Toward a Generous Orthodoxy

Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology

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Introduction

Hans Frei found his voice as a theologian at the close of an era of theological giants. The span of twelve years leading up to the publication of Frei's first book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,* witnessed the passing of his teacher and mentor H. Richard Niebuhr (1962), Paul Tillich (1965), Karl Barth (1968) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1971).[1]

Rudolf Bultmann passed away two years later (1976). Protestant theology in North America found itself in a precarious transition. Accounts of secularization proliferated nearly as rapidly as did liberation theologies. Theological voices in North American public life were mere echoes of what they had been at the height of the civil rights movement several years earlier. The idea of theology as an academic enterprise increasingly required justification. Theologians faced a set of dichotomous options. To remain within the academy meant surrendering much of theology's distinctively theological content in order to justify the legitimacy of its place there. How could a theologian speak in the full particularity of her theological convictions without becoming unintelligible to her nontheological interlocutors? Or if she adopted more broadly acceptable language and presuppositions, what could she say that was not already available to fellow scholars without the assistance of her theological commitments? In a shifting institutional and cultural context, theology appeared to be dispatched to the professional confines of seminaries and divinity schools.[2]

One alternative tempted theologians to draw back into the life of the church. If this avoided compromising theological distinctiveness, however, it risked implicating them in a sectarian posture and retreat into a theological ghetto. This alternative was complicated by the fact that lay people in many church contexts found the terms of academic theology as obscure as those of any nontheological scholarly discipline. Attempting to straddle the church/academy divide led some theologians to occupy themselves so intently with "theological method" that academic theology became nearly synonymous with "seemingly endless methodological foreplay."[3] Amidst the challenges presented by this transitional moment for theology in North America, Hans Frei emerged as one of the most influential theologians of his generation.[4]

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* Frei provided a meticulous historiographic analysis of the development of biblical hermeneutics in eighteen- and nineteenth-century Europe. There he demonstrated how scriptural reasoning and interpretation had come to be regulated by fairly recent and heavily theory-laden conceptions of "meaning," "reference," "interpretation" and "understanding." The story he told captivated theologians, historians, literary critics, and biblical scholars for more than a decade. At one level, it provided an historical and genealogical account of academic theology's late twentieth-century predicament. "Frei has helped to raise ghosts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who are going to put insistent questions to us in the coming years," one discerning critic put it. "One of the hopes aroused by this book is that he himself will make a distinctive and outstanding contribution to answering them."[5] This is precisely what Frei set out to do.

In the wake of Eclipse, Frei sought to critically retrieve approaches to reading Scripture that early Christian communities had drawn from ancient Jewish scriptural practices. According to Frei, those approaches had been employed in various forms roughly through the time of the Protestant Reformation.[6] He took up this project fully aware of the ease with which one might valorize a bygone era of "precritical" biblical interpretation. Frei sought, by contrast, to recover and critically enrich those textual practices with the help of whatever twentieth-century philosophical and literary tools might lend themselves to his purpose and subject matter. Frei thought that critically enriching textual concepts like "realistic narrative" and the "literal sense of Scripture" might provide a way beyond a deepening theological and interpretive stalemate occurring between modern evangelicalism and theological liberalism.[7]

On one hand, textual literalists and theological apologists defended the biblical truth against the tools of "higher criticism." So-called "higher critics," in turn, charged scriptural apologists with deploying protective strategies and wishful thinking, even as they asserted their own enterprise as thoroughly

scientific and historical, and thus legitimate in the halls of the modern academy. Still others claimed that the true religious significance of the Christian Scriptures was, in fact, wrapped in the garb of myth or symbol and required translation into terms of meaning that would be relevant to the modern worldview. Frei presented the case that, whether they recognized it or not, the various parties to this dispute held certain basic presuppositions in common. He thought the impasse between theological "liberals" and "conservatives" was largely characteristic of Christian thought in modern European and American contexts. As the deadlock between these camps of scriptural interpretation deepened, the predicament confronting late twentieth-century theologians intensified.

Frei's primary concerns were far more concrete than reconciling the apparent church/academy and church/world dichotomies that confronted him at midcareer. He sought, rather, to excavate and reframe many of the challenges to scriptural authority and theological exegesis posed by eighteen- and nineteenth-century thinkers. He sought, further, to avoid justifying his theological presuppositions from the standpoint of allegedly universally-available rationality free of prejudice. He refused to appeal to an "anthropological flash point for faith" apart from, or prior to, God's activity of special revelation. For these reasons among others, Frei is credited by some—indicted by others—with having formulated a *postliberal* theology.

Postliberal theologians are often characterized as privileging theological terms by refusing to translate them into nonscriptural and nonconfessional language. By some accounts, they insist that the terms used by their interlocutors be translated into Christian scriptural or ecclesial terms, or else face elimination. Critics from all sides worry that postliberal theology precludes serious and edifying conversation with nontheological voices and abandons concern for public discourse, owing to its focus upon the church.[8] "Postliberal" treatments of biblical narrative often are identified with nostalgia for the unified conception of Scripture allegedly enjoyed by "precritical" biblical studies.[9] They have been criticized for subsuming the rich diversity of nonnarrative biblical forms under a one-dimensional and too easily harmonious narrative of "salvation history."[10] Still others identify postliberal theology as forgoing all concern for historical accuracy of the Bible and fixating instead upon an autonomous "world inside the text."[11] Hermeneuticians have charged that postliberal instruction to "absorb" the contemporary world into the world of the biblical text ties postliberals to a reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "forms of life" as autonomous and discrete. Such a reading curtails the possibility of understanding across different forms of life (if the very idea of the biblical world "absorbing" the modern world is not preposterous to begin with).[12]

Evangelical critics charge that postliberal refusals to historically verify the events reported in Scripture yields the upper hand to modern forms of skepticism.[13] Thus, postliberals lack faith in the historical accuracy of the scriptural witness and are derelict in their apologetical duties. Postliberal theology seals itself into a "closed epistemological circle," some critics claim, "a fideism from within which everything can be seen clearly but which remains necessarily opaque to those outside."[14] At the same time, the single-minded preoccupation with the theological interpretation of Scripture of postliberal theology isolates it—perhaps even alienates it—from other academic disciplines. "When theology limits itself to the task of interpreting Scripture, it gains the advantage of peaceful coexistence with the other faculties of the university," writes Nancey Murphy. "Yet the price of conceiving of theology as the science of revelation is estrangement from and irrelevance to the secular sciences."[15] In the book that follows I argue that these criticisms related to "postliberal" theology fail to fit Frei's theological approach.

