

QUESTION

COMPARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF EVANGELICAL AND CHARISMATIC SPIRITUALITIES.

INTRODUCTION

‘The term “*Evangelical*” is derived from the Greek noun *euangelion*, translated as ‘*glad tidings, good news, or gospel*’. It came into use at the Reformation to identify Protestants, especially as they held to the belief in *Justification by Grace through faith and the supreme Authority of scripture*. Subsequently, while striving to remain faithful doctrinally to the general conservative tradition of the Reformation, the doctrinal core of evangelicalism became focused on the belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, the belief in the divinity of Christ and the belief in the efficacy of Christ’s life, death and physical Resurrection (*His atoning work*) and for the salvation of the human soul.

On the other hand, Charismatic movement developed in the 1960s, beginning in an Episcopal Church in North America, and soon spread to other denominations. Its roots lie on many different soils, in Pentecostalism which had begun over fifty years previously, in a new understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the light of teaching from the holiness movement of the 19th century and in the influence of various individual figures. This move of the Holy Spirit in the historic denominations was characterized by experience of ‘*baptism in the Holy Spirit*’ or ‘*second baptism*’ and by a new informality in liturgical worship, anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ, and renewed emphasis on the present reality of the gifts of the Spirit, especially *healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues*.

First, I want us to note the fact that, *'it is easy for an outsider to see the weakness of any system of religion and to miss the strength, so also it is possible for an insider to know the strength and to be unconscious of the weakness'*. However, while illustrating the features of these different traditions one after the other and bringing out their strengths and weaknesses, I would try to compare their spirituality, by giving my own accounts based on what I have heard, practically experienced and physically witnessed of the two traditions.

FEATURES OF EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

The distinctive marks of evangelical spirituality, are personal *'Quiet Time'*, the *'Family Altar'*, *Prayer meetings*, *Sunday observance*, *Conversion*, *Witnessing*, *Holiness* and *surrender to the will of God in daily vocation*, *personal Morality* and *Christian service*. All these were clearly recognizable. They were tirelessly advocated by word and example. They used to be very effective to have formed a more or less coherent and influential body of tradition. Unfortunately, almost all of these valuable practices have disappeared or completely forgotten by the Evangelical Christians in the world of today.

For example, the Quiet Time is closely linked to the Family *Alta* (*the equivalent for the family*), the mid-week prayer and the Bible study meetings (*for the church*) and more broadly, the sermon or other types of teaching, whether at regular weekly worship or at special occasions like a convention. The Quiet Time is based upon the concept of prayer as petition or intercession and as a channel of spiritual nourishment in which meditation, thanksgiving and praise were the means of drawing on the power of

God. It was also often highly systematic using lists, guides and reminders extensively; books of devotional and inspirational readings were also employed.

Most evangelicals see witnessing to Christ as the first task of a believer. How should one who has been saved from the fire of God's righteous wrath not help other people to be saved as well? By the early nineteenth century, evangelicals had established a network of non-sectarian '*voluntary societies*' which promoted evangelism, founded Sunday schools and colleges, and brought the gospel to needy people all over the world. Although, this is their most commendable achievement, and it is progressing even till this day.

On the issue of holiness, Evangelicals were taught to surrender themselves unreservedly to him and to remain 'unspotted by the world' (*James 1:27*). Hence, the Christian life involves an incessant spiritual warfare against the power of evil in the world, a continual struggle against temptation, and the practice of disciplines to counteract the weakness of the flesh. There is some variety in the way this conflict is understood. Some see the war as winnable in this life and so speak of victorious Christian living as a result of '*mortification*' (or *renunciation*) and the appropriation of the life of Christ within the believer, or of '*entire sanctification*'; others see the struggle continuing with great overt intensity until death, and therefore call for discipline, perseverance and training in godliness; yet again others speak of a decisive release or deliverance from the powers of evil by the direct intervention of God.

Evangelical spirituality used to place so much emphasis upon conversion. Humankind is oriented primarily towards God as a being created in the divine image and therefore made for fellowship with

Him. But this fellowship is not the normal or birth state, due to the effects of the fall, or original sin. Restoration of the divine image can only be achieved by a decisive divine/human act, referred to as conversion. Therefore, the indispensable sting point for Christian spirituality is conversion, whether it is an emotional, datable experience like the charismatic or not. Unfortunately, these realities are no more there. It is often said that '*obedience to the commandments of God determines one's spirituality level*'. If this is right, then the increasing trend of social vices in our Christian communities is enough to prove these points.

Evangelical theology today is much weaker. Evangelical commitments to Scripture have been troubled by decades of controversy-first with liberal Christians and the secular academy over the Bible's inspiration and, then, with other conservatives over the exact nature and scope of biblical authority. Not only that, evangelical higher education has made rapid strides since World War II. Yet it is still an immensely fragmented enterprise. Independent colleges, seminaries, and Bible schools all compete on their own for students, financial support, and a place in the sun. In fact, many are poorly funded especially those in the third-world countries and are, unable to offer the long-term stability that disciplined learning requires.

