Christian Discipleship and Spiritual Formation:  An Evangelical Perspective

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Introduction

In 1978 Richard Lovelace published his ground-breaking, seminal book,  *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.[[1]](#footnote-1) [endnote needed].  While the whole book is a significant outline of the character of the Christian life, it was one chapter in particular that left a mark:  his description of what he called, in his depiction of an Evangelical perspective on discipleship, a “sanctification gap.”   What he identified with these two words was a diagnosis of a noteworthy problem within Evangelical circles:  the lack of a compelling theology and vision for mature Christian experience.   As he and others have noted, this was of course not the case for the great early voices in the Evangelical Awakenings of the 18th century – George Whitefield, John Wesley, Charles Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.  These theologians and preachers gave great attention to the character of sanctification and they spoke, to use Wesley’s language, of the means of grace – the very means by which a believer would appropriate the grace of God and grow in perfection.   But something happened in the 19th century that undercut this vision:   revivalism – a movement that gave dominant focus to the experience of *becoming* a Christian believer, as an encounter with the justifying grace of God, such that the dominant assumption was that then a person was “good to go”, ready for heaven, assured of their salvation.  This movement became the default understanding of religious experience for Evangelicals until well into the 21st century.

Lovelace’s “sanctification gap” was a call to recover the original Evangelical vision that affirmed the indispensability of sanctification – that, indeed, there is no justification [the liberating grace of God] without sanctification, the grace by which Christians are brought into maturity in Christ.

That same year, 1978, Richard J. Foster published his equally significant and influential study:   *Celebration of Discipline*.[[2]](#footnote-2)   Suddenly across the Evangelical world, a generation of younger Christians were discovering ancient spiritual practices that previous generations of Christians and Christians in other traditions – Orthodox and Catholic – viewed as standard to the life of the believer.   Since then, there has been a plethora of publications, each year several more, calling Evangelical Christians to greater discipline and focus, not merely Bible reading and personal prayer, but everything from sabbath observance to meditation to personal retreats to fasting.

All of that to say this:  in one sense, Evangelical Christians have only come to the discussion about discipleship and spiritual formation a bit late to the game.  Relatively speaking.   And, frankly, we have yet to develop a comprehension and shared consensus on what it means to be mature in the Christian faith – a theology of sainthood.   But, when we draw on the best of our Evangelical heritage from the 18th Century – Whitefield, Wesley Wesley and Edwards – and do so in dialogue with Christians in other theological traditions, we see a vision for the Christian life emerging and though we are late to the conversation it would seem that we have something to offer when we discuss this vital theme with those in other Christian traditions.   We need to be reading both John Wesley and Alexander Schmemann; and we need to participate in conversations such as this one that foster conversation between Orthodox and Evangelicals to talk about this vitally important topic. To emphasize: we have something to offer to the conversation we draw on the best of our theological and spiritual heritage – the late 18th century voices – and do so in dialogue with theologians and spiritual writers of other traditions]

By Evangelical I mean a distinct theological and spiritual tradition that is heir to the Western church, and more particularly to the 16th Century Protestant Reformation that through the leadership of those already mentioned had a defining impact on the religious experience of Christians in England and the United States in the late 18th and 19th Century and then had a global impact through a missionary outreach in the 20th century that touched virtually every corner of the globe.   And for those of us for whom this is our religious heritage, we are asking:   what does discipleship and spiritual formation look like in a post-Christian, pluralist and increasingly secular society?

In these comments, I wish to focus on three dominant themes, and then also reference points of concern, or better, points of continued learning and growth.

A.   The Goal and Fundamental Orientation of the Christian life.

First, as an obvious point of departure, it is imperative to speak of the goal or apex of the Christian life:  to what end the salvation of God?  To what end the grace of the Spirit.  And on this, Evangelicals, as their best, emphasize unequivocally that the goal or vision of the Christian discipleship and maturity is to be found “in Christ.”   Consider here the words of Jesus to his disciples, recorded in John 15:4 – “abide in me as I abide in you.”   Or the autobiographical reflections of the Apostle in Colossians 1, where he speaks of his striving and his preaching and indeed his entire life struggle as captured in this:  to present each one mature “in Christ.”  And thus he calls his readers to, having received Christ Jesus as Lord, to be rooted and grounded in him (Col 2:6,7), that is, in Christ.

The Christ of whom we speak is the incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Lord, who sits now at the right hand of the Father and who will be revealed at the consummation of the kingdom.  It is not, then the Christ of our own imagination or creation, but the Jesus of history who is revealed to us through Sacred Scripture.   And all spiritual formation is drawing Christians ever more deeply into the meaning of the cross.  And this vision of Christ, high and lifted up is captured wonderfully by the Charles Wesley hymn and the immortal words:

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sin

My great Redeemer’s praise,

The glories of my God and King,

The triumphs of His grace.

