In the midst of many competing accounts of how to know an evangelical when you meet one—Marsden versus Dayton versus Johnston versus Bloesch, and so on—one of the common themes is a commitment by evangelicals to biblical authority. This commitment may be formulated in many different ways. One of the most common distinctions in past years was the debate among various accounts of inerrancy, and between inerrantists and infallibilists. As I will note, this debate has been rather inactive in recent years. Over that time, many new challenges to biblical authority have arisen. So in this essay I will propose a new account of biblical authority for evangelicals that draws on new resources to meet new challenges.

By so doing I hope to plant some new seeds for theological growth in a field that has lain dormant. I do not expect my proposal to become dominant, but I do hope to make use of some recent developments to promote a fertile discussion of biblical authority among evangelicals. In particular, I will draw on the possibilities of postliberal theology as a resource for my account.

Two convictions motivate my work. First, I am convinced that evangelicals have a particular commitment to biblical authority and can contribute much to any discussion of it. (I remember one of my professors in my doctoral program at Duke telling me that the great hope for the future of theology is in fundamentalists, because, he said, "they still care about the Bible,".) Second, I am convinced that the evangelical account of biblical authority must be revisited by every generation—new questions, new challenges and new insights continually arise. If evangelicals do not
keep that discussion lively and current, our commitment to biblical authority may wither due to neglect.

Recent History
Let me begin with a brief, impressionistic history of the doctrine of biblical authority among evangelicals. The past three decades witnessed an incredible focus of theological energy on the doctrine of Scripture by evangelicals. These thirty years coincide with my own development as a theologian. How well I remember my last two years as a student at Free Will Baptist Bible College. For Raymond Coffey, Daryl Ellis and me, two questions occupied our energies: “Can the resurrection of Jesus be proven?” and “Is the Bible inerrant?” Great excitement accompanied every new discovery of an argument for inerrancy. Clark Pinnock, John Warwick Montgomery, the Ligonier Conference, God’s Inerrant Word and, later, B. B. Warfield, Carl Henry and others became our theological mentors. I am a theologian today in large part because of the passion generated by those friendships and our debates.

When Clark Pinnock joined the faculty of Regent College, I went there as a student to sit under his teaching. During those years Battle for the Bible ignited theological controversy. I remember Clark’s struggles in the midst of the debate, a public forum on the issue at Regent that packed the largest classroom until it overflowed, and my asking a question at that forum that provoked a strong reprimand from Ian Rennie (who would probably do the same if he were here today). This was also the time when Robert Gundry, now my senior colleague at Westmont, provoked considerable debate within the Evangelical Theological Society with his commentary on Matthew. I still have in my files a prepublication copy of his “Theological Postscript” to the commentary with a handwritten note at the top that reads “pirated by stealth—CHIP.” What exciting times—to be part of such theological ferment. Out of that ferment arose the Rogers-McKim proposal and responses to it, as well as the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) and its massive anthologies.

Disquieting Notes
But in the midst of the ferment, there were some disquieting notes. For me, the first was raised by F. Leroy Forlines, my first and great professor of theology at the Free Will Baptist Bible College. Professor Forlines, a staunch inerrantist, kept asking me what kind of proven error in Scripture would change the way I lived. He also kept insisting that theology was for the whole person, not just the mind. Discussions of inerrancy appeared to neglect this, he argued, because they seemed never to move theology beyond Scripture as a source of information.

The second disquieting note was the observation by a Regent professor (I do not remember which one) that inerrancy did not seem to produce works by evangelicals in other areas of doctrine. Since then evangelicals have been immensely productive theologically, but at the time the observation produced some agitation. Moreover, this later theological productivity seems to have little to do with the affirmation of
inerrancy. For me, this observation is reinforced by the experience of the participants in the ICBI when they tried to move on from inerrancy to the question of biblical manhood and womanhood. Suddenly those who had agreed on a rather detailed statement of biblical inerrancy came to different conclusions regarding other biblical teachings. Perhaps inerrancy is not, and never was, the theological panacea I was seeking.