Several reasons may be advanced to explain why there is a noticeable trend among evangelicals to abandon such distinctive elements. For example, one possible reason is that while these practices may have had value in their time, they were too closely related to the period of their origin or development and were without substantial theological basis. This, they suffered greatly from changes in context, external pressures and internal fatigue.

Another possibility may be traced to the personal element-*viz.*, that evangelicals do not clearly understand their own spirituality, or find few good examples of it any more amongst themselves to use as models. In other words, they have lost confidence in their own historic traditions, and under the pressure of the modern secular world have been attracted by other disciplines, which appear to have greater strength and resilience.

CHARISMATIC COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

On the other hand, Charismatic's common characteristics of baptism in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, direct revelations from God, and divine intervention in response to prayer for well-being (*conversion, physical and emotional healing, exorcism, and deliverance from evil*) have formed a distinctive common culture. This character is normally labeled "*charismatic*", although its leading exponents deplore the suggestion that the phenomenon is other than biblical and Christian.

From one standpoint, speaking in tongues sounds like gibberish; expecting divine intervention for healing or exorcism is magic; and "resting in the Spirit" (*a swoon following prayer for divine intervention*), "singing in the Spirit" (*a musical sound in gatherings for worship reminiscent of medieval chant*), and exuberant emotional cries of joy or wailing are typical of religious ecstasy. Such comparison has reinforced a widely held theory that no place has remained in Christian practice since the apostolic age for "signs and wonders" (*Acts 14:3*) such as healing or exorcism by direct (*i.e., without clinical and medical procedure*) divine intervention.

Several considerations counter such an assessment of charismatic spirituality from my understanding of their characteristic features. First, the motive is Christ-or Jesus-centered. Charismatic worship

is directed to the Trinity, not to God alone. Focus on the glory of God makes praise central to worship. The fatherhood of God justifies much of the concentration on human welfare in the exercise of gifts such as healing (*some Evangelical fears that the Charismatic emphasis on experience and spiritual gifts devalues the Scriptures*).

The roles of Jesus as Saviour, Lord, Baptiser in the Spirit, and coming King dominate the renewed evangelism (*just as Christians baptized in the Spirit have a new capacity to speak freely to God in praise, so they have a new capacity and freedom to speak to others about the Lord*), the heightened enthusiasm for and obedience to the biblical teaching of Jesus is the object of baptism in the Spirit, and the world-denying expectation of the alternative Christian society with its stress on personal holiness and authoritarian community discipline.

Furthermore, the advent of Charismatic in the experience of Holy Ghost baptism is typically followed by a new awareness of the reality of Satan and the powers of evil. Charismatic sees this as following the pattern of Jesus' own experience, in which the temptations in the wilderness quickly followed His baptism in the Jordan. This awareness has caused deliverance and exorcism to acquire new relevance and usage in Charismatic. *The truth is that, the people we often refer to as Christian fanatics are people that loves God and obeys His commandments more than we do. Another fact is that, that I do not have or know a thing does not mean that no one else can have or know it'.*

To assert the extraordinary significance of Charismatic for world Christianity and all the churches is not to ignore its weaknesses and its areas of immaturity. But the weaknesses and immaturity flow from its nature as an unplanned spontaneous eruption, and from its being a movement where people

are participants as a result of their experience, not as a consequence of specific training (*In Christian ministry, spiritual power without a very sound theology, gets you exploded, and theology without power, dries you up, but when the two are present, you begin to grow and prosper*). These weaknesses point, not to any reduced significance of Charismatic as such, but to the fragility of this work of God and the dangers of its full goals not being realized. Recent scandals in independent ministries highlight the need for fellowship and mutual accountability. In other words, the negative aspects of Charismatic are not reasons for dismissal but incentives to ensure that this extraordinary grace of God is not wasted.

CONCLUSION

All these factors taken together suggest that Charismatic is not simply a sovereign divine intervention for this age but a grace that is healing and repairing the wounds and the weaknesses of many centuries. It has already had more impact on worldwide Christian life than has been generally recognized. There are few of today's evangelicals, apparently with a more broad-minded outlook than some of their forebears, believing there is value in practices, who are determined to make up the deficiencies and particularly to stop the Evangelical traditions that are currently being eroded off, and therefore loosing converts to the Charismatic.

However, the above mentioned factors needs to be taken into account as well as carrying out a critical review of the existing practices of the Evangelicals to bring out their essential structures and principles. Such procedure would show the strengths and weaknesses of its spirituality, and would serve as a basis for determining whether the Charismatic traditions of spirituality were compatible with it, and how they might be employed to enrich it, or to get it re-vitalized through other measures from within.

