Word of God resumed a prominent place in theological discourse.

But in a remarkably brief period of time, the house of neo-orthodoxy crashed. During the 1960s, the theological giants of neo-orthodoxy passed away, James Barr's claims about the uniqueness of biblical semantics dismantled biblical theology, and Langdon Gilkey exposed the incoherence of neo-orthodox God-language. Gilkey showed that for all of its condemnations of theological liberalism, neo-orthodoxy construed the meaning of the scriptural "mighty acts of God" in essentially liberal terms. Gilkey later called attention to a secularizing trend in theology—he called it "death-of-God theology"—which was led by former Barthians such as William Hamilton and Paul van Buren. Shortly after that, the first currents of liberation theology emerged in Latin America and the U.S., making neo-orthodoxy seem stuffy, provincial and oppressive.

Though postliberals' connections to neo-orthodoxy are not widely touted in postliberal writings, the connections are significant. The postliberal movement is essentially a Barthian project—one that, in certain respects, is more deeply influenced by Barth than American neo-orthodoxy was in its glory days.

Postliberal theology began as a Yale-centered phenomenon. It was founded by Yale theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, who wrote the movement's founding texts and who (before Frei's untimely death in 1988) trained most of its key advocates. Prominent figures in the development of the postliberal school have included such Yale-trained theologians as James J. Buckley, J. A. DiNoia, Garrett Green, Stanley Hauerwas, George Hunsinger, Bruce D. Marshall, William Placher, George Stroup, Ronald Thiemann and David Yeago. A generally younger group of Yale-trained postliberals now contributing to the development of postliberalism includes Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Serene Jones, David Kamitsuka, Ian McFarland, Paul McGlasson, Joe Mangina, R. R. Reno, Gene Rogers and Kathryn Tanner. Numerous theologians from different academic backgrounds share key affinities with the postliberal movement; they include William Willimon, evangelical ecumenists Stanley Grenz and Gabriel Fackre, the late Baptist theologian James William McClendon Jr. and British theologians Rowan Williams and David Ford.

The school's founding argument was propounded by Frei in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974). Frei observed that modern conservative and liberal approaches to the Bible both undermine the authority of scripture by locating the meaning of biblical teaching in some doctrine or worldview that is held to be more foundational than scripture itself. Before the Enlightenment, he explained, most Christians read the Bible primarily as a kind of realistic narrative that told the overarching story of the world. The coherence of this story made figural interpretation possible; certain events within and outside of scriptural narrative were viewed as having prefigured or reflected the central biblical events. Jews and Christians made sense of their lives by viewing themselves as related to and participating within the story told in scripture.

Frei argued that during the Enlightenment this sense of scripture as realistic narrative was lost. Because their own rationalized experience increasingly defined for them what was "real," theologians sought to understand scripture by relating it to their own (supposedly universal) "reality." That is, they sought to determine the truth within and about scripture by translating it into the truer language of their own world. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* offered a richly detailed survey of the ways 18th- and 19th-century theologians overlooked the narrative character of scripture, but fundamentally, Frei argued, there were two main strategies by which modernist (and modernist-influenced) theologians reconstrued scriptural meaning. Liberals looked for the real meaning of the Bible in the eternal truths about God and humanity that it conveyed, while conservatives looked for the real meaning in the Bible's factual references.

In both cases, the priority of scriptural narrative itself was overturned. Scripture no longer defined the world in which Christians lived in a normative way; rather, the Bible was turned into a source of support for modern narratives of progress or for other doctrinal norms. "All across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place," Frei remarked. "Interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story."

With the loss of scripture as a grand formative narrative, the Bible became increasingly alien to the church. Its meaning became decipherable only to an academic elite. Liberal scholars looked for culture-affirming eternal truths in scripture and otherwise deconstructed the canonical text into historical-critical fragments. Conservatives and evangelical fundamentalists turned the text into source material for propositions and developed highly artificial harmonizations of

conflicting factual statements that created internal “solutions” not found in scripture at all.

Frei gave most of his attention to the varieties of liberalism, but his verdict applied equally to most forms of modern liberal and conservative theology. “No one who pretended to any sort of theology or religious reflection at all wanted to go counter to the ‘real’ applicative meaning of biblical texts, once it had been determined what it was, even if one did not believe them on their own authority,” he remarked. The “real” meaning became all-determinative. Conservatives held out for the literal meaning of various factual references in scripture, and liberals countered that modern science and historical-critical investigations negated literal meaning as an interpretive possibility. In both cases, the sense of scripture as canonical narrative was abandoned.