The third disquieting note was the discovery that my non-Christian friends to whom I witnessed were rather uninterested in my views on inerrancy. As I presented to them my hard-won insights on inerrancy, their eyes would glaze over. This attitude has been neatly captured recently by John Stott. With his typical cultural sensitivity and evangelical faithfulness, Stott has observed that “in the contemporary world, people are more interested in whether Christianity is relevant than in whether it is true.”

Finally, I have been unsettled more recently by the relative absence of the discussion of biblical authority among evangelicals. Since the conclusion of the ICBI, there has been little discussion of their work or of other accounts of biblical authority. This seems to be caused more by exhaustion than by agreement. What we need, perhaps, is a happy medium, where discussions of biblical authority are neither neglected nor consumers of most of the theological energy of evangelicals.

So some troubling aspects arise—not arguments against inerrancy, but some questions that caused further reflection. Is it possible, then, to formulate a new paradigm of biblical authority that takes into account this disquiet, remains faithful to the evangelical tradition and yet revitalizes a discussion of biblical authority? I think that it is possible, and I think that the most fertile source for that new paradigm is the “postliberalism” of Lindbeck and others.

The Postliberal Contribution
In The Nature of Doctrine, George Lindbeck argues in typical typological Yale fashion for a new understanding of religion and doctrine. Drawing in large part on the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz, Lindbeck argues for the superiority of a cultural-linguistic understanding of religion over what he designates as experiential-expressivist and cognitive-propositionalist understandings. Drawing on the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Lindbeck argues for a “rule theory” of doctrine. Lindbeck elaborates his proposal and argues for it in a variety of ways. Although he does not directly address the issue of biblical authority and inerrancy, his proposal offers some directions for a new paradigm of biblical authority.

By drawing on Lindbeck’s proposal and extending it, I will develop a new evangelical paradigm of biblical authority rooted in practicing the gospel, living in community and interpreting the world. As I develop this new evangelical paradigm of biblical authority, I can think of at least three questions that should arise. Is this new paradigm a betrayal of the evangelical tradition? Is it simply a restatement of infallibility? Is it irrelevant to the concerns addressed by inerrancy? The answers are no,
no and no. I elaborate on these answers throughout my constructive account.

**Against Foundationalism**

In order to develop my account of practicing the gospel, I must first attend to some developments in the realm of epistemology which are reflected in Lindbeck’s proposal. The trajectory of his proposal moves us away from the context of modernity, though some argue that he has not gone far enough with these developments. In the context of modernity, we seek to base our knowledge on a certain foundation. In philosophy, this sure foundation is universal reason or sensory data. Once this foundation is established, by use of the proper method we can erect a superstructure of knowledge. Thus epistemology becomes “the first philosophy.”

In most evangelical accounts of biblical authority, inerrancy serves as our sure and certain foundation. The inerrancy of Scripture is proven by demonstrating its accuracy in matters of history, science, geography, culture and the like. Once this foundation is established, by the proper methods of interpretation we can build a theological superstructure that accurately reflects the teaching of Scripture. This conviction helps explain the enormous theological energy devoted to inerrancy: a sure and certain foundation must be laid before the structure can be built. This conviction is also reflected in many evangelical doctrinal statements. For example, at Westmont College our Articles of Faith begin not with confession of belief in the triune God but with confession of belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. On more than one occasion, I have heard a Westmont faculty member say that our Articles of Faith begin with this confession because once you have the inerrancy of Scripture, the rest of our faith follows ineluctably. Clearly, these characteristics of evangelical theology reflect a foundationalist epistemology.

One other note may be added to help us understand the way foundationalism works in theology. In the context of foundationalist epistemology, theological error results either from having the wrong foundation or from using the wrong method to build upon that foundation. Thus evangelicals view theological error as the result of the rejection of inerrancy or as the result of the wrong method of biblical interpretation.