The overarching purpose of this book has two distinct but interrelated parts. It aims, first, to provide a critical and methodical exposition of Frei's theology. This objective is neither small nor uncontroversial. The sheer quantity of the critical responses that Frei's work continues to inspire nearly twenty-five years after his death is startlingly disproportionate to the two monographs and handful of articles that he produced over the span of his career. Moreover, as broadly influential as his work has been, it has stirred a comparable breadth of misunderstandings from all across the theological and philosophical spectrum. There are several reasons for this. Frei's thinking generally is unsystematic in ways that make it hard to follow. His writing style is, on occasion, positively obscure. His theology is highly eclectic, even improvisational and ad hoc. Frequently it does not cohere (or coheres only haphazardly) with any single or established theological option. In addition, the association of his work with the label 'postliberal'—and, occasionally, the outright assimilation of his later work to George Lindbeck's—has made Frei's work a target of criticism, polemic, and occasionally caricature. More significantly in my judgment (and a primary motivation for this book) is that insufficient attention to the thoroughly multidimensional character of Frei's work has led to many of the persistent misunderstandings that still vex it today.

Frei's work was a rich and textured mixture of intuitively articulated insight, occasionally excruciating rigor in the details, tortured prose, and a delicate balance between philosophical and theological sensibilities. In many ways he worked as a *bricoleur*—one who cobbles together the bits and pieces of whatever fragments are adequate for the subject matter and task at hand. As remarkable as was Frei's ability to discern family resemblances and develop

inconspicuous connections, it was the unsystematic character of his work that left so many questions begged and lingering points of confusion. This book aims to help alleviate these confusions by elucidating Frei's project in terms of the full range of resources upon which he drew, the ends at which he aimed, and the basic coherence that his body of work exhibits.

The second purpose of this book, perhaps a necessary consequence of the first, is to critically challenge, expand, and enrich the history, character, and viability of so-called "postliberal" theology. My aim here is not to defend postliberal theology per se. In my judgment, the fact that Frei often gets pigeonholed as simply a "postliberal" theologian is itself a problem. Hence, my explication, clarification, and (where appropriate) defense of Frei's work does not result in an outright embrace of the "postliberal" nomenclature. Neither, however, does it result in pronouncing the demise of "postliberal theology," intentionally avoiding the category or declaring it useless. Reading Frei as I propose will charitably complicate it as a theological option. I aim to contribute to a more flexible and complex appreciation of the range of family resemblances that might be said to constitute loosely a "postliberal" approach to theology.[16] This term has found sufficient currency in theological reference tools, curricula, and scholarly literature to suggest that reports of its demise are greatly exaggerated. If so, the question becomes how to cultivate uses of the term that are sufficiently precise to be helpful, yet underdetermined enough to avoid Ralph Waldo Emerson's caution against such monikers—"if I know your sect, I anticipate your argument."[17] On one hand, I aim to demonstrate the ways that Frei's thinking resists certain customary and monochromatic uses of the category. On the other hand, a complex account of Frei's theology requires attending carefully to his ad hoc uses of (and contributions to) the various features of recent theology that might fairly, and illuminatingly, be described as "postliberal."

A central premise of this book is that unlocking the full resourcefulness of Frei's theological approach requires sustained attention to its interdisciplinary and conversational character from start to finish. I make the case that Frei's uses of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, Erich Auerbach, Clifford Geertz, ordinary language philosophy, and nonfoundational philosophical insights—while christologically motivated and oriented—do not relegate his theological approach to critical quietism, methodological separatism, or a so-called "theological ghetto." Moreover, understanding these dimensions of Frei's work is not simply a matter of identifying similarities or appreciating elective affinities. An accurate grasp of Frei's thinking propels us into extensive engagement with nontheological forms of thought and opens opportunities for mutual enrichment. Sustained attention to the multidimensionality of Frei's work will

demonstrate that Frei cannot be pigeonholed simply a "church theologian" whose work bears certain quizzical flashes of relevance or interest to nontheological discourses. In fact, his work challenges many of the received conceptions of what it means to be a theologian of "academic" or "church" or "public" varieties. Arguably, it exposes these received options as a set of false dichotomies. Read in this way, Frei's pragmatic application of nontheological resources for theological purposes provides a model for church-oriented academic theology in a religious studies context.

Unapologetic Theology

Frei thought that theology ought not seek to justify itself in nontheological terms nor by criteria outside the witness of the gospel narratives. Neither can it take its raison d'etre to be its relevance to society or use-value to the world at large. That said, theology cannot do without resources from nontheological disciplines and interlocutors, and neither can it simply forgo attention to its broader relevance. Theology engages nontheological resources not because it is incomplete in itself nor incapable of self-expression. It must seek these resources *because* it is capable of expressing itself. Theology, Frei thought, is licensed—if not compelled—to explicate and expand its implications by every means available. It cannot be sequestered by the boundaries of professional and academic propriety, nor by the methodological equipment by which specialized academic domains differentiate and legitimate themselves. All such resources avail themselves to the theological task because that task first belongs to Christ. "Belonging to Christ" means that this task is initiated and oriented by the gospel witness in which the person and work of Christ confronts its readers as a range of stories whose unity rests upon a Name. Whatever tools might help clarify and illuminate these stories are fair game for the theologian.

