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### Spiritual Friendship in the Works of Ambrose, Augustine, Aelred: Retrieving the Wealth of the Great Tradition in Service to the Evangelical Poor

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**Spiritual Friendship in the Works of Ambrose, Augustine, Aelred:  
Retrieving the Wealth of the Great Tradition in Service to the Evangelical Poor**

*2019 Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego*

*Hank Voss*

**Introduction**

Two weeks ago my friend Benjamin Hoskins drove eight hours from Detroit to visit my family for the weekend. My first memory of Benjamin is from the Spring of 1995 when we were both undergraduates at Taylor University. Benjamin was the only African American among the forty young men who lived on my floor. One day as I passed his room, I looked at him and said, “Ben, I am glad we are friends.” He responded with words I have never forgotten, “Hank, we are not friends. You know my name, but you know nothing about me. To be a friend means much more to me than simply living two dorm rooms down the hall. Look, I am not saying we can’t be friends, I am simply saying we are not yet friends by my definition of friendship.”

Over the last twenty years, Benjamin has taught me many lessons on friendship, and I am glad to say we are now friends according to both of our definitions of the word. This paper is not the time to discuss the many lessons I have learned from Benjamin relating to friendship. I will simply acknowledge that the interaction described above is the first time I remember seriously questioning the meaning of “friend.” This paper’s thesis is simple: Congregational leaders among the poor will never thrive in ministry without developing skill in choosing, testing, trusting, and enjoying friends. This claim will be illustrated through one of the greatest friends in the history of the church, the twelfth-century pastor and theologian, Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167). The paper will proceed in three movements. First, a number of preliminary presuppositions related to the paper’s subtitle, “retrieving the wealth of the Great Tradition in service to the evangelical poor” are addressed. Second, Pastor Aelred’s use of reason, Scripture, tradition, and experience in his book *Spiritual Friendship*, is presented as an exemplar for evangelical pastor-theologians. Finally, the relevance of Aelred’s nine-hundred year old text for contemporary pastor-theologians working among the poor is illustrated in four areas of concern to pastors working among the poor in a North American context. May this paper contribute to each of us in this room growing in our understanding of Christian friendship, particularly may we understand with Aelred that all spiritual friendships “must begin in Christ, continue with Christ, and be perfected by Christ” (SF, 1:10). Amen.

## **I. Three Underlying Assumptions of this Study**

### **A. The Urgency of Christian Mission to the Evangelical Poor**

- The first presupposition of this paper is that North American Evangelicals have an urgent responsibility to share the wealth of biblical and theological food we have stored up with the billions who are experiencing a famine for the Word of God and the theological gifts of the Great Tradition.
- Lausanne Evangelicals; Christian Witness to the Urban Poor (LOP 22); Christian Mission and the Poor (SRTM White Paper #2); *Christian Mission and the Poor*. SR Vol. 4,
- According to International Bulletin of Missionary Research (IBMR) January 2019 statistics, there are over two billion humans living in poverty, 1.2 billion of which live in urban slums.
- There are over 100,000 new-non Christian-urban-poor dwellers entering our cities every day. Leaders of the North American church have a responsibility to engage this greatest (numerically) missionary challenge of all time.
- How will leaders planting and pastoring congregations among the poor be equipped for greater faithfulness and fruitfulness in their contexts? This is a question that drives many missionary educators. Those working with the hundreds of millions living in rural poverty face similar challenges.

### **B. The Reality of Perennial Pastoral Problems and the Cure of Souls**

- The second assumption of this study is that theological educators must address both unique contextual issues and perennial pastoral problems.
- Both types of issues are best engaged by local pastor-theologians who are biblically formed (by Scripture) and theologically normed (by the Great Tradition).
- A unique contextual issue to the present generation might be the way social media and cell phones are changing how youth pastors address addiction, sin, and grace

- A perennial pastoral problem might look like that same youth pastor addressing issues of identity, loneliness, friendship, and community with the teens she shepherds.

### **C. Retrieval of Spiritual Classics Provides a Way Forward for Congregational Leaders Working Among the Poor**

- Historically, leaders like John Wesley (d. 1791), Elizabeth Fry (d. 1845), C.S. Lewis, and A.W. Tozer have used spiritual classics as a way to address both unique contextual issues and perennial pastoral problems.
- Jim Houston provides a contemporary example. He uses Julianne of Norwich as a resource relating to God's Love when working with victims of sexual abuse. This semester I have found this text helpful in that regard as well.
- Aelred provides an example of both a pastor theologian who used spiritual classics and of a spiritual classic which can be used today to help christian leaders understand spiritual friendship.

## **II. Aelred as Model for Constructive and Contextual Pastoral Theologians**

Aelred's spiritual classic, *Spiritual Friendship*, has helped thousands of pastors over dozens of cultures and across many centuries to thrive in Christian leadership while serving in challenging ministry settings. One reason for the fruitfulness of Aelred's work over the centuries is that it is a well balanced text addressing reason, Scripture, Christian tradition, and personal experience.

### **A. Wisdom from Creation: Reason and Cicero**

- Cicero's work on Friendship represents some of the best thinking on Friendship that human reason can deduce. It displays the common grace found in Creation. Aelred begins his text with serious engagement with this creation wisdom.
- He discusses Cicero's definition of friendship at four different places in *SF*, the threefold structure of the book echoes Cicero's structure, and he cites Cicero some 96 times in a relatively short text.

