

# Evangelicalism and Spiritual Direction: Compatibility and Completion

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## Abstract

After outlining the contours of the ministry of Spiritual Direction the author, taking a conventional view of evangelicalism from Bebbington's quadrilateral, demonstrates that the central strengths of evangelicalism can work against the development of the kind of faith experience that is required to both address the culture in which today's disciples are called to live and can fail to sustain those saints who live within it. Reasons are supplied for why there is an evangelical suspicion of this ancient practice that touch upon the historical battles that evangelicals have fought, the influence of enlightenment and the cruci-centricity of the Gospel that underplays the humanness of the incarnation and the importance of the collective life of the church. Likewise, the current celebrated forms of evangelicalism, pragmatism and activism in pastoral ministry devalues the reflective spiritual practices. Yet, this ministry is all the more critical in this age where arid secularism devoid of divine mystery need to see a vital discipleship that has come face to face with the living Christ.

## A difficult topic for both groups

A difficulty for authors writing on this topic has been they either reflect a superficial understanding of Evangelicalism because they stand in a church tradition outside of it, or in the case of Evangelicals, because they have a poor understanding of what spiritual direction entails and why interest in it developed. What authors on both sides of the issue share in common is an assumption that spiritual direction is incompatible with the tenets of Evangelicalism. They are surprised when Evangelicals have sought a spiritual director and seek to address the concerns this raises by writing in response to their perplexity that this has been occurring (Turnow, 2011; Bakke, 2001)! Nevertheless, there are commentators who have grappled with both, and who provide helpful insight into the compatibility and contribution of spiritual direction to Evangelical spirituality (Myers, 2003). This leaves open the question of whether the authors have adequately understood spiritual direction or what 'Evangelical' means, as it is a broad title particularly in America, where it has virtually become a description of any Protestant church which is active and growing (McGrath, 2008). This article defines spiritual direction and explores why some, particularly evangelicals, should be attracted to the practice of spiritual direction as an aid to faith. Of particular interest is what this interest in spiritual direction and other

spiritual disciplines indicates about evangelical theology, its spirituality and its response to wider social and cultural movements within our society.

### **What is spiritual direction?**

Spiritual direction is a relationship formed between a spiritual director and a directee who meet intentionally to explore and nurture the directee's relationship with God, as God is experienced by them. At no point is the director an authority figure telling a person what they must do, as some alternative names like spiritual guide or soul friend indicate. The qualities which a spiritual director offers are a capacity for deep listening and asking helpful, open-ended questions which will allow the person to reflect on their own experience. The conversation is set within a number of commitments: that the Holy Spirit is present, anything is open for discussion and does not need to be specifically religious, as often the conversation encompasses the everyday events of life and also its major crises. Another commitment by the spiritual director is that the conversation is reflected on within the broader tradition of spiritual direction and the wisdom of the church's tradition of this practice that spans from the mid-third century to the present day. There is an awareness by the spiritual director and directee that both are on a spiritual journey, with the spiritual director a little in front of the other to guide and support the pilgrim. By asking the question of where we can name God's presence or activity in what is discussed, an overall theocentric focus is maintained which introduces an element of intentionality that distinguishes the conversation from a chat about the football scores on the weekend. Finally, there is a code of ethics by the centre or association to which the spiritual director belongs which requires *inter alia*, a person's privacy and what is shared is sacred and will not be discussed with others; and their identity will not be disclosed to other people.

The aim of spiritual direction differs from those of mentoring, discipleship training, counselling, pastoral care or psychology. It may occasionally include elements of these, but its distinctive focus remains intentionally listening to the person within a contemplative awareness of God's work in their lives. This permits the person to make their response freely to the gracious invitation by God to respond to his love whatever their situation. There is no expectation that spiritual direction will 'fix' a person or correct their theology which is often an expectation by many Evangelicals of pastoral care or counselling (Tennant, 2003). If the question is raised of how it will help a person to be more effective in their ministry or provide resilience for their mission work, it is better asked of mentoring and discipleship training where it would be more relevant to their aims than spiritual direction. Questions concerning effectiveness reflect a long-held emphasis by our modern society, which Evangelicals are not immune from), that values pragmatism. The emphasis placed on effectiveness often betrays an unreflective, instrumental use of whatever technique is available to solve a problem or meet a need. In contrast, spiritual direction is not about problem solving. It is simply about attending to our deepest desire to be with God and to know him in our deepest self. Whatever the results are secondary, and there will be results in a person's life, but not by the standards of what would be esteemed by many today, particularly busy church leaders focused on running the church 'like a corporation'.