The seeds of a postliberal third way were planted in this account of biblical interpretation. Frei emphasized the primacy of scriptural narrative for theology. His colleague George Lindbeck added an insistence on the primacy of language over experience and a theory about religion as a cultural-symbolic medium. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analysis of language and the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz, Lindbeck’s major work, *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), offered an account of contemporary theological options that reinforced and amplified much of Frei’s argument.

Lindbeck argued for a “cultural-linguistic” understanding of religion as opposed to the “cognitive-propositional” and “experiential-expressive” approaches that have, he said, dominated theology during the modern age. Liberal theologies are nearly always experiential-expressive, he argued; they seek to ground religious language upon foundational claims about experiences of religious feeling, moral value, or the like. Most conservative theologies are cognitive-propositional; they claim that doctrinal statements directly or “literally” refer to reality. Lindbeck observed that in their emphasis upon the function of religious language as propositional information about objective realities, conservative theologians tend to confirm the approach to religion taken by most Anglo-American analytic philosophers. Analytic philosophy typically assumes that religious language is meaningful only if it makes universally valid statements about matters of fact in the form of propositions.

Unfortunately for analytic philosophy, no religion can actually be understood on these terms. Lindbeck contended that religious traditions are historically shaped and

culturally encoded, and are governed by internal rules. Any explanation of religious belief that disregards these factors will inevitably distort the religious tradition under examination. In the case of Christianity, he observed, it is scriptural narrative that shapes the cultural-linguistic world in which the corporate body of Christ expresses its meanings and seeks to follow Christ. Christian doctrines should not be understood as universalistic propositions or as interpretations of a universal religious experience. Doctrines are more like the rules of grammar that govern the way we use language to describe the world. Christian doctrine identifies the rules by which Christians use confessional language to define the social world that they indwell.

Following Wittgenstein, Lindbeck emphasized the connection between “rationality” and the skillful use of acquired rules. Believers, he argued, can prove the rationality or relevance of their religious tradition (or any tradition) only by skillfully using its internal grammar: “The reasonableness of a religion is largely a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter.”

Lindbeck’s model of religious understanding did not rule out the possibility of apologetics—of speaking to people who do not share the linguistic world of Christianity. It ruled out only the kind of apologetic that appeals to reasons that are prior to faith. The logic of coming to believe in Christianity, he contended, is like that of learning a language. Rational arguments on behalf of Christian claims become possible only after one has learned through spiritual training how to speak the language of Christian faith. Moreover, the meaning of Christian language can be found only within scripture. Instead of trying to translate scripture into extrascriptural categories, Lindbeck proposed redescribing reality “within the scriptural framework.” In this approach, “it is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.” If theologians allowed the story of the Bible to become their own story, he argued, they would be less preoccupied with making Christianity relevant to the non-Christian world on non-Christian terms.

This principle applied equally to Christian communities: “Religious communities are likely to be practically relevant in the long run to the degree that they do not first ask what is either practical or relevant, but instead concentrate on their own intratextual outlooks and forms of life.” Just as individuals are saved by faith, not by works, he reasoned, so are religious communities saved by faith, not by social-ethical success.

Lindbeck cautioned that he was not making an argument for religious withdrawal from social concerns, for faithfulness always bears good fruit in the social realm. It was biblical religion that produced modern science and democracy and other values cherished by Western civilization. But if the world is to be saved from the demonic corruptions of these values, he contended, it will need a revival of biblical religion to accomplish this saving work. Christianity is most redemptive as a force in the world when Christian churches focus their energies on building formative Christian communities that are rooted in the idioms and practices of biblical faith.

It followed for Lindbeck that Christian catechesis is a more appropriate emphasis for churches than the various modern strategies to make Christianity reasonable, attractive or relevant. He pointed out that for the most part, pagan converts to the early church did not absorb Christian teaching intellectually and then decide to become Christians. They were attracted to what they saw of the faith and practices of early Christian communities; only later did they come to understand very much about the faith, after a prolonged program of catechesis made them proficient in an alien grammar and way of life. This is the model that a spiritually serious church should seek to recover in a post-Christian age, Lindbeck suggested: “When or if dechristianization reduces Christians to a small minority, they will need for the sake of survival to form communities that strive without traditionalist rigidity to cultivate their native tongue and learn to act accordingly.”