Now let me say clearly that within the context of the foundationalist epistemology of modernity and its challenges to biblical faith, avowal of the inerrancy of Scripture is precisely the proper response. As appeals to reason and sensory data were used by a foundationalist epistemology to challenge the truth of the gospel, theologians were right to counter with the doctrine of inerrancy. As many have noted, inerrancy is a defensive position, a response to attacks. Those who responded to those attacks used the weapons at hand in that cultural context. That is, they rightly used the resources of foundationalist epistemology.

Today, however, we have other challenges and other resources available to pursue another line of defense and response by questioning the assumptions of modernity and its foundationalist epistemology. (Since the primary focus of this paper is not
epistemology, what follows is a rough-and-ready sketch of this new possibility.) Quine's *Web of Belief* calls into question the picture of epistemology that forces us to be foundationalist or antifoundationalist. He asks us to think of our knowledge as a web of belief. More radically still, Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* introduced a philosophical program that rejects modernist epistemology and metaphysical realism. (By the way, I accept the first part of Rorty’s program and reject the second.) Among other things, Rorty’s argument exposes the historicist nature of our knowledge.

As a result of these developments, some have noted ironically how “modern” evangelical theology has been, even as it sought to stand against modernity. This judgment, I believe, is correct, but I do not believe it is a reason for rejecting our heritage. Some have done just that by questioning whether or not our theological forebears should have been more aware of how much modernity was determining the evangelical response. Inerrancy, they say, is a faulty doctrine determined by wrong assumptions. I disagree. I am enough of a historicist to believe that we must respond to the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves and “make do” with the resources at hand. Indeed, one of the main reasons I am writing this paper is that I believe that the circumstances have changed and other resources are at hand.

Thus the inerrantists were right to meet the challenges they faced in the manner they did. But the circumstances and challenges have changed so that inerrancy no longer serves the purpose of faithfully asserting biblical authority. To use a slightly prejudicial historical example, the Maginot Line was a brilliant tactical strategy in World War I, but useless in the face of Hitler’s Blitzkrieg. Likewise, inerrancy is a brilliant response to foundationalist attacks on the gospel, but unless we respond to new challenges, we will find ourselves defenseless and overrun, unable to assert the truth of the gospel that we have inherited.

However, even as I reject foundationalism, I want to recognize that our faith has a “foundation.” As Paul says, the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). But this foundation is far from foundationalism. Foundationalism looks for a foundation separate from any particular convictions that a Christian might have. In other words, a foundationalist epistemology seeks to ground knowledge in truths that anyone can accept. Thus an inerrantist who applies a foundationalist epistemology might say, “Set aside any convictions about Jesus Christ, God and salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ. I will show you that the Bible is true through historical, geographical and scientific study that everyone agrees on. Now, if the Bible is true on these matters, you should also accept what it says about God, Jesus Christ and salvation.”

This approach may be effective at certain times and places, but it is no longer where the main challenges to biblical authority occur. Nor is a foundationalist epistemology what Paul appeals to when he refers to the apostles, prophets and Christ
Jesus. Paul’s appeal is already situated within particular Christian convictions. So we need to give an account of biblical authority that does not depend upon a foundationalist epistemology.\textsuperscript{13}

In response to biblical assertions and critiques of foundationalism, some have located biblical authority in an appeal to the Word and the Spirit.\textsuperscript{14} In its appeal to the Spirit, this approach resists foundationalist epistemology. Indeed, in the way that Word and Spirit are intertwined, it is closer to Quine’s “web of belief” than to foundationalism. What is usually underdeveloped in this account is the role of the community.

In this context we need to draw on Lindbeck’s proposal of a cultural-linguistic approach to religion. In this understanding “religion” is shaped and transmitted by a particular community—in the case of Christianity, the church. In addition, the religion of the community is conveyed by the linguistic practices of the community. Here Lindbeck applies to religion Wittgenstein’s dictum that meaning is use. In other words, in contrast to modernity—where the meaning of language is found in its reference—in the postliberalism of Lindbeck, the meaning of religious language is found in the ways the community uses the language. This is a much richer account of religious language, since it allows for such practices as confession, praise and thanksgiving, as well as assertion.