In speaking this way about the vision of the Christian life, we are challenging what might be called a transactional – or, better, *merely* transactional – understanding of the relationship of the Christian to Christ.   Due in part to revivalism, many Evangelical Christians think of themselves as relatively passive when it comes to the work of Christ:   the cross is out there, and on the cross Christ accomplished something, *transacted* something – notably our forgiveness – so that now we are free from guilt.   This is dramatically evident in the way that many view the Eucharist in purely memorial terms:   Christ is “remembered” as having done something on our behalf.  No more and no less.

But what is emerging and must emerge is a far more dynamic, personal and indeed mystical connection with Christ – a vision for an organic union, including intimate identification with the Ascended Christ.

This, of course, assumes the gift and grace of the Holy Spirit.   At the heart of the renewal movement that represents the Great Evangelical Awakening in the late 18th Century is the assumption that Christ’s presence and grace in the life of the church is known through an *immediate* awareness of the Holy Spirit – an immediacy that is marked by a felt awareness of the love of God and a distinct empowering of the Christian and of the church to know the transforming grace of God.    John Wesley, for example, spoke of the inner witness of the Spirit, referencing the language of Romans 8:15, and all the early Evangelical leaders were equally at home to speak of the Christian life as “life in the Spirit”.

And yet, a tension remains and, in some respects, this tension is one of the key theological issues for Evangelical Christians today.  What is the relationship between Ascension Day and Pentecost Sunday in the redemptive work of God and the life of the church?  For some Evangelicals, it seems they never get past the Ascension; Pentecost is almost nothing more than secondary afterthought.   And the language of the Spirit finds little place in their liturgies and preaching.  They have what we might call a “truncated pneumatology.”  And other Evangelicals have no problem with Pentecost, but then for them the language of the Spirit dominates their liturgies and their preaching, and the Ascension and thus Jesus are almost a distant memory.  Their spirituality is more pneumo-centred rather than Christ-centred.

Can Evangelical Christians learn to pray “Come Holy Spirit Come” and in so doing find in their prayer that they are being called, in the fullness of the Spirit, into a dynamic union with Christ?   That is, can they articulate and live in a genuinely Pneumatological Christology – that the only Christ we know is the Christ who is present to us by the Spirit – and a Christological Pneumatology, such that the only Spirit we know is the Spirit who draws us into intimate fellowship with the Ascended Lord Jesus Christ?

If so, the early Evangelical writers will surely provide us with a guide – including the wonderful hymnody of Charles Wesley who understood the Ascension/Pentecost dynamic as well as anyone, as is evident in his hymn:   Love Diving, All Loves Excelling, that includes these lines:

Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven to earth come down;  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;  
All thy faithful mercies crown!  
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,  
Pure unbounded love Thou art;  
Visit us with Thy salvation;  
Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,  
Into every troubled breast!  
Let us all in Thee inherit;  
Let us find that second rest.  
Take away our bent to sinning;  
Alpha and Omega be;  
End of faith, as its Beginning,  
Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, Almighty to deliver,  
Let us all Thy life receive;  
Suddenly return and never,  
Never more Thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,  
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,  
Glory in Thy perfect love.

Finish, then, Thy new creation;  
Pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see Thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in Thee;  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Thus, the hymn-writer calls the church to sing out its faith: that the new creation, the great salvation, would be and is restored in Christ and that this comes as we learn to receive the gift – the loving Spirit who is breathed upon and in us.

B.   The Quality and Character of Formation:   Faith that Works and the Elements of Maturity In Christ.

Then also, it is fair to ask:  what specifically is the agenda of the Spirit in the life of the Christian and in the church?   Even if we determine and affirm that the Spirit is fostering within us, gracing the Church, to be in union with Christ, it is yet helpful to give this greater definition and nuance.

First, to speak of faith.   Evangelicals, heirs of the Protestant Reformation, are marked by a deep resolve and commitment:  they affirm the pre-eminence of faith in the life of the church and in the heart of the Christian.   A Christian is fundamentally one who trusts in the shed blood of Christ and therein finds hope and freedom – freedom from guilt and freedom from the oppressive power of sin.   And yet, of course, the idea would be that this is a dynamic rather than static reality in the life of the church.   To be a Christian is, in essence, to live in radical dependence on God.  This faith is focused on Christ and evident in an intentional reliance on the Spirit.   We can speak of “justification by faith” but what must be stressed is that this experience of grace is not a one-time expression of faith but a movement from a life of spiritual autonomy to one of dependence – from a self-constructed life to a life lived in response to the initiative and grace of the Spirit.   When John Wesley speaks of “the means of grace” we recognize that the whole of our Christian experience in the life and witness of the church is lived, personally and corporately, and unapologetically, not “in the flesh”, to use Pauline language, but in the Spirit. And the means of grace are only that, *means* by which we appropriate and live within and under the grace of God.

