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Evangelicals and Roman Catholic Spirituality



by Dr. Daniel L. Brunner
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After almost twenty-five years of teaching at an evangelical seminary in the Pacific Northwest I am seeing an emerging interest in and hunger for Catholic spirituality and mysticism among many of our students, both at the master's and doctor of ministry levels. It is exciting to see spirituality as a conduit for Roman Catholic – Evangelical ecumenism and dialogue.

Context

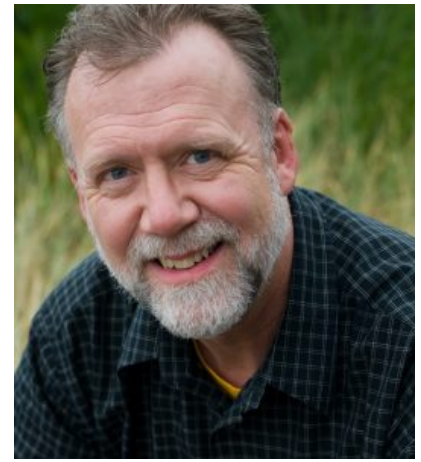
Obviously, the meaning of “evangelical” is slippery, especially because it is so prevalent in today’s media. When I refer to evangelical I usually take a sociological approach and include those people who self-identify as evangelical because of their upbringing, which in many cases involves a conversion experience. David Bebbington’s academic definition of evangelical—the quadrilateral of biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism—draws a broad enough circle to keep many (like myself) in the evangelical fold. Others, however, largely because of the cultural stigma associated with “evangelical,” have moved into post-evangelicalism.

In the mid-20th century, evangelicals put a clear emphasis on discipleship, rooted in the disciplines of Scripture study, prayer, and evangelism. This focus was evidenced by Richard Foster’s best-selling *Celebration of Discipline* (1978) and Dallas Willard’s *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (1988), an academic apologetic for the spiritual practices. Many evangelicals rallied around the importance of putting discipline into discipleship. The language of “spiritual formation,” interestingly, was usually avoided because it smacked of Catholicism. Over the last 15-20 years, however, the interest in spiritual formation has increased within significant sub-cultures of evangelicalism.

Central Themes

I am currently writing a book on reimagining evangelical spirituality, and am drawing significantly from Catholic sources. Three themes are evolving in my thinking. First, many of my students, especially those who have ministry experience, come to seminary in a season of **disillusionment** and emptiness. The spiritual disciplines they developed early in their spiritual walk and came to depend on, have stopped working and no longer bring the consolation they once did. This space of darkness and uncertainty can be called “the Wall,” “the second half of life,” or a “dark night of the soul.” Most of the evangelicals I encounter experience guilt and ambivalence over these seasons of disillusionment. Their presumption is that they are doing something wrong and they want to recover what they have lost. The situation is often aggravated by the fact that much of evangelicalism lacks a healthy concept of suffering and hardship, in spite of the fact that Jesus talked so often about the cross of discipleship.

A second theme running through my thinking and writing is Catholic **mystical spirituality**, which has long held space for dark nights, desolation, and even abandonment, exemplified in Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Teresa of Calcutta, and many others. Theologically, many in my own tradition (Lutheran) have long resisted Catholic mysticism. The standard argument has been that within Roman Catholic mysticism, the focus on climbing spiritual “ladders” and on union with God (*unio mystica*) runs counter to the faith alone (*sola fide*) of Protestantism.



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However, those barriers are clearly breaking down, and many students are eagerly reading mystical literature (and not just because I assign it in class). In addition, Catholic spirituality is impacting evangelicals because of a mounting interest in contemplative spirituality. Initial seeds planted by Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, and others, have been nourished by the likes of Franciscan Richard Rohr, Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, and African American activist-scholar Barbara Holmes (admittedly, the last two are not Catholic but they do advocate for a contemplative spirituality). Decades ago, most evangelicals feared contemplative prayer because of its parallels to Eastern meditative practices. I am finding, however, that when centering prayer is carefully and pastorally taught along the lines of Thomas Keating, much of that opposition fades.

The third theme in my work is the centrality of **mystery and paradox** within Christian spiritual formation. As Christian leaders mature in faith, it strikes me that much of the spiritual journey can be set forth as paradoxes to be embraced, moving away from “either-or” thinking and welcoming “both-and”. Again, I am drawn to a bevy of Catholic authors like Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, and many others. I am structuring my writing around particular paradoxes such as Three – One; Human – Divine; Human Freedom – God’s Freedom; Spirit – Body; Solitude – Community; Knowing – Unknowing; and Finding Oneself – Losing Oneself. My conviction is that praxis rooted in paradox can help restore hope to disenchanted evangelicals.

Final Thoughts

The themes of my writing are not just theoretical concepts for me. On Good Friday, 2009, my wife of almost 32 years died after a 13½-year struggle with brain cancer. My own grief and disillusionment have often tossed me into the cauldron of mystery and paradox, and through it, slowly and painstakingly, God is working in me. Contemplative prayer and innumerable Catholic writers and mystics have been my companions. Hopefully, at the end of the day, my writing will help to encourage others.

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