To say that theology belongs to Christ is to say, as well, that theology belongs to the church. Dogmatic theology was, as Frei conceived it, divine *Wissenschaft*—spinning out, testing, ordering, redescribing, and correcting the inferences and implications of the rationality intrinsic to faith. It was Karl Barth's influence that led Frei to claim that theology must be unapologetic, and Frei found Barth's pithy definition of dogmatic theology particularly helpful in expressing this idea. Barth had characterized dogmatics as "the scientific test to which the Christian Church puts herself regarding the language about God which is peculiar to her."[18] The language peculiar to the church was not the medium that the church had invented in order to talk about the revelation of God. It was, rather, the medium that had created the church.

The point of origin of the church's peculiar language—and the church itself—was the life, death, and resurrection of Christ to which the Scriptures witness. On this account, the "church" has no unrevisable form or fixed meaning apart, that is, from the fact that it belongs to Christ. The "church's" modifier, "Christian," has its significance in pointing to the One who calls, commands, and gathers the followers into communities of various shapes and forms. Scripture's witness to the person and work of Christ presents the *fons et origo* ("fount and origin") of that peculiar language in which the church is gathered and through which its life unfolds. Frei was keenly attuned to how *under*-determined Barth's account of the church remains. He treated the topic with a similar delicacy.[19]

Frei found Barth's account of revelation especially compelling. Scripture, on this account, is not a distinct and separable medium of God's revelation. It is, authentically yet indirectly, that revelation. God acts to manifest the person of Christ in and through the apostolic witness of Scripture through the activity of the Holy Spirit. The result is that the *content* of revelation becomes inseparable from its *form*, while remaining qualitatively distinct from it. The Word of God occurs conceptually, and thus linguistically, in God's continuing activity of revelation. Yet there is no simple or univocal correspondence between the words of Scripture and the Word of God as it comes in and through Scripture. Rather, God takes up human conceptual practices—words, concepts, and the claims and assertions they constitute—and breaks and transforms them for the purposes of revelation.[20] "[W]e don't have more than our concepts of God," Frei articulated the point. "We don't have a separate intuition, a preconceptual or prelinguistic apprehension or grasp of God in his reality, not unless we are mystics (and we honor them). But we don't need it either; for the reality of God is given in, with, and under the concept and not separably, and that is adequate for us."[21] As Barth put it, God's revelation comes as the gift to humankind in human form. "[T]he transparency of these human words [of the prophets and apostles] is God's free gift," Barth had written. "But this gift is placed in their hands, and it is theirs to make their own insofar as they will make use of it. Thus the exposition of the prophetic-apostolic witness becomes a human task and activity."[22] "Divine gift in human form" could not result in a synthesis of the two on this view. It could not compromise the qualitative distinctiveness of the divine and the human. God's revealing activity leaves intact the social and practical identities of human concepts, words, and speech.

Friedrich Schleiermacher had claimed, by contrast, that language was an anthropomorphic addition to revelation. As long as God's revelation remained within immediate (and thus prelinguistic) consciousness, it was wholly separate from its anthropomorphic mode of representation.[23] Barth countered

Schleiermacher with the claim that, because we have it only conceptually, revelation is, in a sense, *essentially* anthropomorphic. "Since all our language inevitably arises from and is formed by the human and creaturely sphere," George Hunsinger helpfully captures the point, "the question in speaking about God was not whether but how to be 'anthropomorphic'."[24] And yet, because God's act of revelation is the condition of the possibility of such anthropomorphism, it differs entirely from the creeping anthropo*centrism* that Barth diagnosed as a central disorder of modern theology and then worked tirelessly to invert. It would be fair, if overly simple, to say that Frei spent his career figuring out how to speak and think about, conceptually redescribe, and expand upon the peculiar kind of anthropomorphism that was central to Barth's account of revelation.

From the time of his work in the early 1960s to his latest writings, Frei's eclectic and ad hoc borrowing was central to the task of theology as he understood it. "The logic of religious discourse is odd," he wrote in the preface to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, "connecting things and categories that may be disparate in other contexts, for example, the mode of factual affirmation with that of a religious life."[25] At the same time, this same logic of religious discourse required Frei to abandon any borrowed theoretical tool if it risked tying him down to a general theory or larger philosophical system.

For instance, to expand upon Barth's definition of dogmatics as the testing and self-examination of the language about God that is peculiar to the church, Frei first drew a philosophical connection.[26] "Incidentally," he wrote, "Barth wrote this passage in 1931 when most theologians still thought that the tools for knowing God were faith with or without concepts, in either case an 'inward,' mental instrument and not an 'outward' or linguistic skill. *Now* it's commonplace, philosophically as well as theologically. But it was quite remarkable for Barth intuitively to reach that far ahead."[27] Here Frei pinpoints the idea—increasingly commonplace at the time he wrote—that concepts are not ghostly entities occurring somewhere inside an interior region of "the mind." They are, rather, products of the practical skills of language use (paradigmatically, words), an insight he found most profoundly articulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein and several of his students.[28] Frei thought that Barth was onto this insight at least as early as Wittgenstein, and long before other theologians. While it will prove to be far from the case that Frei can adopt some theoretical tool only if he first finds it theologically articulated by Barth, there is something to the suggestion that Frei was schooled philosophically and anthropologically by Barth's theology.

As Frei read him, Barth's account of God's revelation, the church, and the task of theology could be elucidated and expanded in practical and social terms.