From this posture, second, we can speak of the outgrowth of faith – the fruit and evidence of faith.   The historic commitment to “sola fide” sometimes led Evangelical Christians into a perpetual infancy.  But faith, properly understood, fosters, nurtures and animates Christian discipleship and spiritual growth towards full Christian maturity.   Clearly, for the Apostle Paul, the goal of the church was not merely to secure converts, women and men who might believe in and trust God for the forgiveness of their sins.  It was this, but much more so, the goal of the church for the Apostle was *mature* believers.  Conversion is but a good beginning.  Thus, motivated by faith in God and sustained by the Spirit, with the vision of Christ ever before us, what might we expect?  What does it mean to be mature in Christ?

I have suggested elsewhere that it is helpful to think in terms of four distinctive expressions of this maturity – each of which represents a distinctive emphasis of the Scriptures and each of which finds expression within the canon of Evangelical theologians and spiritual writers.[[3]](#footnote-3)

(1)  To speak of spiritual maturity as wisdom – knowledge, understanding and discernment (sapiential holiness).   Mature Christians are wise.  The Christian community is a teaching-learning community; disciples are made by teaching.   For Evangelicals, the focus has consistently been on the Scriptures as the focus of study, learning, growth in wisdom and encouragement.   But this is in many respects only the point of departure in that we recognize that all truth is God’s truth and that truth is the foundation for understanding and thus wisdom.   Wisdom necessarily includes moral intelligence – purity of heart and will with regard to finances, sexuality and speech.

(2) To speak of spiritual maturity as loving others as we have been loved (what Wesley termed “social holiness”).  Mature Christians have learned what it means to be love and, in turn, they love others in like fashion.  They have learned the grace of radical hospitality, of generous service in response to the needs of the others and, fundamentally, they have learned to forgive as they have been forgiven.  The church is a school of love.

(3) To speak of vocational holiness, leveraging language from a subtitle of a Eugene Peterson publicatoin.   Mature Christians know this grace:  to do the good work to which they are called – living, and giving of themselves sacrificially, for the sake of the world.  Very important within Evangelical circles is the principle that each person is called to serve Christ and that this service is not arbitrary but a vocation – a distinctive calling from God through Christ in service for the kingdom of God.  Whether called into religious work or business, the arts or education, each one is called.   And we are only mature in Christ when we know and embrace this call with humility and courage.

And (4) To speak of the emotional contours of one who is mature in Christ.   Christian discipleship necessarily includes attention to the the quality of joy and peace that demarcates the life of Christian experience.   In Christ, as we are nurtured in the faith, fear dissipates and joy grows; anger and discouragement are moderated and the defining mark or movement of the heart is one of deep consolation.   Yes, there is sadness and mourning; but these are not our true home, for Christ has come that our joy would be made complete (John 15:11)

Wisdom, love for others, vocational clarity and joy.   What must be stressed, though, is that each is the fruit of the Spirit’s work in our lives – thus we lean into the means of grace.  And each is derivative or our relationship with the Ascended Christ.

C.      The Scriptures and More – the Elements of Disciple-Making

With some clarity about the goal of the spiritual life we can then speak of the means of grace and the practice of disciple-making.

There is no doubt that in an Evangelical perspective on discipleship and spiritual formation, the Scriptures take pride of place.   The first spiritual practice we learn, typically, is the importance of Bible reading, Bible memorization, Bible study and Bible meditation.   Evangelicals are, as Wesley said of himself, a people of “one book.”   Worship as often as not focuses on the ministry of the Word.   The liturgical center for Evangelical worship is the pulpit.  An Evangelical pastor is first and foremost a teacher of Scripture.    Seminarians in Evangelical Seminaries typically engage a curriculum with a high emphasis on learning biblical hermeneutics that will then translate into preaching, which for Evangelicals is fundamentally the exposition the Scriptures.

Evangelicals are typically drawn to the Apostle Paul’s identification of himself as a preacher – making plain the Scriptures, preaching Christ and him crucified (ref).   And we are struck by his exhortation to Timothy to preach the Scriptures in season and out of season, suggesting that this was fundamental to his call to religious leadership within the congregation where he was serving (ref).

This rests on a premise referenced in 1 Peter 1:22 – 2:3.   The Apostle speaks of how the new birth in Christ came through the “living and enduring Word of God . . . that was preached, or announced, to you.”   And then naturally stresses that his readers should crave the spiritual milk by which they will grow up in their salvation.”   For Evangelical believers, this milk – this spiritual food and nourishment – is the Scriptures.

