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Biblical Friendship in Historical, Theological, and Practical Perspective: Aelred as Paradigmatic Model for Christian Friendship

*Evangelistic Faith Missions, Urban Leadership Team Retreat
Upland, IN, Rev. Dr. Hank Voss*

“Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. . . and Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.”

I Samuel 18:1-3 (c. 1000 BC)

“You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third.”

Aelred (c. 1167 AD)

“Let’s plunder the Egyptians!”

An ancient urban Egyptian pastor!

INTRODUCTION: POOR PASTORS WITH RICH FRIENDS

Big Idea: Pastors among the poor will never thrive in ministry without developing skill in choosing, testing, trusting, and enjoying friends. One of the best ways to learn how to do this well was explained by a pastor named Aelred (d. 1167).

Aelred is known as one of the greatest friends in the history of the church. He was a pastor, a theologian, and a really good friend to hundreds of people who wanted to grow into maturity in Christ (i.e. Christlikeness).

1. The teaching has three parts. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

Lets Pray.

May this message 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.

1. 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.²
2. 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.³
3. 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 PASTOR-THEOLOGIANS AMONG THE POOR

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 four areas: reason, Scripture, Christian tradition, and personal experience.

A. Wisdom from Creation: Reason and Cicero

1. 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.
2. 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.⁴

B. Wisdom from Scripture

1. Scripture is Aelred's "Mirror." It is the source and measure of all understandings of true friendship.

² Hank Voss and Lucas Hagen, "Forty-Five Lists, Anthologies and Collections of Christian Spiritual Classics: Their Breadth and Purpose," SRTM Whitepaper (Upland, IN: Taylor University, September 2019).

³See as an example of Dr. Houston's work with the Spiritual Classics: Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God and Spiritual Friendship*, ed. James M. Houston, Abridged edition (Portland, Or: Multnomah Pub, 1983). If you are interested in *Showings*, see Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

⁴See index in Aelred of Rievaulx, *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland (Collegeville, Minn: Cistercian Publications, 2010).

3. **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.
4. **Can One Love God Without Loving a Friend?** No. Your love for a friend is also the limit of your love for God, and vice-versa.⁵
5. **A Pastor Must Love Everyone in His Congregation, but Must a Pastor Like Everyone in His Congregation?**
 - Aelred teach us that we must understand the difference between Christ's command to love (*agape*) everyone, even our enemies, and the way Christ entrusted his innermost soul to a select few. In the ministry of Jesus, we see an ordering of friendship:
 - (1) —namely John,
 - (2) the three,
 - (3) the twelve,
 - (4) and his inner circle of disciples (including women).
 - Aelred teaches us that we must love everyone, but choose very wisely and carefully our friends.

B. It helps pastors imagine a Christian Vision for Same-Sex Friendships

1. Covenant Same Sex Friendships

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

2. 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. It helps pastors imagine a Christian Vision for Cross-Sex Friendships

1. 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

⁵ For more on this claim, see Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time With God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship With God* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2001).

cross-cultural friendships continue to be important resources for pastors 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.