## **B. Wisdom from Scripture**

- Scripture is Aelred's "Mirror." It is the source and measure of all understandings of true friendship.
- Aelred cites 34 biblical books in his work, and constantly makes uses of biblical narratives, the life and teaching of Jesus, deep meditations on the text.

## **C. Wisdom from Tradition: Teaching and Practice of the Church**

- Aelred builds his teaching on friendship from the foundations he finds in Ambrose (Cited 46 times); Bernard (a contemporary and friend, 30x), Augustine (24x); Jerome (10x), and Cassian (7x).
- He also builds on the apocrypha (11x)

## **D. Wisdom from Experience: Aelred and His Friends**

- Aelred was a legendary good friend (*Life of Aelred*, Walter Daniel).
- His treatise is a dialogue with three named friends, and he discusses a number of other unnamed friends. He can't talk about friendship except with friends.

In sum, Aelred's teaching on friendship can be thought of as a four legged chair. Spiritual friendship is built upon four pillars: 1) the wisdom of practical reason found in creation; 2) the wisdom of Scripture; 3) the wisdom of church tradition; and 4) the wisdom of lived experience with friendship.

### **III. The Relevance of Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship* for Congregational Leaders Working Among the Poor**

In this third section of the paper, I identify four areas where Aelred's spiritual classic is of service to congregational leaders today.

#### **A. Four Perennial Pastoral Questions on Friendship**

First, Aelred's text raises many practical questions about friendship for Christian leaders. There are at least a dozen, but these four are illustrative.

■ **Can One Become a Friend With One Who Is Not Your Equal?**

- Aelred teaches that men and women are equal (1.57). See also page 42). Thus:

(1) It is possible for men and women to be friends. Both as married and as non-married.

(2) It is possible for a pastor to be friends with members of his congregation!

■ **How Long Does True Friendship Last?**

■ **Can One Become a Friend Without Loving Oneself?**

- No. One must also know oneself if one wishes to know God. the limit of self-knowledge is your limit of God-knowledge.

■ **Can One Love God Without Loving a Friend?**

- No. Your love for a friend is also the limit of your love for a friend, and vice-versa.

**B. Imagining a Christian Vision for Same-Sex Friendships**

■ **Covenant Same Sex Friendships**

David and Jonathan provide a case study of what covenant same-sex friendships among Christian Leaders can look like.

■ **Faithful Christian Friendships Between Same-Sex Attracted Friends**

Christian leaders desperately need a positive vision of same-sex friendships when they or those they pastor experience same-sex attraction.

A resource here is Wesley Hill's text *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Brazos, 2015) and the group that blogs with Hill at the website of the same name.

### **C. Imagining a Christian Vision for Cross-Sex Friendships**

#### **■ Christian Marriage as Covenant Friendship**

Aelred cites both Adam and Eve and Ruth and Boaz as examples of spiritual friendship. The description of spiritual friendship is a model relevant to all Christian marriages and an antidote to the cultural poison much of the North American church has imbibed in relation to Christian Marriage. One contemporary writer who develops this theme is Paul Stevens in his *Marriage Spirituality* (Regent University Press).

#### **■ Faithful Christian Friendship Between the Sexes as Evidence of God's Kingdom Come on Earth**

Aelred cites an example from the Maiden of Antioch and a Roman soldier as an example of spiritual friendship between the sexes (1.29). See page 42).

Aelred provides a more robust vision of the relationship between Christian brothers and sisters than is found in the Billy Graham Rule. Indeed his vision for Christian friendship is one that must be embraced if ETS is to flourish moving forward into the third millennium.

### **D. Imagining a Christian Vision for Catholicity and Cross-Cultural Friendships**

#### **■ The Catholicity of the Church as a School for Christian Friendship**

- The catholicity of the church is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Our ethnic and national identities provide unique gifts to bring God glory.
- Cross cultural friendships allow us to give greater glory to God for his gifts, but perhaps more importantly, to identify the cultural vices that one's ethnocentrism invariably blinds one from seeing. There are few more painful and yet more sanctifying relationships than a cross cultural covenant friendship.

#### **■ Consider Dana Roberts' 2019 book, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community* for dozens of examples . .**

### **Conclusion**

In sum, I have argued that congregational leaders among the poor will never thrive in ministry without developing skill in choosing, testing, trusting, and enjoying friends. The twelfth-century

pastor and theologian, Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) has provided wisdom to the church for many centuries and across dozens of cultures. His teachings as collected in the Spiritual classic, *Spiritual Friendship*, provide an example of how evangelicals retrieving the wealth of the Great Tradition in service to the evangelical poor might be done. Pastor Aelred's use of reason, Scripture, tradition, and experience in his book *Spiritual Friendship* was presented as an example for evangelical pastor-theologians. His careful consideration of questions about spiritual friendship, and his advice on same-sex friendships, opposite sex friendships, and cross-cultural friendships continue to be important resources for evangelicals today. Once again in Pastor Aelred's words, may we understand and embrace the truth that all spiritual friendships "must begin in Christ, continue with Christ, and be perfected by Christ" (SF, 1:10). Amen.