## Why Evangelicals may benefit from spiritual direction

There are two predominantly doctrinal reasons why evangelicalism by its very nature could benefit from spiritual direction. The first has to do with what evangelicals mean by the doctrine of the 'Authority of the Scriptures'. The means by which this authority is experienced and therefore the ability by Evangelicals to relate to spiritual direction is conditioned by two major movements in Western thought: the influence of the Enlightenment and the adoption of the scientific method in biblical exegesis (Greer, 2003). These two influences continue to be reflected in their search for exegetical certitude, its confidence in reason and the elevation of the individual conscience in matters of faith (Bloesch, 1982; Migliore, 2014). An assertion that certain foundational truths are 'first order' issues contribute to treating the Bible as a miscellany of facts or propositions which can be assembled to advance or defend an Evangelical position. Its emphasis on eternal propositions delivered by scripture results in a lack of sensitivity to sections of scripture in which God's people discuss what is normally only spoken of behind closed doors. The result has been a loss of the richness and colour of scripture's themes; an image of God is created which is monochrome, rather than vivid colour which reconciles the God of Exodus, the Psalms and Revelation with Jesus of Nazareth.

It is difficult for that subset of Evangelicals who maintain with little qualification that the text of the Bible is the *ipsissima verba* of God, to grasp that biblical authority does not lie in the words themselves, but the trinitarian God who inspired them.

Our authority is not the propositions of Scripture. Our authority is the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture as a testimony to the living Lord." (Bird 2013, 201).

But when a shift of authority away from the triune God who inspired scripture and whose truths are sufficient for people to understand salvation occurs, onto a collection of texts which are selected for their ability to promote a particular cause, be it the gospel or the agenda of a church leader, a new danger is introduced into Evangelical practice (Migliore, 2014). A leveling of Scripture results where all texts are treated equally as others. This necessitates the application of a hermeneutical 'canon within a canon' to impose a sense of order and value on certain books or texts. But in doing this, the Marcionite error of discarding or demoting certain books of the Bible is repeated because they are not deemed relevant to advancing the cause of the gospel or the formulation of certain doctrines. In short, certain books and texts are deemed irrelevant to daily life and this suggests 'daily life' holds little interest to many Evangelicals focused on doctrines, unless there is a lively issue of the *zeitgeist* which requires their response.

The second doctrinal certitude is the Evangelical emphasis on soteriology, namely, its cruci-centric focus which values Jesus Christ for what he has done in obtaining our salvation. Teaching concerning teaching about the substitutionary death of Christ may clarify why he died for our sin and the forensic arguments concerning this, but there is something which is disconcerting. It is one of emphasis. The Evangelical soteriological emphasis appears adequate and helpful on the surface, but it has resulted in a bifurcation of soteriology with the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God. Jesus Christ becomes a passive agent of the Father's will who sends him; a talisman of sorts, whose full humanity

is ignored because he is presented as a soteriological means to an end. A transactional emphasis is in the foreground and if his humanity is mentioned, it is without real value or place beyond being a representative death. A quasi-Docetism results which demotes the importance of the humanness of Christ and by implication our humanness, and its conjunction with the Father's love and will. A spirituality is encouraged which values doing things for God and for the promotion of the gospel, "just like Jesus did"; a spirituality skewed toward achievement, busyness and obligations. It is one not nourished by an incarnational theology which gives attention to the humanity of Christ and how he and by implication us, must give due attention to our human nature. An additional concern is that the ethical and pastoral application which the incarnation provides, becomes disconnected from New Testament theology and daily practice – which is not the case in the Pauline corpus (Phil 2:6-12; Col 1:15-23, 3:1; 1 Cor 6:14-17; 2 Cor 8:9). This, I suggest, leaves Evangelicals ill-equipped to live in this disenchanted age and susceptible to adopting a hermeneutic shaped by the Enlightenment. Spiritual direction addresses these inadequacies of Evangelicalism which is often first expressed to the spiritual director in the request, "I want to deepen my prayer life. Can you help?" In the conversation between the spiritual director and the pilgrim, our humanness and God's Spirit are brought together to explore what God is up to in the directee's life experience.