The school of theology founded by Frei and Lindbeck has emphasized the community-forming centrality of scriptural narrative and the countercultural mission of the church. With liberal theology, the postliberal school takes for granted that the Bible is not infallible and that biblical higher criticism is fully legitimate and necessary. With evangelical theology, the postliberal school emphasizes the primacy of biblical revelation, the unity of the biblical canon, and the saving uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In recent years some evangelicals have shown considerable sympathy for the postliberal school (notably Stanley Grenz, Nancy Murphey, Roger Olson and Clark Pinnock); other evangelicals have treated it respectfully while making strong objections against it (such as Donald Bloesch and Alister McGrath).

At the same time, many old-style conservative evangelicals have warned that postliberal theology is but the latest manifestation of a deadly neo-orthodoxy, which is all the more pernicious for its seeming affinity with conservative aims. In an early negative judgment on Frei, Carl F. H. Henry summarized the problem: Narrative theology drives a wedge between biblical narrative (which it plays up) and historical

factuality (which it plays down). Moreover, by failing to ground their assertions about scripture in a logically prior doctrine of biblical inerrancy, the narrative theologians undermine their purported desire to uphold the unity and authority of scripture. Narrative theology has no substantive doctrine of biblical inspiration, no objective theory of biblical authority, no objective criterion for establishing religious truth, and only a partial account of scriptural unity. Furthermore, Henry noted, much of scripture consists of nonnarrative material, which makes the narrative category insufficient by itself to account for the canonical unity of scripture. As for the postliberal claim to eschew the experiential subjectivism of liberal theology, Henry charged that in elevating narrative over factuality, narrative theology becomes unable to distinguish truth from error or fact from fiction.

This critique made some telling points, some of which have been registered by others more sympathetic to postliberalism. For example, Harvard theologian Ronald Thiemann, who studied under Frei, objects that the cultural-linguistic model makes talk about the “text” stand in place of Christian talk about God; Yale biblical scholar Brevard Childs rejects Lindbeck’s talk about the text creating its own world. This way of speaking about scripture is rooted in the spiritual practices of the liturgical churches, Childs observes, not “the way the Bible actually functions within the church”—apparently meaning, in this case, the nonliturgical churches.

Frei never claimed to have worked out satisfactory answers to such criticisms, and Lindbeck doesn’t claim to have done so either. But the postliberal founders have addressed many of these issues. In a pointed reply to Henry, for example, Frei admonished that such terms as “truth” and “reference” and “historical fact,” which Henry relied on, are more ambiguous than is often recognized.

Indeed, Henry’s rationalistic evangelicalism epitomized Lindbeck’s cognitive-propositionalist type of theology. To Henry, the metaphors and narratives of scripture carry meaning as religious truths only if they are restated in propositional form. For this reason he regarded scriptural narrative as secondary in importance to the doctrines that scripture contains. Frei countered that this is not a biblical way of thinking. Though the Bible obviously contains multiple literary forms, he observed, it conveys meaning and truth primarily through narrative. Doctrines are conceptual redescriptions of biblical stories; they arise from the stories and point back to them. Though such redescriptions are surely needed in theology, he allowed, they are not the primary basis of theology. Biblical truth is conveyed primarily through stories.

Consider John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” As a doctrinal statement, he observed, “the Word became flesh” can be understood only through the gospel story. Its religious meaning is not an independent proposition; it is comprehensible only as a sequence enacted in the gospel-narrated story of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Frei did not deny that biblical truth is often cognitive or that it is sometimes expressed in scripture in propositional form. His argument against evangelical rationalism centered on its claim that truth can be expressed only in propositional form.

Like Barth, Frei contended that much of scriptural narrative is historylike without needing to be historical. The purpose of the Gospel stories is to narrate the identity of Jesus, he argued. For this reason many of the Gospel episodes function as illustrative anecdotes. They show us the kind of person that Jesus was. The test of their truth is not whether the particular incidents that they describe took place, but whether they truthfully narrate the identity of Jesus to us. The same principle applies to other scriptural narratives.

It followed for Frei (as for Barth) that it is fatally misguided for Christians to suggest that archaeology or form criticism or any other critical discipline should be the judge of how seriously Christian readers take the witness of scripture. The Christian indwells the narrative world of scripture and lives through its meanings. She does not decide whether scriptural testimony should be taken seriously on the basis of the most recent issue of the *Biblical Archaeology Review*. To her, the God described in Genesis is real whether the patriarchs really lived or not.