Without doubt, this focus on the Scriptures sometimes descends into an unfortunate biblicism that is not life giving.  But when we preach and teach and engage the Scriptures *in the Spirit* and when the Word is complemented by the Table – Word and Spirit and then also Word and Table – preaching draws the people of God into the life of the Word made flesh.   Language becomes life-giving – sustaining the church with the same vitality as we find in Genesis 1 where all things are created by the Word and John 1, and the vision that is forthcoming that all things are redeemed by the Word.

And yet, while highly commendable, the emphasis on the Scriptures needs to be located within a broader vision for formation and spiritual nurture.   I propose the following;

First, that we need to recover something of the ancient practice of catechesis.   We can assume nothing in terms of spiritual capacity for someone coming from a secular background into the Christian faith.   Thus, an intentional program of teaching-learning, mentoring towards functional maturity and intentional initiation into Christian faith is imperative.  Those on a journey to faith need a thorough grounding in the ancient creeds, an immersion in the Scriptures and an orientation to a Christian ethical and moral life of the church.  This takes time and intentionality.

Second, all Christians, but especially new Christians, need an orientation to the basic practices of the spiritual life – including, as very basic, the practice of prayer and Bible study.  We have come a long way from Foster’s Celebration of Discipline; and we continue to learn.  On the one hand, all Christians and especially new Christians need to be introduced to the practice of Bible study and meditation and the practice of prayer.  These are, for us, fundamental to the spiritual life.  But then, why not a full orientation to the whole range of spiritual practices on the assumption that deep transformation and maturity in Christ comes slowly and gradually as we invest time and thought in habituated practices that are to us a means of grace?

And third we need to recover and affirm the inter-generational character of spiritual formation.   We can speak of the formal practices of catechesis, of course, but here I am thinking of the crucial place of older Christians present to and invested in the lives of younger believers.   Older men with younger men; older women and younger women:  present to one another, and in conversation about the defining issues that shape our spiritual lives.

D.  Points of Learning and Challenge – Asking some Hard Questions

Finally, it is important to speak of where there is place for new learning and growth, particularly as Evangelicals do as I mentioned earlier – draw on the wisdom of the founders of the Evangelical movement and do so in conversation with Christians of other spiritual traditions.   In this regard, I will mention four things.

First, there is no doubt that Evangelicals still need to face up to their deep residual and almost non-sensical ambivalence regarding the sacraments.    This ambivalence and, in some cases, an actual anti-sacramentalism, makes no sense.   Clearly disciples are made by baptism and baptism is a mark of Christian discipleship in the New Testament.   And second, how can we not appreciate the early church commitment not only to the apostles teaching, but also to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42).  I would venture to say that we will only truly be able to form disciples for a post-Christian secular society if and as we appreciate that the sacraments are an essential and thus necessary complement to Word.

Second, we are still learning when it comes to appreciating the formative role of the liturgy in Christian discipleship.  I think here of the scathing critique of Thomas Bergler in his *The Juvenization of American Christianity*. Despite the witness of Robert Webber and the very significant work of John Witvliet and the Calvin Institute of Worship Studies, most Evangelical worship is dominated by teen-age sensibilities.  We are in many respects quite naïve on this score.  But, there is hope; and here I think in particularly of the work of Webber and Witvliet, but also that of James K.A.Smith – especially his work *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Third, as an element of both of these points – the sacraments and liturgy – is that the Evangelical theological and spiritual tradition suffers from the lack of an adequate ecclesiology.   This is as significant a concern as any.   The witness of the Scriptures and the entire Christian heritage is that the Christian journey is not a solitary one – but one in community and, in particular, an *authoritative* community.   It seems to me that no Christian heritage faces the scourge of indiviudualism and self-authorization as deeply as that faced by the Evangelical world.  Perhaps this is an overstatement, but if so, barely.

And fourthly, I would observe that we still lack a genuine theology of suffering that would then inform our worship – the place of lament and sorrow in our liturgies, and the equipping of God’s people for pain, suffering and disappointment.   We need to preach 1 Peter and Romans 8, of course; we need to demonstrate and encourage the people of God to see that in suffering they are joint heirs with Christ in his suffering (Rom 8:17) and that the Spirit groans with them in their time of darkness (Rom 8:26).

Conclusion

How will we navigate these questions and challenges?  As noted, I suggest that we need to lean into the wisdom of our forefathers – the early greats of the Evangelical Awakening.  But we also need to learn from and with others, in other traditions – colleagues and fellow pilgrims who can challenge us and foster our capacity to be wise in our understanding and approach to discipleship and spiritual formation.

And of course, it is essential that we keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.    When this is our vision we find and know something of what Charles Wesley draws us to in another verse of “O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing, when he writes:

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,  
That bids our sorrows cease;  
’Tis music in the sinner’s ears,  
’Tis life, and health, and peace.

1. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (IVPress, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth* (Harper and Row, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gordon T. Smith, *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity* (IVPress, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Baker Books, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)