This results in an unintentionally bibliocentric, forensic and cerebral faith, which being experienced as a disconnection from daily life, can act as a motivation for a person seeking assistance from the practice of spiritual direction. In what follows, five additional reasons which are centred on a person's experience will be explained to account for their interest in spiritual direction before a brief discussion of what constitutes the practice of spiritual direction is made.

The first reason a person seeks a spiritual director is due to their desire to *deepen their experience* of God and feel that this is not offered in their church or found in their current ecclesial context. Some are frustrated with the theological narrative of Evangelicalism, finding it a collection of spiritual formulas and intellectually confining. At the same time, a deeper awareness is growing that they are wanting God above all the things they are currently doing. The Evangelical spiritual practices of bible study, prayer (meaning 'intercessory' prayer), the commitment to a holiness of life and various expressions of activism have become empty for them and their desire for God, unsatiated.

The second reason is the person *is transitioning from one type of faith to another*. Events like divorce, a serious illness, particularly cancer, the rejection by a church hierarchy or group, and the challenge to one's faith posed by the demands of cross-cultural service are life-changing and challenge settled belief systems (Culhane, 2014). Their desire is to find someone with the expertise who can help them make sense of it all.

A third reason is *exhaustion*. Evangelicalism is characterised by activism identified (Bebbington, 1989), by promoting the cause of Christ in social action and undertaking evangelism. A culture of 'doing for God' is used as an unspoken gauge of a person's commitment to their church's ministry.

The following quotation by an author in the United States could also describe the situation in Australia. Evangelical churches today, he writes, are “. . . often captives of the consumer-driven, efficiency-minded, result-oriented culture in which we grow our churches.” (Okholm, 2007, 33) This description is cause for concern as it exposes a dark-side to Evangelicalism: burnout (McGrath, 1993). As Turnow succinctly writes: “The concept of ‘being with God’ is not familiar [for Evangelicals].” (Turnow, 2011, 15) Burnout is another way of talking about this exhaustion, but with the connotation of emptiness or an enervated spirit which leaves the person disconnected from their capacity to engage meaningfully with God and their congregational life. It is often one tinged with bitter anger.

The fourth reason is the *need for discernment*. Questions concerning what God's will might be for their life niggle them. It might be the question of becoming a missionary, getting ordained, or leaving their career to pursue something else, especially if there is risk involved.

A fifth reason a spiritual director is sought is because they offer a safe place to *listen without judgement to questions which they dare not mention* to another person due to their fear of being misunderstood or rejected. Even questions considered taboo or which challenge traditional views are permitted. They might want to examine their life, beliefs and reflect on where God is experienced in the midst of their confusion.

### **Social currents which have opened Evangelicals to Spiritual Direction**

Evangelicalism and spiritual direction are both embedded within the currents of religious and social change. The association of spiritual direction with Roman Catholicism often raises concerns which have been noted earlier. However, resistance by Evangelicals to new expressions of spirituality, particularly those associated with Roman Catholicism, has waned slightly. The construction of national histories and selective memories which single out past slights and create caricatures to define a group of people are stubbornly persistent, particularly the memory of the intense rivalry between Roman Catholic and Protestants in Australia. But these have dimmed with generational change, and changes in immigration which have resulted in a multicultural society. The sectarian issues over education for example, have largely been resolved. The isolationism and tribalism which marked both groups in previous centuries has been diluted by the participation of Roman Catholics in our social and political life and partially accounts for the attitudinal change by both groups toward each other. Another contribution to the rapprochement has been their shared interest in promoting certain Christian values which has encouraged their collaboration or mutual support against a shared enemy – the forces of secularism. Now facing a resilient secularisation, both these religious groups have more in common with their shared values and outlook than the old, hard issues imported from Britain.