Does this mean that Frei-style narrative theology simply waves off the question of historical factuality? If biblical narratives do not derive their meaning by referring to historical events or ontological realities, how can biblical theology be anything more than a symbolic or mythical construct? If biblical theology makes no claim at all to a historical basis, doesn’t the narrative strategy simply reduce biblical truth to being merely a good story?

Many evangelical theologians have followed Henry in charging that Frei is hopelessly cut off from historical reality. Others have argued that Lindbeck too settles for a merely descriptive intratextual strategy that makes no normative truth claims.

Critics have also complained that the writings of Frei and Lindbeck are highly formal and that Frei's prose style is evasive and impenetrable. Alister McGrath confesses that he is "verbally defeated by Frei's prose, which is the most opaque I have ever been obliged to wrestle with." Frei was apparently incapable of writing in a way that was not highly allusive, elusive and vexatious. His keen intuitive sense of the nuances and complex interrelationships between arguments was evident to his students, but this same gift made it painfully difficult for him to make a clean or orderly account of his arguments. As George Hunsinger remarks, "The tortured syntax so often evident in his prose seemed to be matched only by the profundity of insight which that very syntax seemed at once to promise and yet also so vexingly to withhold."

Frei's major constructive work, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (1975), epitomized these qualities. The book was filled with disjointed fits and starts that tied up his argument and nearly strangled it. Moreover, some of Frei's more lucid passages were calculated not to give comfort to many readers, especially evangelicals. A strong case can be made that historically the Christian story is not at all unique, he suggested: "This being the case, I shall not attempt to evaluate the historical reliability of the Gospel story of Jesus or argue the unique truth of the story on grounds of a true, factual 'kernel' in it. Instead, I shall be focusing on its character as a story." Later he argued that we know almost nothing about the historical Jesus apart from the gospel story and that "it is precisely the fiction-like quality of the whole narrative" of Jesus' passion and resurrection that makes his identity present to us.

Frei recognized, however, that the Gospel narratives themselves do not support a sharp dichotomy between the gospel story and historical factuality. He noted in particular that the question of historical factuality is raised very forcefully in the stories of the crucifixion and resurrection. Mythical narratives always seek to sacralize fundamental religious symbols, but in the Gospels Jesus insists on the unsubstitutable uniqueness of his person and mission. He does not symbolize any mythical type or theme but is presented as unreplaceable. For this reason, Frei observed, the cross and resurrection story virtually forces readers to ask whether the events it describes actually took place. In other words, in the cross and resurrection story, the bond between the meaning of the story and what Jesus did is very tight, whereas in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8: 1-11), the story is true whether or not it actually occurred, because it shows us the kind of

person that Jesus was.

Having emphasized that human minds on this side of eternity cannot comprehend the nature of the resurrection, Frei was careful not to make definitive statements about the content of the Easter proclamation. We cannot claim to know the manner of Christ's presence in his resurrection appearances, he cautioned. Elsewhere he remarked that this was the problem with speaking of the resurrection as a historical fact.

"Of course I believe in the 'historical reality' of Christ's death and resurrection, if those are the categories which we employ," Frei said. The problem is that the language of "historical factuality" is not theory-neutral and does not deserve to be absolutized. "There was a time when we didn't talk, as many people have talked for nearly two hundred years now, about Jesus Christ being 'a particular historical event,'" he observed. "And it may well be that even scholars won't be using those particular terms so casually and in so self-evident a fashion for much longer. In other words, while I believe that those terms may be apt, I do not believe, as Dr. Henry apparently does, that they are as theory-free, as neutral as he seems to think they are. I do not think that the concept 'probability' is theory-neutral. I do not think that we will talk theologically in those terms, perhaps, in another two generations. We didn't talk that way three hundred years ago."

To say that the resurrection must be a "fact" of "history" is to make history contain something that obliterates its boundaries. If the resurrection actually occurred, it is an event without analogy. "History" as a category is too impoverished to contain it, and the usual historiocritical questions about the relative probability of different explanations are rendered useless. At the same time, Frei acknowledged, the gospel story clearly makes claims that are not less than historical. "If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of the literal resurrection."

Near the end of his life Frei reflected that his personal stake in Lindbeck's argument was very deep, and he exhorted Lindbeck not to back down from his truth claims about the truth status of Christian language. Frei lived long enough to see the emergence of a postliberal school, to which he bequeathed some vexing questions. Is the postliberal conception of Christian truth merely descriptive and evocative? Is it enough for theologians to say that biblical truth is the capacity of the text to draw readers into a new framework of meaning that makes sense of one's life and world?

In the next issue I will look more closely at those questions and at the possible future of postliberalism.