The rationality intrinsic to faith does not present a set of conceptual relations abstracted from practice and action. It is self-involving. This does not mean, we will see, that this peculiar rationality is intelligible only for those involved in it. It means, rather, that "unlike other cases of factual assertion, that of the resurrection of Christ shapes a new life."[29] This rationality with the person of Christ at its center is embodied, practical, and therefore exhibited in all the practices that constitute the communities that participate in the life of the Christian church and engage the world.

Frei recognized concept and language use as two of the practical and social skills most basic to the constitution of the church, but without deriving this insight from a general anthropological theory. In other words he recognized language and concept use as basic practices for the church *not* because human beings are most fundamentally language and concept users. He thought of social practices as basic to God's revelation, the church, and the life of faith because God's Word "became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This was the reason that Frei thought developments in ordinary language philosophy, the philosophy of mind, and cultural anthropology might serve as particularly helpful tools for theological redescription.

The practical and social character of faith and the church comes clearly to the fore when theology executes its task of reflecting upon and redescribing the practices that constitute the communities of those who follow Christ. "[T]he subject matter of theology (the very word itself involves it) is 'God'; that is the 'object' or 'referent' of the language," Frei wrote. "For Barth we have the reality only under the description, only linguistically, not independently of the concept as we use it in preaching and liturgy, in action in church and world, in prayer and praise."[30] In other words, the content of God's revelation is inseparable from—yet not identical to—its form. We do not have the Word of God in abstraction from the person and work of Christ as narratively depicted in Scripture. And we have that depiction as it is used in particular contexts. God's use of Scripture's witness to mediate the person of Christ implicates all the embodied practices to which that witness gives rise, and thus all the practices that constitute the church.

At the same time, the Word cannot simply be reduced to Scripture's narrative accounts nor to the uses of those accounts in particular contexts. Frei spent much of his career working to move past this apparent opposition. And while he clearly spent little time articulating what could be called a formal "ecclesiology," the priority he ascribed to the social and the practical embodiment of Christ's witness meant that ecclesial interests could never be tangential to his thinking. In fact, they informed much of his work from *The Identity of Jesus Christ* to his latest writings. Even when Frei did not speak explicitly of them, ecclesial implications of his work were never far away.

Much is made of the fact that Frei's thinking about the contextual character of the church and scriptural practices developed considerably over the course of his career. So much, in fact, that he is often treated as two different theologians—the "early" and the "later" Freis. The following chapters make the case that the development in Frei's thinking is just that, a continuous development. I argue that Frei's increasingly explicit attention to social and practical contexts occurred as an expansion and elucidation that made explicit the inferences and implications implicit in much of his earlier work. It is from the vantage point of the end of his career that Frei most overtly articulated his philosophical and anthropological borrowings. There these insights visibly interacted with his markedly Barthian orientation. I will show, however, that this increased explicitness does not become disjoined from the basic trajectory of Frei's earlier thinking. In fact, a central claim of this book is that the development of Frei's thinking over the course of his career displays greater continuity than discontinuity. Moreover, it is in attending meticulously to the philosophical and anthropological facets of Frei's work that we might draw its overarching continuity into full precision and clarity.

Frei departed from Barth in important ways. The reading of Barth in the paragraphs above, for instance, is uniquely Frei's. "Here I admit to doing a bit of finagling or making Barth say what I want him to say," he quipped in a characteristically plainspoken aside. "The word for that is 'interpretation'."[31] Even so, Barth's work enchanted Frei. It was his quiet but passionate interest that made Frei one of Barth's most provocative readers. And Frei transmitted that passion to several generations of his students.[32] Even at his most innovative and eclectic, Frei's work exemplified the basic spirit of Barth's claim that "the truth of the Word must be sought precisely, in order to be understood in its deep simplicity. Every possible means must be used: philological and historical criticism and analysis, careful consideration of the nearer and more remote textual relationships, and not least, the enlistment of every device of the conjectural imagination that is available."[33]

One of the earliest tools Frei used to make explicit the hermeneutical bases of dogmatic theology was Gilbert Ryle's debunking of a conception of consciousness and inner intentionality that had plagued modern thinking since Descartes—a conception Ryle called "the ghost in the machine."[34] Frei began reading Wittgenstein by the early 1960s and found the most salient themes in Wittgenstein's later writing worked out philosophically by Ryle and anthropologically by Clifford Geertz. He deployed these thinkers' theoretically low-flying treatments of terms like "meaning," "understanding," "identity," and "culture" eclectically and unsystematically in order to make sense of the theological claim that God's revelation comes to us conceptually.[35]

Of course, such an appeal to conceptual articulation—such a "linguistic turn"—did not imply the "autonomy of language." To put the point in the philosopher's terms, Frei's *semantics* presupposes a *pragmatics*. Concepts have meaning as *concepts in use*, and use presumes embodiment and context. Frei gradually came to understand biblically oriented concept and language use as a social and practical skill orienting and incorporating the practices and contexts that make up Christian communities.

Philosophy as the Handmaiden of Theology

Frei's uses of philosophical and anthropological tools for theological purposes invites a persistent misreading that I grapple with in various forms throughout the chapters that follow. While this misreading acknowledges value in Frei's use of nontheological resources for theological purposes, it does so with insufficient flexibility. I must briefly address it here lest some otherwise friendly reader proceeds with the misapprehension that my account of Frei is flatly "correlationist"—that I construe Frei as conferring a flat-footed independence to, and parity between, theology and nontheological disciplines. Such allegations misunderstand the nature and basis of the theological commitments that motivate Frei's work. They too rigidly demarcate the boundaries between theology and nontheological disciplines without paying attention to specific engagements between them.

