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The Emergence of Evangelical Discipleship: Learning to Walk with Jesus

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In every age the followers of Jesus have been called disciples. Sometimes we in the contemporary church act as if we were the first serious believers of Jesus. In reality, we can learn a great deal from earlier Christians in how they sought to walk with Jesus. I have a particular interest in the early evangelicals of the eighteenth century; many of these key leaders have influenced us today. This article is based on my recent book, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton, and Whitefield.*[1]

True Disciples

To contrast the sharp distinction between faithful followers of Jesus and those only in name, early evangelicals often spoke of "true disciples." Some actually referred to what we might call nominal Christians as "pretenders." Jonathan Edwards asserted,

> *There is no man but a true disciple of Christ, that is willing thoroughly to deny himself for him, and follow him in a way of obedience to all his commands, unto the end, through all difficulties which Christ has given his followers reason to expect.*[2]

George Whitefield, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean six-and-a-half times (he died and was buried in Newburyport, Massachusetts), declared,

> *Not that all who followed him, were his true disciples. No, some followed him only for his loaves, others out of curiosity; though some undoubtedly followed to hear, and be edified by, the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.*[3]

Edwards cautioned his listeners that the world was not conducive to the gospel of Jesus Christ and that believers of Jesus must deny those earthly pleasures that hinder their growth in Christ. He declared,

> *I know of nothing that is more abundantly insisted on as a requisite and necessary work of a sincere disciple in the Scriptures than this is. It is a great thing to part with the world. The world is a natural man's god, and it is his all. It is a great thing for a man to be cut down in this affair, and to be willing to cut himself off from the world for Christ's sake, and so to give up all and reserve nothing.*[4]

Many eighteenth-century evangelicals stressed the critical nature of Luke 9:23, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me,"[5] and similar passages. Francis Asbury, the leader of early Methodism in the American colonies and states, stressed this in his 1802 sermon: "The operations of grace upon believers, by which they live in self-denial of all evil; and bear the cross, enjoy the life of God, and exercise themselves in Christian temperance, justice, and holiness."[6] John Fletcher, John Wesley's chief assistant in England, concluded his guidelines for self-examination—whether a person was a new creation in Christ—with these words:

> *Jesus, Lord of all, grant thy purest gifts to every waiting disciple. Enlighten us with the knowledge of thy will, and show us the mark of the prize of our high calling. Let us die to all thou art not; and seek thee with our whole heart.*[7]

Fletcher realistically understood that many could be followers of Jesus in name only. After affirming the importance of Luke 14:26, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple," he proclaimed, "Christ evidently means, that whosoever does not love his Father, and his own life less than him, cannot be his sincere disciple."[8]

In 1757 John Newton wrote a series of letters to a fellow minister. He began one epistle with an admonition to his friend and also himself: "I would earnestly press you and myself to be followers of those who have been followers of Christ; to aim at a life of self-denial; to renounce self-will, and to guard against self-wisdom." Soon thereafter, Newton wrote again to this minister, expanding his explanation of a follower of Jesus:

> *The two great points we are called to pursue in this sinful divided world, are peace and holiness . . . these are the peculiar characteristics of a disciple of Jesus, they are the richest part of the enjoyments of heaven; and so far as they are received into the heart, they bring down heaven upon earth.*[9]

While there are many benefits to walking with Jesus, early evangelicals also understood the cost of discipleship. Also writing in a letter, Whitefield reminded his friends of the lifelong practice of following Christ:

Let your obedience be constant, universal and uniform, founded on a living faith in Christ Jesus, that by well-doing you may put to silence the slanders of foolish and evil men. Let your speech, and all your actions, manifest whose disciples you are. Confess your Lord publicly before men, and be not afraid to tell those that have ears to hear, what God has done for your souls. It is good to keep close the secrets of a king, but it is honorable to reveal the works of the Almighty. Above all things, my brethren, have fervent charity among yourselves. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.[10]

Clearly discipleship included hardships and struggles as one attempted to faithfully obey Jesus Christ. Whitefield reinforced this truth in a sermon on Luke 9:23, simply titled "Self Denial," in which he announced:

