

Growing in Jesus vs. sentimentalism

Jeremiah 15:15-20

David C. Dixon

Introduction: Mark Noll is a well-known evangelical historian who wrote a book in 1995 entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, in which he contends that the *scandal* is that there's simply not much to the evangelical mind. That's how he starts off this award-winning intellectual history and critique of the evangelical movement. His underlying concern is, why the largest single group of religious Americans –who enjoy increasing wealth, status, and political influence– have contributed so little to rigorous intellectual scholarship in North America. If we truly nourish believers in the simple truths of the gospel, why would that cause evangelicals to flounder when it comes to sustaining a serious intellectual life? Are these two somehow at odds? Why would we not promote a strong evangelical witness in the realms of high culture? His answer has to do with a certain evangelical characteristic that tends to cloud the intellectual horizon: the strong focus on emotions and sentimentalism, which Noll sees as a tendency inherited from Pietism.

1) In another book he wrote, entitled *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, Noll explores our common roots more thoroughly, tracing them back to the Protestant Reformation, not so much the magisterial reform, but more the radical wing: the Anabaptists, whose precedents were in the Moravians and Pietists. But it wasn't just a matter of belief, but also of practice and attitude. Revivalism impacted the current of evangelicalism even more profoundly – how many of us have ever participated in what you would call “revival” services? The evangelical revivalists saw religion advancing primarily through extraordinary rather than ordinary works of God. Jonathan Edwards called them “remarkable outpourings of the Spirit of God” (this became a “standard” for evangelicals). In other words, the ordinary ministry of the church making use of the ordinary means of stimulating growth in grace would prove inadequate to maintain the vitality of the Church or to achieve the salvation of large numbers of sinners. So on both sides of the Calvinist-Arminian debate, there was a conviction that extraordinary works of the Spirit were *necessary* for restoring spiritual life to individuals and to the church. So Noll shows how the revivals in Britain and North America in the mid-18th century proved to be foundational in the development of the movement, its ethos, beliefs and subsequent direction. It was in these revivals (called “great awakenings”) where the core commitments of evangelicals crystalized, and they continue to characterize evangelicals to this day. A brief summary, according to Noll, would look like this:

A) Lordship of Jesus Christ: this is the conviction that His death and resurrection represent the central elements of the Christian message. **B)** Belief in the need for personal conversion to Jesus: this is the conviction that lives need to be changed. **C)** Our dependence on Scripture as *the* reliable witness and

authority regarding what God has done for us and His will for our lives: this is the conviction that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages.

But it wasn't just revivalism, but a particular aspect of practice and attitude manifested there: **"evangelicals were experiential"** = their tendency to look to a conversion "experience" as an indicator of whether a profession of faith was genuine. That experience often came after a period of intense and prolonged struggle, which they could describe in different ways (using highly emotive, experiential language). What these descriptions pointed to was something like a *conscious sense* of having been regenerated, and a consequent over-confidence in feelings. How much do we depend on feelings in our daily Christian life? Emoticons have certainly raised our awareness of feelings as we try to make sure we get the right one for the occasion. There's something definitely worthwhile in helping children learn to identify what they're feeling (adults too!). So please don't misunderstand where I'm trying to go with this. But did you *"feel like"* coming to church today? Do your feelings determine God's will? And do feelings help you decide whether you will practice Christian discipline? Whether you'll share your faith? What role do feelings actually have in these crucial decisions? It's important to realize that in our historical DNA as evangelical Christians we have a predisposition to depend on feelings – not that the rest of our culture doesn't do so, but we have an extra dose, though this is also a serious human weakness of the flesh: to let ourselves be dominated by feelings, controlled and directed by them. So feelings and spirituality can get all confused: just because I feel spiritual, does that mean I am? Jesus said, **"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"** (Jn. 14:23). So what does it mean if I'm not keeping His commandments? Serious spirituality acts responsibly regardless of feelings! Did you ever hear the old saying, "If it feels good, do it"? It was invented by my generation (the "mantra" of the 60's and 70's)! When Mark Noll warns us about these elements of our history that make us more "susceptible" to giving excessive importance to personal experience and feelings, what we're being cautioned about is a kind of "sentimental spirituality" that lacks depth. Not that emotions are bad! They are God-given abilities to respond to the whole range of life's stimuli. But the sentimentalism of much evangelical theology and practice can inhibit our faith from growing deep, because sentimentalism aims at comfort rather than correction and therefore tends to produce spiritual shallowness instead of real discipleship. Let's look closer at our biblical example for today.

2) Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet for good reason! What he saw ahead for Jerusalem was devastating, and it broke his heart. He would have to experience the total collapse of his beloved homeland, even the destruction of the holy city, so he was constantly in emotional turmoil, made even worse by all the persecution and rejection he received from his fellow countrymen. In our text, God has just given him the news that there will be no pity for Jerusalem. Her day of reckoning had come: **"Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity"** (v. 2). Jeremiah was overwhelmed at the horrific message he'd received from the Lord and had to tell the people; he finally broke down, crying out, **"Woe is me, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me"** (v. 10). Like Job, who also rued the day of his birth, Jeremiah felt so useless and lonely. Then God begins to answer him, promising well-being in the end, but much affliction in the meantime. (How comforting is this to know?) So Jeremiah pours out his painful prayer, full of emotion and brutal honesty: **"O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and vindicate me before my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach"** (v. 15). Can you hear the whimpering tone? These are short gasps of desperate prayer, little pleas and reminders to God: Jeremiah is suffering because of his devotion to God: **"Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts."** Jeremiah began to prophesy in the 13th year of King Josiah, and in the 18th year the lost scrolls of the law were discovered in the temple (2 Kgs. 22). This started a major revival under Josiah, and this "rediscovery" may be exactly what Jeremiah is referring to here. His response to these rediscovered words was that he "ate them" – they were food for his soul, the nourishment he

longed for, so they became his joy and delight. How could it be otherwise when Jeremiah bore God's very name?! (Heb. *Yirmeyahu* = Yahweh exalts).

He continues his prayer: *"I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?"* He reminded God of his integrity, always reflecting God's perspective to the people, so fully identified with God's truth; yet all his deep passion for God, his conviction of the truth of his message of doom, could not move these people – it only excited their ridicule! So he asks, *"Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?"* He is so tired and frustrated from never seeing any results: it's very painful, like an incurable wound. He's in deep crisis, fearing the worst about God: that He may abandon Jeremiah to a dreadful fate (have you ever feared this about God?). Does Jeremiah seem almost bipolar? Going from despair to ecstasy and back to despondency. But he's actually being very honest with God about his fears in this drastic test, which is actually a very healthy prayer.

3) So God responds, telling him the answer to his fears is all about *conversion*: *"Therefore thus says the LORD: If you convert, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. Let them convert to you, but you shall not convert to them"* (v. 19). The Hebrew word here is *shuv* (translated as turn, return, come back, repent, convert). God was saying that Jeremiah, who had preached repentance to the people of Jerusalem, also had a need to repent.

The modern evangelical movement is all for "conversion," but too often we have such a narrow concept of what it actually means that we miss its multidimensional application. Conversion is **not just about new birth, but new life** that results from a genuine turning from self to the Savior, a complete change of government over your life, a total change of loyalties! There is no true conversion that doesn't lead to regeneration and transformation! So it always involves process – you may have to start over a number of times before you really get what this is about (it was certainly true in my case!). And in a culture that's dominated by sentimentality and relativity, do we evangelical Christians even know what we're asking people to convert to?! What are we ourselves supposed to have converted to? Hopefully, we've come to understand that it's about converting from me-centered to Christ-centered! But *I* don't accomplish this – it's only a work of the Holy Spirit! Our challenge is to not be "converted" to this world, not be molded by this society and its standards, but to remain firm and immovable in our convictions. God's finishing remarks are reassuring: *"And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD"* (v. 20).

Jeremiah's example of handling his strong emotions may strike us as counterintuitive, but it represents his process of conversion and regeneration. And he reflects the kind of transparency that would deepen our emotional maturity if we practiced it, as well as our discipleship to Jesus. God can handle your overwhelming emotions, and the best thing you can do with them is to pour them out before Him honestly. He is where we get a better perspective of our situations, our troubles, ourselves/others! Only a deep look at ourselves in the light of Scripture can move us toward giving highest priority to God's rescue of our lives through Christ, and that's what drives us deep into the character of Jesus and the fruit of His Spirit (so we become truly "spiritual thinkers"), with redeemed emotions and redeemed imaginations. Remember Paul's perspective of our challenge: this is a spiritual battle we're in, and we have spiritual weapons at our disposal: *"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ"* (2 Cor. 10:3-5). We need a renewed commitment to taking every thought captive to Christ.

Conclusion: C. S. Lewis was right: we prove the veracity and relevance of our faith when our faith is most tested. But a sentimental response won't get us through the crux of the test. We need Jesus' example at the cross – the supreme test of His faith and His lordship, and He triumphed in it, because He never stopped forgiving us and never submitted to the enemy. And then He triumphed over death by resurrecting, so that He could offer us His victory ... by simply our surrendering to Him as Lord and Savior.