**Practicing the Gospel**
Together, a cultural and linguistic understanding of religion turns our attention to the practices of the church and produces an account of biblical authority different from the account that would be given by an inerrantist. In this cultural-linguistic account, biblical authority is rooted in what Nicholas Lash calls “performing the Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{15} In his article, Lash argues that the proper interpretation of Scripture is not found in a biblical commentary or a theological text, but in Christian discipleship. Developing his argument with analogies from drama and music, Lash argues that interpretive performance is the proper activity in response to these “texts” and to the text of Scripture.

Before offering some nuances to my position, I want to push the arguments of Lindbeck and Lash further, to argue that in the contemporary cultural context, the “first philosophy” is no longer epistemology but (theological) ethics. A number of arguments may be made for this notion of ethics. Emmanuel Levinas, the source of the notion of ethics as first philosophy, is an obvious source, as are some arguments from Rorty’s “Priority of Democracy to Philosophy.”\textsuperscript{16} But even more important for theology are arguments that may be made from Scripture. Jesus’ words in John 8:31-41 indicate the importance of “doing,” as do many of his other statements. The letter of James likewise calls us to doing. Even in 2 Timothy 3:16, inerrancy is an inference drawn from the verse. The verse itself describes the importance of Scripture for living, not knowing.

While inerrantists certainly cannot be accused of neglecting doing, in that whole
debate doing was an inference from knowing; that is, ethics followed from epistemology. With recent developments, we now have the cultural and intellectual resources to articulate clearly and forcefully the biblical emphasis on doing the word. This is admittedly a potentially radical shift that needs further exploration, but it is one we must explore for the sake of the gospel.

Here we enter a tangle of issues that will never become entirely clear. Certainly, doing is a kind of knowing and knowing is a kind of doing. Moreover, in order to do what Jesus calls us to do, we have to know what he calls us to do. In the face of these rather intractable complications we may note that a foundationalist approach to biblical authority often has the (unintended?) effect of postponing obedience until we are certain of the truth of Scripture. Moreover, it often leads evangelical scholarship into a quest to say why the Bible is authoritative rather than saying what God, through an authoritative Bible, calls us to do. Reasserting the importance, perhaps even the priority, of doing recovers the biblical call to discipleship. After all, the disciples did not learn that Jesus was the Messiah and then decide to follow him. Rather, they realized his messiahship by following him.

Those who know the theological tradition may at this point have several objections. Some objections will be resolved only through dialogue. Others may stop dialogue before it begins. Let me address two dialogue stoppers. First, some may think that this approach simply reenthrones experience as authority and thus leads us into a new “liberalism.” Lindbeck’s original account disarms this objection by clearly distinguishing the role of experience in an experiential-expressivist approach from the role of experience in a cultural-linguistic approach. In the former, Scripture is interpreted by our (authoritative) experience. In the latter, our experience is interpreted by Scripture through the Spirit-led community. Therefore, my appropriation of Lindbeck’s proposal does not elevate experience. Rather, it recognizes the proper role of experience and disciplines it by Scripture.

A second objection to my proposal may be raised by some who think that this is only a restatement of the old “infallibilist” position that Scripture is our infallible rule (only) of faith and practice. However, that infallibilist claim was still made within the context of epistemology as the first philosophy—that is, it was a “limited inerrancy” position that was still concerned with what we could know from Scripture with certainty. It accepted the presuppositions of modernity and narrowed the Christian claim to knowledge. The claim that ethics is the first philosophy differs from this infallibilist position by denying the epistemological priority granted by modernity.

This move to ethics as first philosophy is what I have called in theology “practicing the gospel.” In this view the first step toward biblical authority is not establishing an inerrant text which we then follow; rather, the first step is following the text. In this approach, there is still a place for the avowal of inerrancy, but it now follows from doing rather than vice versa. As Lash has pointed out, there is also still a role for “the expert”—scholars of the biblical languages, text critics, exegetes, historians
and theologians—though these roles are no longer, in the technical sense, "foundational."