Frei's theological interests and purposes are normative throughout his work without question. However, he remained insistent that this is not to be captured in a method or a formal rule. It is, rather, a matter of approach—of theological sensibility—a practical skill exercised on a case-by-case basis. Thus, Frei wrote to one inquiring philosophical interlocutor:

> I am a Christian theologian and do not regard philosophy as ever having achieved that clearly demonstrated set of even formal certainties (and agreements) in 2500 years which would allow it the kind of authoritative status you seem to want to accord it; and yet I believe theology cannot do without philosophy. Furthermore theology cannot even invest so much in the foundational/anti-foundational debate as to come out (*qua* theology) *in principle* on the anti-foundational side. Christian theologians will have to make use of philosophy, whichever way philosophers decide that particular issue is to be resolved. In other words, I'm saying two things simultaneously: First, Christian theology is quite distinct from philosophy . . . Second,

> despite their mutual distinctness, theology as a second-order discipline cannot dispense with philosophy, and their relation remains complex and has constantly to be worked out, rather than being of invariable shape.[36]

This passage exemplifies that, in Frei's view, the relationship between theology and philosophy cannot be captured in a formal rule. Even a principle as platitudinous as "philosophy will be Christian self-description's handmaid" gives the encounter between philosophy and theology precisely the kind of invariable shape that Frei thought we ought not presume to ascribe to it. Such a principle risks fashioning an a priori conception that will constrain assessments of this complex relationship across cases. This relationship, Frei thought, should be assessed situationally. Any *pre*conception about the shape of their relationship risks manipulating the theologian's task. The deficiency of such a rule is not that there is no validity in it, but that it mistakes the claim that in *some* instances philosophy will serve as theology's "handmaid" for the demand that such a relationship must obtain in every case. The latter conception is not sufficient to capture the multidimensionality and situation-specific character of the ways that theologians will engage—and be engaged by—nontheological resources and interlocutors. Some occasions may take this form. Others will not.

The point to keep in mind is that an a priori rule is insufficient because it fails to take into account God's concrete activity. The case-by-case approach Frei describes is not a claim that in every instance theology will subvert philosophy, disassemble it for useful pieces, or even appear to subsume it. Nor do nontheological discourses find their true identity only in service to theology. Such claims would abstract the faith-inscribed theological sensibility that Frei's work exhibits by reducing it to a rule that presupposes a method for application. While Frei described the theologian's use of philosophy as a "ruled use," his is a fairly idiosyncratic application of that term.[37] He used it to indicate a practical skill or sensibility "most likely to have been learned in or by application." Such uses are likely to be articulated and applied quite disparately, depending upon contextual specifics. Such uses are "ruled" in the sense that any application of nontheological tools will not be arbitrary or accidental. They will be ordered in accord with the centrality of the person of Christ. But this ordering will appear differently—sometimes radically different—as circumstances of application differ. As we will see, this is what Frei meant when he said that the relationship of philosophy and theology stands as "complex and has constantly to be worked out."[38]

Frei keeps the whole of the gospel in mind precisely because he leaves space for, and fully expects, God's activity in particular circumstances of application.

The particular form that God's activity will take at a given point is impossible to predict antecedently. It could mean, in some instances, that philosophy serves as theology's tutor, standing on its own as friendly critic or adversary. Philosophy may be a fellow laborer in the field. From time to time, moreover, philosophical or anthropological claims may challenge, subvert, or scramble theological categories.[39] But this can be so only in virtue of a larger sense of the whole—a whole with the person of Christ at its center. So understood, the theologian's primary objective is neither to be distinctive nor normatively prior to other disciplines. The concepts characteristic of theology stand just as much under God's judgment as any others. Rather, the theologian's primary objective is to be faithful to the witness of Christ. And when faithfulness norms the theologian's task, her investigations cannot but come to bear an unpredictable flexibility and expectancy.

It is simply not the case, then, that theology must always come first in the order of presentation, or even that a theologian's explicitly theological interests and purposes will always plainly be in view. The distinctive feature of the whole is that Christ is the centerpoint that orients it. In this way, Frei modeled anthropological and philosophical workings after Barth's in that his ultimate end is to point back to that centerpiece. "[P]hilosophy is *not* the handmaid of theology," Barth declared. "Theology, along with philosophy, can only seek to be the handmaid of the church and the handmaid of Christ."[40] Frei, we will see, was inclined to agree.

On the Very Idea of "Church Theology"

Frei practiced theology as an interdisciplinary exercise. And yet, he understood that theology could forgo the final particularity of its vantage point only at its own peril. In the book that follows I clarify and expand upon precisely this delicate balance in Frei's work. I aim to demonstrate the kinds of engagements that are possible when a theological approach and sensibility of the kind that Frei exhibited converses with its nontheological conversation partners, as it must. Conceived in this way, theology is anything but sequestered from the broader concerns of intellectual discourses, academic or otherwise. Nor does it engage them to only plunder and steal from them. Neither, moreover, does it describe and redescribe its inner workings as a matter of "show and tell" in interdisciplinary conversation.[41]

Theology can—in fact it must—open itself, press beyond itself, engaging its interlocutors in ways that recognize their integrity. And yet, it does this on the basis of its conviction that "the final word of the final word" is the same for

both. As Frei put it, what we say now we say with an "eschatological edge."[42] The theologian opens himself to his interlocutors under the conviction that God's promises are true, and that the command of the One who has called him or her is "the light which will burn the longest."[43] So conceived, the theological endeavor is not oriented by privileging the discursive practice formally known as *theology* per se. The theologian's allegiance is to the command and promise of God. And yet, the theological task is not *ultimately* guided by the theologian's faithfulness, but by God's. It is the particular commitments, normative attitudes, dispositions, and actions that arise from her being confronted by, conformed to, and working in light of God's commands and promises that make the theologian a theologian. These chart the course for what she does, and how she does it. However, what they imply and where they might lead far outrun exclusively theological precincts of her chores and tools. How can they not? God's promises and commands will transgress any disciplinary boundaries purporting to mark out theology *proper*.