Progressive Evangelicals in particular, see little value maintaining an antipathy to Roman Catholicism and this gives them an openness to engage with spiritual direction and other spiritual disciplines. A maturity has also occurred in their relationships which recognises that the particularities of one's faith,

its traditions and theology, have all been shaped within a historical context and this context, which although acknowledged, is no longer considered a determinative feature which prevents engagement with the questions of faith and theology and Catholic expressions of spirituality including spiritual direction. There is also a growing awareness of the family resemblance between Roman Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals, in that they are siblings of the Christian family, despite their particular differences (Greer, 68). Finally, the bookish culture of Evangelicalism (which is largely middle-class), has also helped. Where authors like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, for example have been consumed this has further facilitated this openness.

The second current of social and religious change is secularisation, a force which has recast the traditional spiritual division between the church and the world (viz: its culture which was expressed as 'worldliness'), to the church and the nation state. To our modern ears, conditioned by secularisation that we can carve out a part of life separate from God/religion, and *must* according to secularists if we are to have a society truly free for all to express their own faith (provided it is practiced in private), the assertion that a secular space is a theological fiction might sound novel. It is not however, to the Aboriginal woman or man in Australia, or for the Christian from Africa or India who do not live in the shadow of the Western cultural movement, the Enlightenment. In Africa or India and among indigenous Australians, one's religious life is interwoven with every part of daily life so that a sacred/secular dichotomy is foreign to them. It is a dichotomy which receives no validation within scripture either where all of life is important to God.

The very use of the term, 'spiritual life' reflects a conditioning to think within the parameters developed during the Enlightenment which emphasised reason, empiricism, individualism and the Cartesian dualism between mind and spirit, inner and public life. Our consent to this paradigm was not consciously made because of our immersion within the Western cultural tradition. We are like a fish in water unable to see our cultural influences until we stand outside of them. The era of Modernity, which promoted the optimistic view that knowledge could be arrived at by building on self-evident 'truths' gained from an inductive methodology, that is to say that a knowledge of God could be ascertained from the observation of data, has shaped Evangelicalism, particularly in its relationship to scripture (Bird, 35). The consequence has been that our thoughts about God can be confused with our experience of God. They are not necessarily the same, but it can be conceded that one might lead to the other, if the heart is open to receive what is apprehended. Spiritual direction helps a person reflect on this difference between 'thoughts' and their actual experience, and encourages the person to become open with God as he is experienced by them. It is then a counter-cultural spiritual practice, reforming the mind and questioning the assumptions of our culture.

It might therefore be the case that interest in spiritual direction reflects a dissatisfaction with Modernity and its influence on Evangelicalism, which the Charismatic movement had been in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Both spiritual direction and the Pentecostal/Charismatic expression share in common the view that access to God can be an immediate experience of God's presence which

bypasses reason. Although both Charismatic experience and spiritual direction emphasise a deep intimacy with God, in spiritual direction it is characterised by a deep, gentle awareness (in the heart), and not one of the ecstasy of the Charismatic experience. Spiritual direction offers the participant a theology of God's immanence and is a corrective to Evangelicalism's emphasis on transcendence. It is a practice which is self-consciously theocentric and one which is always asking the question in the narrative of daily life, "Where is God in all this?" It also integrates the work and witness of the Holy Spirit – who is often named as the third person present in the spiritual direction conversation, giving spiritual direction a strongly Pneumatological and Christological focus.

### **This Age and the Powers of this Age**

Finally, the question of the logical compatibility of evangelicalism and Spiritual Direction is overtaken by one of historical urgency. That is the issue as to whether Evangelicalism is able to speak meaningfully today where the narrative of secularism now dominates and how the practice of spiritual direction may contribute to that conversation.