Finally, this move also responds to the disquiet I noted earlier. Forlines's concern for the whole person is met by the emphasis on living, not just knowing. The experience of the ICBI in attempting to move from the foundation of inerrancy to questions of practice arguably displays the need to displace epistemology as the first philosophy. Stott's concern for the relevance of the gospel is met by the call to live the gospel before the watching world. What, we may ask, would be the result for biblical authority if the world observed Christians practicing the gospel to which Scripture bears witness? Should we not explore this possibility together?

Living in Community
In addition to practicing the gospel, Lindbeck's proposal directs our attention to living in community.19 Drawing on Geertz, Wittgenstein and others, Lindbeck argues that linguistic practices take place within what we may call "interpretive communities."

We may get at this notion by briefly considering the layout of most contemporary biblical commentaries. These commentaries are usually structured to address at least two interpretive communities. Some sections of the commentary reflect the interpretive interests of the academy—of other biblical scholars. These sections follow conventions, arguments and concerns that only biblical scholars understand and care about. Other sections, variously labeled "Exposition," "Application" and the like, reflect the interpretive interests of the community of believers.

This conflict of interpretive interests raises many questions that we cannot pursue here.20 My purposes in describing it is to help us understand how biblical authority may be stated differently in different interpretive communities. For my purposes, we must recognize that the assertion of the inerrancy of Scripture may often (not always) play into the interpretive interests of a community at odds with the community of disciples. Is inerrancy the first thing that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, want to say about the authority of Scripture?

This emphasis on the community of interpretation accords well with Scripture and opens up the process of biblical interpretation in ways that are wonderfully described by John Howard Yoder.21 In "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," Yoder uses the doctrine of spiritual gifts to show how a community of disciples practices moral reasoning. Although he applies it specifically to "practical moral reasoning," his description fits all processes of faithful interpretation. Yoder describes the contributions to interpretation of biblical scholars and historians (agents of memory), prophets (agents of direction), administrators (agents of due process), philosophers (agents of linguistic self-consciousness) and others. Together, and guided by the Holy Spirit who gives these gifts, the community discerns the authority of Scripture in their circumstances. One can argue that this is precisely the picture of biblical
authority reflected in the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and in the accounts of the later Ecumenical Councils.

In the context of foundationalist epistemology, inerrancy works against this communal process. Instead, it tends to foster a process of interpretation that Lash labels "the relay method." Here the biblical expert determines the inerrant foundation and applies an interpretive method that yields "what the text meant." This product is passed to the theologian-ethicist, who then determines "what the text means." This product is in turn passed on to the "laity" for their consumption.

In the new paradigm that I am seeking to develop, biblical authority is centered in the community of disciples, not in the work of the expert. Before the watching world, the church is called to live in such a way that the authority of Scripture is displayed as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Again, there is a place for inerrancy in this paradigm, but it is no longer the province of the expert, nor is it foundational. Instead, it is part of the web of belief.

Many concerns and objections may be raised in response to this emphasis on community. Let me address two of them. First, in response to the arguments of literary critics like Stanley Fish, some may object that this emphasis on interpretive communities may dissolve the text. That may or may not be the case with Fish (I think that it is a misunderstanding of Fish's argument produced by his extreme rhetorical style); it should not be the case for Christians. For Christians, the text of Scripture is the indispensable and authoritative means by which God forms the community of the redeemed. It is, in Donald Bloesch's words, "sacramental."²³

A second objection raises the specter of relativism. If biblical authority and interpretation is dependent on the community, then how do we confront other interpretive communities or malformed Christian communities?²⁴ We may begin the process of disarming this objection by noting that foundationalist epistemologies and other formulations of biblical authority have not been terribly successful in avoiding or dissolving conflict. Of course, the more basic concern of this objection is that all conversation among various communities will cease.