The ways that the Word of God may come outrun even the practices that *formally* constitute the church. This does not imply that God's grace, as it comes to us, is extricated from language and social practices. It means, rather, that God's grace can announce itself in *any* language, as Barth put the point, "even by quite other tongues than those which have been given to us."[44] If God is the central actor in any theological endeavor, then it is God's freedom and sovereignty that must order the indispensability and standing complexity of theology's interrelation with philosophy on the one hand and their irremediable distinctiveness on the other. In this important sense, then, theology is *essentially* interdisciplinary. That is, it will be interdisciplinary insofar as it is faithful to the freedom of God's free grace. "Because it [God's grace] is free, it is not bound to human ways and means," Barth wrote, "the area of 'the Church's concern' is not a prison, but a platform open on all sides for the word of God's grace." He continued:

> The language of the Church, theological language, the edifying language of Canaan, may not be the fetters of this word, nor may the history and tradition of the church. . . . We must reckon with the fact that [God's free grace] can always be at work outside the walls of the Church and can be announced even by quite other tongues than those which have been given to us. Its being so free brings fresh air again and again into the Church. We need this fresh air, and we should not try to shut it out with the holy games of our churchly speaking and behavior. . . . The Lord God could be more liberal than we think or like. But we are speaking of God's liberalism and therefore about the freedom of God's grace.[45]

I take this description to convey the theological sensibility that Frei had in mind when he spoke of a "generous orthodoxy."

Of course, the radical unpredictability of God's Word cannot be abstracted from God's love. God's freedom is not like human caprice. Sovereignty does not render God unknown or unknowable. Rather, God comes to humankind—graciously, miraculously—as the One who loves in freedom, in the person and work of Jesus Christ through the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit.[46] The unpredictability of God's grace requires that it be discerned with specific attention to the witness of Scripture and its portraiture of Christ's life, death and resurrection. "[A] word from outside is not self-validating," Eugene Rogers cautions. "It is not entitled a prophetic authority within the church, until tested by exegesis. To make the test *is* the task of dogmatics, 'the *wissenschaftlich* self- examination of the Christian church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.'"[47] Rogers' caution here pinpoints the centrality of the practices of reading and consulting Scripture in the life of the church, and the task of theology. But these, and all of the practices surrounding the exegesis of Scripture, are notoriously messy and continually contested. Affirming the necessity and centrality of scriptural exegesis can be only the first step in a perhaps interminable investigation.

The complex tension generated between a scripturally centered orientation and ceaseless interpretive contestation is no deficiency, of course. It is the substance of a living tradition. Frei sought to articulate, explicate, apply, and expand the historical and conceptual dimensions of all the practices that constitute the tradition of Christian scriptural reading and exegesis. He sought to conceive of this tradition broadly as, at once, orthodox *and* generous.[48] He thought that the inevitable conflict and contestation internal to scriptural practices presented an opportunity for Christ-oriented thought and practice to be, and to become, generous. Such generosity would identify and integrate the best insights of theological liberalism and evangelicalism at the same time that it sought to diagnose and move beyond the deficiencies that kept them locked in apparently irremediable conflict.

As Frei conceived it, a *generous orthodoxy* will attune itself to the best insights of various Christian theological traditions. It will reach beyond itself in order to engage the full wealth of resources made available by nontheological interlocutors, remaining keenly attentive to the ways that the Spirit might work through nontheological voices. For Frei, the dynamic, unpredictable, and at times painful interplay of traditional constraints with innovation and improvisation did not indicate strife, intractable opposition, or unfaithfulness in a tradition. It is blessing, and likely a sign that the tradition in question is flourishing. Such a tradition has much to teach, as well as much to learn. It has much to preserve, but also much to expect in the way of transformation.

The Structure and Claims of this Project

The early chapters of this book are primarily exegetical. In chapter 1 I sort through the details of Frei's early project on biblical interpretation published as *The Identity of Jesus Christ.* I argue that an adequate understanding of that project requires a cautious grasp of its complex integration of hermeneutical, confessional, and ecclesial dimensions. Perhaps more significantly, a detailed grasp of the complex interaction of these dimensions in *Identity* is required for an accurate conception of the deep continuity running from that work through Frei's thinking of the 1970s and 80s.

Chapter 2 explicates this trajectory of Frei's thinking over the course of his career. It challenges the prevailing belief that Frei's theology divides neatly into two distinct periods, the "early" and "later" Freis.[49] The earlier period is frequently characterized by Frei's attention to an essential meaning in the scriptural text; the later, by his turn to a cultural-linguistic framework, largely under the influence of the "cultural-linguistic" theory of his colleague at Yale, George Lindbeck. I argue that what is frequently understood as a "break" in which Frei turns his attention from Scripture "in itself" to the impact that cultural and linguistic considerations have upon scriptural practices is not, in fact, a *break* or *turn* at all. My rereading of the development of Frei's work demonstrates that so-called "cultural-linguistic" insights are, in fact, evident in some of his earliest writing. At the same time, his later writing does not forgo textual constraints exerted by Scripture in order to comply with the (markedly un-Wittgensteinian) slogan injudiciously extracted from Wittgenstein's later work and taken to encapsulate a Wittgensteinian theory of meaning—that of "meaning as use." I aim to demonstrate that even at his most explicitly "cultural-linguistic," Frei did not collapse meaning into use.

It is true that Frei's emphases upon the social and practical character of theology place him in close proximity to the work of George Lindbeck. And Frei was deeply appreciative of Lindbeck's work.[50] At moments he drew upon several insights directly from Lindbeck's formulations and endorsed certain of his claims. The intricacies of their similarities and differences lead many to view their projects as components of a larger single project or school of thought. In chapter 3 I argue that positioning their work in this way is a mistake. I argue that the differences between Frei and Lindbeck, while often quite subtle, are, on balance, more definitive than their similarities. Here I most explicitly take up questions of theology's relationship to philosophy and other nontheological disciplines. I make the case that Frei ascribed a *regional* (as opposed to all-fields encompassing) grasp to the theological task without compromising the

final ultimacy of the claims that are its ground and goal. This distinguishes his position from several other theologians broadly classified as postliberal. At the same time, it further illuminates the basically conversational and interdisciplinary character of Frei's approach to theology.

