

There are Reasons Why Evangelical Spirituality is an Oxymoron

- (1) The words spiritual, spirituality, and spiritual formation have not been popular words for evangelicals in late modernity. Which is surprising since the word SPIRITUAL is so biblical and used so often. And we do worship the HOLY SPIRIT as one person in the Trinity! But . . . we haven't liked that word - in part because it was so associated with the New Age movements of the late 20th century. For many evangelicals, the term was too strongly linked with eastern religions.
- (2) Perhaps it was hard to speak of evangelical spirituality because evangelical is a somewhat broad group that has a diversity of sub-groups within it or connected to it. So it was easier to speak of Wesleyan spirituality, or Pentecostal spirituality or Reformed spirituality, or Baptist spirituality.
- (3) Along those lines, sometimes another adjective was used to describe spirituality. Like Missional Spirituality or New Testament Spirituality.
- (4) And we prefer to talk about theology, identifying what evangelicals believe. Discussions of spirituality were framed under the discipline of theological inquiry and study. (When I search for Evangelical Spirituality, there are more books that come up in that Amazon.com search with the words Evangelical Theology in the title than Evangelical Spirituality).
- (5) Being a Word-centered tradition, we were very interested in correctly studying the Bible and then correctly teaching the Bible. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, that is a very good thing. Christian spirituality must essentially be a biblical spirituality. Unfortunately, sometimes-often, studying the Bible and learning the Bible became the END and not the PATHWAY to a greater end.
- (6) We were a Trinitarian and Christocentric (Jesus centered) movement. We prefer to talk about God and not the self who experiences God. Well that is not quite true - see the next point.
- (7) Spirituality did not resonate with us because we were/are also a practical, pragmatic activist movement. We like to do things. There is nothing wrong with that by the way. The Bible instructs us in the doing of a lot of things. Somehow the practical Christian life trumpeted over the spiritual life. Maybe I could even say that the spiritual life was redefined as practical Christian living. Whether it was marriage, parenting, money, mission, evangelism, moral issues, political matters - our approach was to figure out practical, pragmatic, "how-to" ways and teach evangelicals how to live like this.
- (8) We were also cautious (and skeptical... and thus resistant... and at times hostile) about the experiential and emotional/affective dynamics of life. We either avoided those dynamics or criticized them. Since these dynamics are a part of the genuine spiritual life, to avoid them is to diminish the spiritual life.
- (9) And there are other reasons, some of them more theologically profound than anything I have mentioned above... but also more complicated to explain in a post... which is becoming lengthy.