> *Our blessed Lord took all opportunities of reminding his disciples that his kingdom was not of this world: that his doctrine was a doctrine of the cross; and that their professing themselves to be his followers, would call them to a constant state of voluntary suffering and self-denial.*[11]

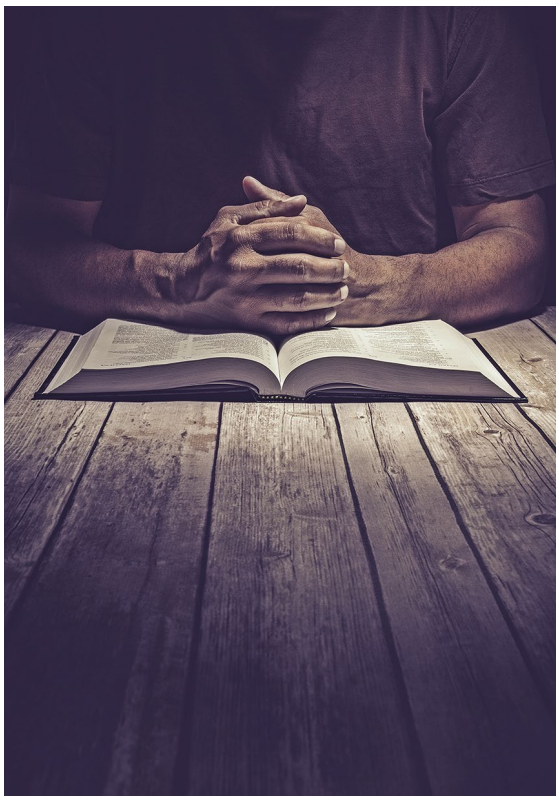
To summarize, early evangelicals recognized that a disciple was a true believer of Jesus Christ. That person desired to walk in the way that Jesus called His followers to walk.

Cultivating a Vital Faithfulness

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, church life lacked vibrancy, and cultural competition was often at odds with faithful discipleship. Not surprisingly the evangelical emphasis on new birth that is the expectation of readers of Knowing & Doing was a new message for many. How then did the early evangelicals seek to cultivate a vital faithfulness in following after Jesus? Noted evangelical scholar Mark Noll in his foreword to *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality* succinctly answers that question:

> *The book begins with a focus on "New Life in Christ," where the standard themes of evangelical conversion predominate. The following sections––on the Holy Spirit, Scripture, spiritual practices, love for God, and love for neighbor–– represent the natural outgrowth of a converted life for evangelicals.*[12]

This narrative shape of the Christian life invites us to consider our own pilgrimage and maturity in Christ.



New Life in Christ:[13] Early evangelicals took sin seriously and understood its disastrous effects in splintering relationships with both God and humanity. The vivid language that described sin included *worm of dust, lost, blind, wretched, pitiful,* and *starving.* Evangelicals recognized that sin created doubt, fear, and numerous expressions of spiritual turmoil. Sin also could convince individuals that they could never escape this prison because they were unworthy. Fortunately these eighteenth-century believers were also cognizant of God's grace and the promise of new life in Christ. Regardless of a person's experience, God was rich in mercy and declared there was a better way of living. God's outstretched arms of welcome were always extended with the invitation to come and be healed, restored, and forgiven. This was possible because Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, shed His blood on the cross to save all those who would believe and follow Him (John 1:29). For early evangelicals, this was truly "amazing grace" that redeemed and created assurance of peace and comfort to troubled souls. The proper response to Jesus' invitation was sincere repentance that exchanged one's old life for a life that through self-denial sought to follow Jesus daily. The result of being spiritually awakened challenged all who practiced a formalistic or "Pharisee-like faith," especially ministers who had not experienced the spiritual rebirth. Without the new birth no one could be a disciple of Jesus Christ!