Chapter 4 addresses two of the most pressing challenges to Frei's understanding of his own work. The early part of the chapter sifts through Frei's debate with the evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry. My purpose is to draw the most opaque feature of Frei's theology into the greatest possible transparency (arguably the point most criticized from evangelical quarters)—the question of historical reference. Here I take up two criticisms frequently leveled at Frei. The first is that he forgoes all concern for whether or not the biblical accounts of Jesus do, in fact, truly correspond to actual historical events. The second is that Frei reduces the biblical witness to a self-contained literary world. These are two of the criticisms that Henry raised against Frei. They have been reiterated by numerous critics in the twenty-five years since the Frei-Henry exchange. Indeed, Frei's writings on the question of historical reference are elusive. Nonetheless, I demonstrate that they are coherent and that his position can be made clear.

The second part of chapter 4 takes up another pressing criticism, this time from Barth scholars. Throughout his career Frei understood himself to be in an extended engagement with Karl Barth. Several critics allege, however, that Frei's reading of Barth suffers a central deficiency. Specifically, in treating Barth's 1931 book on St. Anselm of Canterbury as a "revolutionary turn" in Barth's thinking (from dialectical method to analogical thought form), Frei's account of Barth became infected with two persistent inaccuracies. Perhaps more significantly, these inaccuracies have been transmitted to many of the so-called "American neo-Barthians" influenced by Frei and have thus become two hallmarks of "postliberal theology."

First, positioning Barth's *Anselm* text as a turn from dialectic to analogy results in an "undialectical" treatment of Barth's theology. This restricts God's revelatory activity to an analogical mode of reference, thereby collapsing it into the biblical text and resulting in a "positivist Biblicism." Theology, then, becomes "just one more complacent, bourgeois discipline" rather than a task dependent upon God's actually doing something time and again as a condition for its very possibility.[51] A second deficiency in Frei's reading of Barth is that it conjoins its undialectical reading of Barth with "non-foundational philosophical epistemologies." On this basis Frei reconceived theology as "communal self-description" understood as the task of explicating the rules implicit in Christian practices. This account forgoes the realism of Barth's theology. It overlooks Barth's claim that God's miraculous activity makes human concepts

refer to the otherwise unintuitable reality of God as God outside of the creaturely sphere. The result, if not a terminal deficiency in its own right, is a positive misconstrual of Barth's theology. Frei and the postliberal thinkers influenced by him deploy Barth for their own specific purposes. Such uses of Barth are not inherently illicit, of course. However, postliberal thinkers engage in a bit of false advertising insofar as they claim to present an accurate account of Barth's theology.

These are powerful charges, but they are ultimately erroneous when applied to Frei. Frei's understanding of Barth's *Anselm* text is far more complex than they permit. To access this complexity, I engage in a critical retrieval of material in Frei's dissertation, his earliest publications, and recently circulated material from his archived papers. Frei, we will see, identified a complex interrelation of dialectic and analogy in Barth's theology dating back as far as the second edition of Barth's *Romans* commentary, and reaching forward into the *Church Dogmatics*. I argue that it is equally inadequate to view Frei's ad hoc use of "non-foundational epistemology" as implicating him in a *reductive* account of theology as "reflexive ethnography of Christian practices" that precludes propositional truth claims. I devote the remainder of the book to addressing the difficulties raised by the complex position that Frei articulates.

Chapters 5 and 6 together take up the feasibility of Frei's likening his theological approach to the cultural ethnographer's task of "thick description." Some claim that Frei's borrowing from cultural anthropology results in an overly integrated and unified conception of "the church" and its practices. Others charge his philosophical borrowings with contributing to a kind of "faith foundationalism" and conceptual or practical "fideism." Still others charge that his approach reduces theology to redescription of the logic internal to Christian practices, thereby eliminating the capacity to make truth claims or to correct Christian malpractice. Several questions follow in train. For instance, if Frei articulated a historically and socially situated conception of God's revelation, how did he avoid compromising the *objectivity* of that revelation? Once we focus our attention upon the contingencies of cultural context and the formation of revelation within social practices, have we not rendered God's revelation a function of human understanding? Moreover, as far as Frei utilized insights from Wittgenstein's so-called "linguistic turn"—a turn to the irreducibility and inescapability of linguistic social practices—how does he not "lose the world?" How, in other words, did he avoid sliding down the slippery slope into linguistic idealism? Reservations or criticisms couched in terms of a "linguistic turn" are often driven by assumptions of a necessary dualism between realism and antirealism. These latter questions I take up in the remainder of the book, in

the context of a broader exposition of Frei's work on the plain and literal senses of Scripture.

Chapters 7 and 8 are the most philosophically technical chapters of the book. Here I hope to clarify and sharpen the cogency of Frei's claims about plain sense and literal reading. This issue has been of particular interest in biblical hermeneutics and the theological interpretation of Scripture. It is also a topic on which Frei's thinking was most in progress at the time of his death as it posed a central concern of the material posthumously collected and published as *Types of Christian Theology*. My aim in these chapters is to administer sustained attention to the difficulties produced by Frei's increased emphasis upon context, practice, and tradition in his account of Scripture's meaning. On one hand, I hope to illuminate Frei's uses of Geertz and Wittgenstein for these purposes. At the same time, I aim to identify and explore the limitations of these tools. For it is at their most anthropological and philosophical turns that Frei's claims about literal reading receive their most persistent criticisms.