We Christians have a particular contribution to make here. Since we believe that the God who has redeemed us and called us together is the Creator and Redeemer of all humanity and that we have been commissioned to make disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations, we must also believe that God will enable us to carry out that commission. We are unfaithful to this calling when we downplay the conflict of communities; there is a Prince of Darkness against whom we do battle. But we are unfaithful to the gospel when we engage these conflicts as the world does and with the weapons of the world. Rather, we are called and equipped by the gospel to be peacemakers. As we recognize the line between the community of the faithful and other communities that runs even through our own lives, we may be enabled to display more faithfully the authority of Scripture and the work of redemption through Scripture that is the good news of Jesus Christ.
Interpreting the World
The third element of my proposed paradigm, interpreting the world, reinterprets Lindbeck’s claim that “intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”25 Lindbeck’s move here reflects the analyses and proposals of Hans Frei.26 For Frei and Lindbeck, theology should not seek to interpret or translate Scripture into categories, concepts or convictions found outside the Bible. Rather, the flow should be just the reverse. It is not that “believers find their stories in the Bible, but rather that they make the story of the Bible their story. The cross is not to be viewed as a figurative representation of suffering nor the messianic kingdom as a symbol for hope in the future; rather, suffering should be cruciform, and hopes for the future messianic.”27

But note that inerrancy leads us to do just what Lindbeck argues we should not do. Inerrancy seeks to demonstrate the authority of the Bible by showing how it meets the demands for accuracy and precision pressed upon theology by the world. In other words, in spite of our conservatism and desire to be faithful to the gospel, we end up interpreting the Bible for the world.

Following Lindbeck and others, I want to argue that the proper way to practice the authority of Scripture is through a theology that interprets the world according to Scripture. In my account, I want to go beyond Lindbeck’s, which focuses too much on the text. It is not the text that absorbs the world, but the practices of the community formed by the Holy Spirit through the text that “absorb the world.” In order to enforce this difference, I speak of “interpreting the world.”

An account of the community’s practice of interpreting the world incorporates a number of my previous points. Through Scripture, God incorporates us into the work of redemption in Jesus Christ. Redemption gathers us into the people of God and a particular form of life that simply is participation in the reality of redemption. As a result, we are formed by a cultural-linguistic “world” and taught a view of reality. Our way of life and our language, then, interpret the world according to the gospel.

So, for example, when Christians see nonviolence as the appropriate way to live in a world created by God in peace, marked by Christ’s forgiveness through death and determined by the resurrection of Christ, then our way of life interprets the world according to that reality.28 Likewise, when Christians through Christ confess their sinfulness, ask for forgiveness and receive assurance of that forgiveness, we interpret the world and ourselves as fallen from God and redeemed by God. As we live our lives in these and other ways, we are learning to live in the world established and revealed in Jesus Christ. As we learn to live in this world, we are interpreting the world for ourselves and others.

These acts of interpretation are themselves particular kinds of truth claims for which the community must be prepared to argue. How the argument will go cannot
be specified ahead of time (thus the concept of “ad hoc apologetics”), but we cannot be content merely to say, “Well, that’s the way we see things—too bad for you if you don’t. So there.” As I noted earlier, our convictions—the world established and revealed in the gospel—lead us to seek to persuade all of the truth of the gospel. As Julian Hartt warns us, we cannot be content merely to tell and retell the story. We must also be prepared to say and show how we are to live according to the story.29

Conclusion
In Scripture we have God’s witness to the reality of the kingdom: God and humanity reconciled through Jesus Christ. Through Scripture the faithful are gathered into the community of the redeemed and commissioned to witness to the gospel so that others may enter the kingdom. That kingdom, as Julian Hartt has taught me to say, is an everlasting actuality; it is at work even today and until the end of the age. In order to be faithful to that gospel and commission, we must be continually enabled by the Holy Spirit to discern the threats to and possibilities for the gospel in our present circumstances. We are living through changes that are altering our circumstances significantly from those to which the doctrine of inerrancy responded. The new paradigm of biblical authority that I am developing here is an attempt at evangelical faithfulness. I look forward to companions along the way who will correct, instruct and encourage.