The Holy Spirit: The next three categories examine the means of growing in Christ. Early evangelicals affirmed the reality of the Trinity and recognized the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer's life was foundational. Evangelicals maintained that this gift was for every age and not just for the first century, a stance that resulted in their opponents accusing them of "enthusiasm." But, while evangelicals emphasized the importance of being inspired by God to live a vital spiritual life, they distanced themselves from the excesses of spiritual excitement and fanaticism. This lived experience of faith was named experimental or heart religion and sought the integration of head and heart. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was and is varied, and eighteenth-century evangelical texts on this topic examine sanctification, the dynamic interaction of Scripture and Spirit in the inspiration of and proper use of the Bible, perseverance throughout life's trials of affliction, sorrow, and doubt, and guidance to attain the eternal triumph and victory over sin. Writers stressed growing in holiness and conformity to the revealed will of God, with the resulting emphasis upon sorrow for sin and holy affections that would inspire deeper sanctification. In times of affliction and temptation, believers were counseled to stand

firm and accept their suffering for Christ. Evangelicals were continually reminded to thirst for the Holy Spirit and to seek these manifestations of the Spirit's presence and power in their daily lives.

Scripture: Scripture has always been central to the Christian faith. Because evangelicals affirmed the divine nature and inspiration of the Bible, they believed that it contained God's dynamic and transformative word. Reading Scripture could make people wise, alert them to sin, and offer them the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. People were warned not to neglect Scripture; it could correct and comfort anyone in need. Scripture was read, prayed, studied, and preached; it formed the basis for commentaries, created the themes and images for hymns and letters, and became a source of conversation among people from every walk of life because it contained guidance for Christian living. Similar to many Christians in the early and medieval church, they prized humility and cautioned that a corrupt mind would distort the interpretation of the Bible. They approached the Scripture in both a literal and a historical manner but realized, especially in reading Old Testament passages, the need for a spiritual or typological reading. Other writers instructed people to read passages slowly, meditatively, dwelling over a few verses to soak up the maximum meaning. Engaging Scripture was often combined with other spiritual practices, especially prayer and fasting, to sensitize the readers to God's presence in their daily lives. Each individual had a personal responsibility to come to know Jesus; all people were expected to search the Scriptures for the truth that would liberate them.

Spiritual Practices: Early evangelicals inherited the Puritan threefold classification of spiritual practices: (1) the closet or secret and personal prayer practiced by a single individual, (2) private prayer cultivated within a more intimate social structure, such as a family or religious society, and (3) public practice, which was the broadest gathering for nurturing of one's faith with others, particularly in worship. Spiritual practices were highly prized because they had the potential to bring individuals or groups of people into God's presence. Proper motivation and focus was critical. Because ministers and friends alike understood that spiritual practices were about God and not about the individual, the person would seek to come with the best posture of his or her heart. Many ministers served as spiritual guides for those who sought counsel through letters or personal sessions. Common wisdom recognized that it was not possible to create a standard rule that would guide everyone. Rather, flexibility and experimentation were encouraged with the reminder to consult one's own temperament. Evangelicals engaged many spiritual practices still commonly used today, such as reading and praying Scripture, prayer and fasting, keeping a journal, meditation on creation, spiritual friendship, family worship, self-examination, spiritual direction, retreats, public worship, celebrating the sacraments and listening to sermons. But they also included forgotten practices: public days for prayer and fasting around national or state emergencies and the preparation displayed especially in the Scottish communion weekends.

Love for God: Faithful discipleship is always lived out in loving God and one's neighbor. Early evangelicals demonstrated that their deep desire for communion with God was possible because they had first experienced God's love in union with Christ. Since believers in Jesus Christ had already experienced God's presence; their desires for a deeper delight and enjoyment of God were awakened. This created a yearning for heaven, not as an escape from the challenges of earth but rather as a fulfillment for their longings to know God more fully. Drawing from Scripture, evangelicals realized both the importance of a proper motivation for seeking God and the obstacles that they would face along their earthly pilgrimage. These believers valued the beauty, mystery, and ineffable nature of God. In responding to this awareness, they fully appreciated the proper posture of surrender to God, expressed through obedience, regular self-examination, and scrutiny of their souls, desire to grow in holiness, praise and glorifying worship, and grateful gazing on God in contemplation. But they were not naïve; they recognized the reality of residual sin following conversion and spiritual conflict that arose from persistent temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Periods of spiritual dryness were not uncommon, and friends were honest in confessing their struggles or offering words of encouragement to one another.

