

Spiritual Direction with Evangelical Christians

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One of my favorite roles as executive director of New College Berkeley (NCB: an institute of the Graduate Theological Union) is supervising people who serve as spiritual directors to our NCB groups throughout the greater San Francisco Bay Area. These groups meet monthly to pray together in a contemplative spiritual direction form and the supervisory group for spiritual directors of those groups does the same.

Recently the word “evangelical” cropped up in one of our meetings as we gathered in a circle before the formal time of supervision began. One spiritual director said her group includes someone who is “very evangelical.” “I consider myself evangelical in the sense that I believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ,” she said, “but I just don’t share the political commitments of many American evangelicals.” Other spiritual directors in the group, all from different Christian traditions, seemed to murmur in harmony. Yet, there was unease in the conversation. The theological conversation seemed to move us away from the question of more central concern for our meeting: How does a director’s spirituality inform the sacred art of accompanying a group of people as they open their hearts to God and one another in spiritual direction?

As is our practice, the supervision time moved from casual, gathering conversation to the reading of a short passage of Scripture and then into silent prayer. Emerging from the silence, the spiritual director who had mentioned the word “evangelical,” said: “Again, in the silence, I’m moved to tears. This happens when I’m with the directees, too. I remember God is here. God is with each of the directees. God is with us.” As our meeting continued, we returned to a devotional stance, experiencing and standing in God’s grace that informs and sustains our spiritual care, a perspective central to evangelical spirituality.

As an adjective deriving from Greek, “evangelical,” like its theological cousin “gospel,” points to the centrality of Christian Scripture and communicates the joy that faith bestows. Literally, *euangélion* (*eu* = good + *angelion* = message) is good news (gospel). This definition is in keeping with the stance of the spiritual directors I supervise. They are Christians, devoted to Scripture, and engaging in a ministry (spiritual direction) that communicates the joy bestowed by faith. In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale wrote that “evangelical” signifies ‘good, merry, glad and joyful tidings’ that make the heart glad and the person ‘sing, dance, and leap for joy.’¹ Those are not the first images that come to many minds when they hear the word ‘evangelical’, yet they’re good ones for the practice of spiritual direction which is, at base, about accompanying others as they seek and attend to the One Who is Truth and Love. Indeed, as spiritual directors we attend to the directee’s experiences of grace, joy, and freedom, and, as a supervisor, I look for the same in the directors with whom I work. It is those spiritual gifts that our supervisory group turned toward as we were together in silent prayer.

Today most evangelical Christians when meeting someone from whom they hope to receive soul care would introduce themselves as Christian, without any prefacing adjective. Nevertheless, they have been shaped by a particular tradition that has theological, historical, and cultural components, all of which affect how spiritual direction is sought and received.

Those offering spiritual care and direction to evangelical Christians and, therefore, respecting the evangelical perspective, encounter significant differences in orientation across the generations. Older evangelicals who became adults just after World War II are interested in apologetics, the reasons for faith which can then be offered to nonbelievers in the hope of their conversion. Some of these evangelicals do seek spiritual direction, but most are unfamiliar with the practice. Evangelicals who were young adults in the 1970s through the 1990s are characterized as more pragmatic, less convinced by objective evidence for the claims of faith, largely ahistorical in their religious identification, and more attentive to experience. Most evangelical spiritual directors in the United States today are in this age cohort.

Christians identifying with the evangelicalism of the new millennium, whether using the word “evangelical” or not, retain belief in the truth of Christ, yet, in keeping with their post-modern leanings, are less sure that they know the whole of that truth. They are relationally-focused and praxis-oriented,

emphasizing devotion and right living. They are often politically liberal and interested in global concerns, such as the abolition of modern slavery, AIDS prevention worldwide, and the relief of global hunger. They are also more open to spiritual understandings and practices from the whole history of the Christian church, especially the pre-modern church, that include contemplative practices of prayer and worship, adaptations of monasticism, pilgrimage, and spiritual direction. This reflects a notable shift within the evangelical tradition toward spiritual formation and the disciplines that aid it such as *lectio divina* and the Ignatian prayer of *examen*. It also indicates a response by the evangelical tradition to a spiritual need felt by many Christians.

This new direction is reflected in the 2011 edition of the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*—edited by scholars from evangelical seminaries—which contains entries for spiritual direction, formation, and mentoring, as well as ones devoted to early saints of the church and pre-Reformation practices. The inclusion of these topics signals a turn within evangelical spirituality toward attention to soul care and growth, which is of significance in the practice of spiritual direction. In the supervision session mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the conversation shifts from one about theological categories and toward a spiritual experience of God’s grace through prayer. For evangelical Christians, the Good News of Jesus Christ offers the grounding vision of spiritual progress. Scripture claims we are to be “sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:2). We are enjoined to follow Christ (John 21:19), grow in grace (2 Peter 3:18), and become rooted and grounded in love (Eph. 3:17). According to Christian historian William Bouwsma, “[t]he essential element in the Christian idea of adulthood is...the capacity for growth, which is assumed to be a potentiality of any age of life”² Yet, as Dallas Willard, a prominent exponent of evangelical spiritual formation, claims, “We have for most of the twentieth century been in [a] period of time when, in all segments, the Christian churches have been distracted from the central task of teaching their people how to live the spiritual life in a way that brings them progressively to enjoy the character of Christ as their own.”³ The traditional focus of evangelical Christianity has been on the mind and mission of the Christian believer. Scant attention was given to spiritual growth and the cultivation of prayer, and some wrote of a “sanctification gap” existing between a person’s conversion and the end of his or her earthly life.

Today evangelical churches have begun to correct their neglect of spiritual formation (including soul care practices like spiritual direction). There is a great thirst for spiritual vitality among those who are steeped in Scripture. Evangelical Christians find the invitation to lively spirituality in the Gospel, yet in their churches have too often found their minds engaged and their hearts untended. As a supervisor to spiritual directors working with evangelical Christians, I am keen to cultivate the directors’ attunement to this situation, respecting the biblical literacy and strong theological tradition of their directees, and paying attention to how God’s grace flows through this particular form of spirituality.

NOTES

1. d. Bruce Hindmarsh, “Contours of Evangelical Spirituality,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, Simon Chan, Gordon T. Smith, James d. Smith III, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 146.
2. William J. Bouwsma, “Christian Adulthood,” in *Adulthood*, Erik H. Erikson, ed. (New York: WW Norton, 1978), 85.
3. Dallas Willard, “Foreword,” in *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community*, James C. Wilhoit, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 9.

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