It should come as no surprise that several of the central philosophical insights that Frei employed parallel—and, at points, overlap with—developments in recent philosophical work on social practices. Frei sought to sidestep many of the same perennial philosophical conundrums that praxis-oriented philosophers have worked to dissolve.[52] Chapters 7 and 8 explicate how the insights and advances in recent philosophical work might be used to further clarify and sharpen—and to overcome certain descriptive limitations of—the tools that Frei employed to circumvent the above difficulties. Attempting to imitate Frei's knack for bricolage, I briefly turn to the work of Wilfrid Sellars and his colleague Robert Brandom to further clarify, enrich, and expand Frei's account of literal reading and the plain sense of Scripture. My aim here will be to identify and sort out the several delicately interwoven strands of normative constraint that easily become tangled in Frei's latest writings. These tangles obscure the nuances of his claims and open the door to charges that Frei, for instance, merely offers cultural-linguistic correction of his earlier claims about realistic narrative, and that what inevitably ensues is a textual "warranted assertability" that collapses meaning into the community of readers' uses of the text. Brandom's conceptual pragmatism affords redescriptive insights with which I propose to clarify Frei's seemingly contradictory claim that the recognition of the *sensus literalis* as plain or obvious in Christian scriptural practices was not a "logically necessary" development, but was nonetheless obliged by the "rule of faith" or "rule of truth" in the life of the community. These resources should, at the same time, illuminate how Frei additionally factored in the biblical text's grammatical/syntactical features on one hand, and its "literary-literal" (what Frei calls its "storied") sense on the other.[53]

Conclusion

It might appear to some that an analysis of Frei's thinking focused so persistently upon the methodological facets of his work cannot but confirm its contrary; that is, in fact, Frei's theology never gets past a fixation upon theological method indicative of so many theologians of his generation as a last-ditch effort to retain some glimmer of relevance and respectability for theology in the academy. And yet, the viability of Frei's central claims about the church and its scriptural practices does not stand or fall with my success in clarifying or defending the tools Frei used. More importantly, Frei would politely demur in response to any characterization of his work that rested the success of his theological claims upon his precision about, for instance, some Wittgensteinian methodology (a markedly un-Wittgensteinian idea to begin with). As we will see in chapter 1, Frei learned from Barth that scriptural readers and theologians can never simply dispense with philosophy. The legitimacy of such insights and tools will depend upon how they were used.[54] It was in light of these observations that Frei found the philosophical approach portrayed in Wittgenstein's later work redescriptively helpful precisely because it was eclectic, ad hoc, nonreductive—even "vacillating." "There is not *a* philosophical method," Wittgenstein had written, "though there are indeed methods, like different therapies." Just as important as his eclecticism for Frei's purposes was Wittgenstein's aim to cultivate the kind of philosophical sensibility "that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. . . . that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question."[55]

Frei took the unavoidability of second- and third-order reflection in theology as a constant reminder that the insights and tools of "theological method" serve their proper purposes only if, first, they arise in engagement with the biblical witness, and second, they are oriented by and used in ways that ultimately point back to that witness. In his own way, then, Frei sought to articulate a sensibility for which theological method was properly ordered and that was capable of "stopping doing theological method" when it needed to. And yet, Frei's was not simply a Wittgenstein-inspired attempt to relieve late twentieth-century theology of its methodological obsessiveness. Frei viewed the subject matter that motivated and oriented his theological investigations as unique in kind and finally defying any exhaustive framework or methodological container (even of a Wittgensteinian variety). Accordingly, at times in his writing Frei falls conspicuously silent, makes an appeal to "common sense," or interposes a proviso that speculation and system-building need to be avoided. From time to time he reminds his readers that "extra-scriptural" implements, while

indispensable, must finally remain fragmentary and ad hoc.[56] Occasionally he will register such provisos at points where his interlocutors (theological apologists, "higher" critics, and analytic philosophers in particular) most want to pin him down in detail. This has led some to try to determine for themselves what Frei's theory of truth, meaning, or reference must be by force of logical inference. Such an approach to Frei's work is surely to frustrate and confuse. Frei frequently points his readers back to Barth's theology and, ultimately, to the biblical accounts themselves.[57]

Frei remained keenly attuned to the priority of the church for theology's vocation throughout his career. At the same time, it was precisely this sense of vocation that impelled him to continuously transgress the boundaries between church, academy, and world. His theological approach caught him up in a constant shifting and catching of balance that is not easy to emulate, and perhaps impossible to master. Explicating and expanding upon the dynamics of this theological gait cannot be done without at least attempting to resolve the confusions that arise from insufficient attention to its multidimensionality. At the same time, while Frei may have avoided a number of the errors ascribed to him by sympathetic readers and critics alike, by no means is his work free from error or inconsistency. My hope is to alleviate the inconsistencies and errors in his work that are merely apparent and to explore the prospects for further developing a theological sensibility of this type. These critical occasions afford the opportunity to affect a little theological therapy—to untie a few conceptual knots that do not have to be there. And *theological* therapy this is. For whatever philosophical explication I employ in redescriptively expanding upon Frei's theological approach ultimately points us back to Frei's unwavering focal point—the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

More than two decades after Frei's passing, contemporary theology finds itself characterized by a new set of dichotomous oppositions. Some of the most strident theological voices today retrieve notions of "tradition" and "orthodoxy" in the name of becoming as distinctive and uncompromising as possible. Frequently, such voices seek to counter theological postures that are so reserved or open-handed as to invite questions about what makes them theological at all. Both of these currents of theological reasoning stand in contrast to hegemonies of so-called secular reason that would eliminate theology from the conversation altogether on the grounds that the academic study of religion at large remains, purportedly, far too "residually Christian." Frei's work offers a wealth of resources with which to chart a path through these apparent dichotomies—a path that will be marked primarily by its concern to be charitable and faithful, and generous.