Love for Neighbor: One of the primary descriptors of early evangelicals was activism. Since they had experienced conversion through Jesus Christ, they recognized the importance of communicating that message to

others. These writings explored a wide range of concerns that required the good news. The evils of slavery were debated on both sides of the Atlantic, although the British successfully abolished it decades before the United States did. Missionary efforts were encouraged and societies formed specifically to prepare and send men and women to countries that had not heard the gospel. Some of these writings sought to remove the excuses related to the danger, expense, and challenges of learning new languages and cultures. The importance of evangelism is demonstrated both in addressing a specific people group of their need to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and also in the narrative of a single person as he or she attempts to live a consistent life of faith that honors Christ amid the conflicts of business and daily life. The wealthy were reminded that religion was more than external formalism and that selfishness was the greatest barrier to vital Christianity. Those who had experienced abundant resources were challenged to practice benevolence to those less fortunate. Likewise, sermons proclaimed the necessity of charity to the poor. Giving to others was a direct biblical command of Jesus that also produced significant benefit to the benefactors themselves. ■

Conclusion

In 1776 John Newton penned a letter in which he reminded a woman that, despite the trials of life, Jesus "is always near." He continued,

> *the chief difference between us, and the disciples when our Savior was upon earth, is in this: They then walked by sight, and we are called to walk by faith . . . We conceive of him as at a distance; but when the heart is awakened, we begin to make Jacob's reflection, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." And when we receive faith, we begin to know that this ever present God is in Christ*[14]

and will always lead us forward as His disciples. May we grow in that same ability to walk by faith in following Jesus Christ as His disciples.

Notes

[1] Tom Schwanda, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton and Whitefield,* The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016).

[2] Jonathan Edwards [1737], *Ecclesiastical Writings (WJE Online vol. 12),* ed. David D. Hall, 414.

[3] George Whitefield, *Works of George Whitefield,* vol. 5 Sermons (Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2000), 424.

[4] Jonathan Edwards [1739], *Sermons and Discourses*, 1739–1742 (WJE Online vol. 22), ed. Harry S. Stout, 315. Punctuation altered for readability.

[5] All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

[6] Francis Asbury, *The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Bishop from August 7, 1771, to December 7, 1815* (New York: N. Bangs & T. Mason, 1821), 3:67.

[7] Melvill Horne, ed., *Posthumous Pieces of the Rev. John Fletcher* (Philadelphia: Solomon W. Conrad, 1804), 345.

[8] John Fletcher, *The Works of Reverend John Fletcher* (New York: B. Waugh & T. Mason, 1833), 2:98–99.

[9] John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1839), 1:315, 316.

[10] George Whitefield, *Works of George Whitefield,* vol. 4 Controversial Writings and Tracts (Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2000), 43.

[11] Whitefield, *Works of George Whitefield,* 5:447.

[12] Mark A. Noll, foreword in Schwanda, *Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality,* xvii.

[13] The six themes beginning at this part of the article are condensed from Schwanda, *Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality,* 31, 71, 112, 153, 196, 240.

[14] John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1839), 2:284.

The process of growing up is to be valued for what we gain, not for what we lose.

C.S. Lewis

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RECOMMENDED READING

Tom Schwanda, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton, and Whitefield* (The Classics of Western Spirituality) (Paulist Press, 2016)

The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality offers readers a balanced collection of primary sources for eighteenth-century evangelical spirituality in America and Britain. Beginning with a chapter that introduces readers to the foundational nature and themes of evangelical spirituality, the book goes on to present the writings of men and women authors some very well known, others not well known grouped into six thematic categories. From giants of the movement such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield to social reformers William Wilberforce and Hannah More and such hymn writers as William Cowper, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality* presents an invaluable and unequalled treasury of authors representing a rich heritage of American and British spirituality for students and general readers alike.

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