The apostolic confession that 'Jesus is Lord' – over this world, the age to come and principalities and powers of this age challenges the fiction promoted by the secular coalition of political and cultural interest groups that only a discrete part of life need be provided in which to practice one's faith. But without a spirituality which embodies the reality of God's reign in daily life using practices that deepen it, the message will remain hollow and disembodied, like Docetism. However, one of the fruits of regular spiritual direction is that another narrative is presented; that God is with us, in the texture of our daily life. The person is accompanied on their journey to remain faithful to Christ within a culture that devalues faith and views religious adherence with suspicion.

The narrative of secularity has dis-encharmed the sacredness of daily life and God's world. The beauty of all that God has made is turned grey by the poison of secularity. Eugene Peterson's quote grasps this concern:

The secularized mind is terrorized by mysteries. Thus it makes lists, labels people, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life. These tightly buttoned-up people never take great faith risks or make convincing love talk. They deny or ignore the mysteries and diminish human existence to what can be managed, controlled and fixed. (Peterson 1989, 64)

The notion of mystery or the numinous has disappeared from our modern secularised society – and also from Evangelicalism due to its cultural roots, fear of uncertainty and devaluing of the place of human experience. A vacuum has been created filled by fictional Hollywood superheroes who save the world and institute a new reign of peace – an alternative gospel no less and secularised rituals have been created to replace the Christian ones. A popular alternative to discipleship is an individualised faith, loosely based on the human potential movement, which is cobbled together from disparate sources and traditions – the 'spiritual but not religious' type, in which a series of disconnected experiences considered 'authentic' are strung together as a substitute for wrestling with



the great existential questions of life and death (Taylor, 2007). It is not entirely their fault as a generalised scepticism pervades secularism and Postmodernity. Meanwhile, Evangelicalism remains an intellectualised faith, shaped by or worse, exhibiting a preference for remaining confined within the values of the Enlightenment (Greer, 80), especially rationality, and the application of the scientific method which questions *inter alia*, the miraculous and the relevance of the heart and feelings as places where God is experienced and known. It lacks a theology and spiritual practices which would help us become re-enchanted with this world due to its transcendental suppositions of God and the Bible, and suspicion of anything which cannot be definitively reasoned.

## Conclusion

This conclusion takes the form of two simple questions. So, what might be the solution? It would be the recovery of the importance of the incarnation of Christ and what the Chalcedon declaration set in place concerning the union of flesh/matter and Spirit. It provides the axiomatic paradigm to shape the contours of Christian spirituality. What we confess about Jesus Christ the Son of God incarnate is what we confess about our humanity, its relationship to Spirit and our hope of transformation. The incarnation also provides Evangelicalism with a way out of the self-enclosed world of rationality, that God can be known without the adoption of the Enlightenment tools of trade. It also provides a paradigm for Evangelicals engaging in hermeneutics and finally, a deeper appreciation of who it was that was crucified that humanises Evangelicalism's cruci-centric focus.

So why do some Evangelicals seek spiritual direction – or engage in other spiritual disciplines outside their tradition as the solution? The simple answer is their dissatisfaction with what they are experiencing within the Evangelical camp; they seek in spiritual direction the opportunity to hear a different voice and a place where their interior life and issues with prayer are honoured and respected. Prayer is after all, a courageous act in the secular age, which defies its cadres who insist its fictional claims and ghostlike theology of insubstantial meaning are true realities. Spiritual direction and interest in the practice of spiritual disciplines reflect a thirst for meaningful praxis linked with Christian belief and theology which is not being experienced in Evangelicalism. A defective theology leads inexorably to a distorted spirituality that leaves the heart, the affective part of human life and the soul, bereft of an authentic encounter with God himself. This encounter for which the Psalmist yearned, of which Charles Wesley elegised and Calvin ruminated is the central aim of those who seek spiritual direction. It is that spiritual practice which helps this process by bringing the person face-to-face with Christ, no less, within an intentional conversation so their allegiance to alternative worldly narratives may be gently challenged and their focus of attention returned to Christ and his call to follow him and with the Spirit's work, to renew their heart to live faithfully within this critical age in the light of that encounter.



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