

January 2011: The Rich Vein of Evangelical Spirituality

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It is safe to say that evangelical Christianity has experienced a renewal of interest in spirituality in the past thirty years. Since I first read Richard Foster's landmark *Celebration of Discipline* in 1980 (it was published in 1978), I have seen entire lines of books emerge (for example, the "Formatio" line of InterVarsity Press publications). Since I joined the Masters Program in Christian Spirituality at Gonzaga University in 1988, I have seen many seminary programs in spirituality emerge in evangelical institutions (for example, the program in spiritual formation at Denver Seminary). I served as a spiritual director and consultant for a conference of the overseas missions department of the Association of Vineyard Churches in October and was touched to see how so many leaders were deeply nourished these days drinking from the wells of the spiritual formation movement. For many evangelicals these days spirituality is "in." And I say "Amen!"

Through this renewal our horizons have been expanded. We have recited the Jesus Prayer, a phrase deeply embedded in the Orthodox tradition. We have practiced *lectio divina*, a pattern of meditating on Scripture often associated with the Benedictine tradition. We have started taking retreats, an habit rekindled in recent decades especially by the Jesuits. We have read classics of spirituality: the desert elders, Teresa of Avila, and Henri Nouwen. And through all this our world has grown larger. We were hungry for the things of the Spirit and we have received (not to mention what we have received from the charismatic renewals in the past 50 years).

And yet aspects of our own evangelical tradition have gone relatively unexplored. We have studied Charles de Foucauld on holiness, but have we read Charles Finney? We have read Thomas Keating on prayer, but have we read Thomas Chalmers? We have instituted recitation of the divine hours as an intentional discipline, but have we forgotten the practice of preaching, hearing, and reading sermons as an intentional Means of Grace?

My aim is not to scold us. God knows, we've had enough of that. Rather I simply want to report a discovery. After 30 years of studying Christian spirituality, this fall I dug myself into the world of evangelicalism (those individuals and groups which had their roots in the Protestant Reformation, emerged from Puritan and Pietist influences, manifest a characteristic expression in the worldwide revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, generally distinguished themselves from "liberals" or other similar expressions, and are present in a number of kindred groups today). I dug myself deeper into this ground than I ever had before. And what I discovered down there was what I at first described as a gold mine of resources. Now I call it a vast, rich, unexplored "vein."

This vein of evangelical spirituality is truly vast. It reaches from Menno Simons' treatises on rebirth in 1536-37 to Chuck Colson's own *Born Again*. It includes a wide range of literature: devotional manuals like Henry Venn's *The Complete Duty of Man*; collections of sermons or lectures like Lyman Beecher's *Views in Theology* or Charles Finney's *Lectures on Revival*; formal treatises like Jonathan Edwards' *Religious Affections*; magazine articles such as can be found in the *Christian Treasury*; biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries such as those of David Brainard, Cotton Mather, Amanda Smith, or Phoebe Palmer. Not to mention the hymns, testimonies, tracts and much much more. As mentioned above, I downloaded over 200 volumes of relevant primary source material (free!) from various online archives (such as archive.org). I documented over 1500 secondary sources relevant to this topic, and that was just searching under the names of about 120 individuals and movements. Once I got into this it honestly got a bit overwhelming.

This is also a *rich* vein. We are not talking fools gold here. In this literature we find nuanced reflections on the character of conversion (both initial and ongoing). We join a centuries-long dialogue regarding the work of the Holy Spirit. We ask the profound question of just what "true religion" is anyway. We witness a wide range of ways of living out the Gospel. And whereas much of Orthodox and Roman Catholic spiritual writings were penned by and for professional religious folk, the literature of evangelicalism is rooted in a sensitivity for the average lay person. If you think that spiritual disciplines are limited to Catholic and Orthodox practices, let me give you my own Celebration of (evangelical) Discipline: (1) reading, studying, and meditating on Scripture, (2) preaching, hearing, reading sermons, (3) family worship, (4) song, (5) intercessory prayer, (6) small groups, (7) testimony giving, (8) sabbath-keeping, (9) journal-keeping, (10) revival meetings, and more. Each of these practices is characteristic of the evangelical tradition and was used specifically as a means of grace to foster spiritual formation. Just think of the old Wednesday "prayer meeting." There were entire manuals written on prayer meetings designed to encourage the developing maturity of believers. In my digging I discovered evangelical guides for spiritual direction, manuals for the meditative reading of Scripture, helps for taking private retreats, treatises on discernment, accounts of mystical experiences and on and on. The fact is that our perception of the lack of spiritual discipline and mystical experience in evangelical Christianity is simply a mis-perception based on developments in some evangelical circles between 1880 and 1950 (but that is another story). There is some valuable stuff down there!

Finally, this vein is *unexplored*. I remember, during my doctoral studies, reading Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt's little treatises on "Gelassenheit" in Old German. It took me weeks to read these works (and I could not even begin to do it now) but as I did so I felt like I was entering a special place. Here I was, absorbing beautiful devotional reflections that were 500 years old and that very few people today had ever even heard of, let alone read. Many of the works of the Pietists still remain in Latin and German manuscripts. Again and again in my library searches I would find a few resources on a figure's spirituality: all dissertations and theses tucked away and unavailable to the public. Most of the names I searched are probably

unknown by most evangelicals today. Women, men, black, yellow, white (and black women preachers), people from every denomination imaginable: so much that has never been touched. We have a lot of work to do.

We need someone who will dig into the significance of the Post-Reformation understanding of the invisible church for the character of evangelical lived spirituality. We need someone who will trace the development (the successes and failures) of Pietist conventicles, Methodist bands, and other forms of small groups in an effort to clarify insights regarding group spiritual direction. We need someone who will explore the relationship between interest in the Holy Spirit and decrease in spiritual discipline (if there is one). We need someone who will compare French quietism with the Keswick movement and other similar expressions between 1880 and 1930. We need to collect sources and review them. We need to summarize and then to compare evangelical to evangelical and evangelical to non-evangelical. We need to evaluate our own tradition in terms of the "big topics" of spirituality: formation, prayer, care, discernment, renewal, and so on. And we need to live into a renewed practice while we are doing all this study. There are a few folks who are starting to do this kind of work, at least from the scholarly side of things (Bruce Hindmarsh, David Bebbington, Richard Lovelace, Ian Randall, Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Tom Schwanda, and Joel Beeke to name a few). But we need many many more.

Let me report a discovery. I have found a vast, rich, unexplored vein of gold in the history of evangelicalism. Much of it is not all that difficult to mine. I cannot even begin to mine this wealth. What I can do is announce my discovery. Will you take up a pick and join me?

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.