

# EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

I do not go everywhere he goes theologically, but I do appreciate Father Richard Rohr's contributions to our understanding of adult spirituality, particularly male spirituality. (You may want to check out his book *Falling Upward* for some profound insights on that.) When I was going through a challenging period of my life a decade ago, I found powerfully helpful his observation that there are usually only two things strong enough to transform us: great love or great suffering. And that great love is often accompanied by great suffering anyway. And that, for men in particular, it's usually suffering that provokes deep change in us, if anything. We are socialized to resist other movements of transformation. I vowed then to "not waste my pain." That is, life will give us pain, whether we want it or not. We can choose to merely experience it and not be changed, and thus waste the opportunity, or we can choose to embrace it and be transformed. That's been a life motto and a preaching/teaching point for me since.

To not waste our pain is a nearly universal invitation at midlife, Rohr says, because if we have not experienced suffering (which he defines as the realization of not having control) by then, this period of life will almost certainly bring it to us. It's in midlife that we realize keenly the mortality of our bodies, or the futility of some of our career ambitions, or loss of relationships, or some other kind of limitation that, decades before, we may have optimistically pushed through. When we're young, we ascend... we earned our credentials, we prove ourselves, we establish structures for our lives, we start families, we establish priorities, we plan a future. It's a time of creating or receiving containers for life, and all that is good and necessary.

But to be fully mature in Christ, at some later point we will find those containers inadequate for the new thing God is doing in it. They may even become stifling or uncomfortable. That experience is an invitation to follow Jesus into descent... to surrender to a greater pattern of death and resurrection. That's what the apostle Paul was referencing in Philippians 3, when he testified that all that was once gain for him was now rubbish, for the sake of knowing Christ... and the pathway to the power of the resurrection was through fellowship in his sufferings. Paul was not describing his conversion experience here, but his "second half of spiritual life" experience of embracing suffering as a pathway to true, mature, surrendered, joyful Christian life.

It is an experience that, unfortunately, many Christians never fully engage, which is why so many in American churches (and in American pastorates) remain spiritually immature (even in theologically orthodox). There are several reasons for that. One is that it's not often taught. American Christianity has been syncretized with our cultural ethos of ascent—we are continually after "bigger, better, faster" when the kingdom of God is more often characterized as "smaller, simpler, slower." Jesus's parables of the kingdom are sometimes about growth, but it's the organic, natural growth of biology, not the forced, frantic growth of a construction company. American Christianity is big on the atonement of the cross but light on carrying our cross. We are very much into victory and resurrection but not as much into suffering and surrender, no matter what hymns we may sing on Sunday mornings.

That indictment may be too broad (or even too narrow) but I suspect that those of you reading this recognize some truth in it—and each one knows full well the other reason that we are reluctant to embrace the deepest kinds of spiritual growth: the process is uncomfortable, and therefore scary. We come to Jesus initially for comfort, clarity, maybe even certainty. Who wishes to wade into discomfort, ambiguity, and mystery? And yet isn't that precisely what the Scriptures teach us? Jesus perpetually confounds us; every time we think we have him and his gospel of the kingdom nicely packaged into a comfortable little box, he surprises us by breaking open the box, by reminding us that he is "not tame" (as CS Lewis wisely put it), and by obscuring kingdom truth from those who will not engage the discomfiting process and making it accessible only to those who will. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The gospels teach us that those with ears to hear are often those we least expect, and that religious professionals struggle more than most to hear.

What does any of this have to do with Evangelical Seminary? Two things. First, we are committed to a mission that invites students into the deeper things of God—including second half of life, hard-but-good spirituality that produces pastors, teachers, therapists, and other leaders who are emotionally, relationally, and spiritually mature. We cannot guarantee how deeply each will respond to or engage our invitation to do so, but we assure you that for us seminary is far more than "learning important stuff" about the Bible and theology. That happens too, of course, and for younger students in the first half of life that is particularly essential—they need a solid container of truth from which to think, serve, and lead, just as children need boundaries and knowledge and security to flourish and grow. But we also teach what happens after that; we teach Philippians 3 as well, and encourage each other to embrace suffering (when it comes) and love (always present) as powerful invitations to transformation...for themselves and those who watch them.

The second reason this is relevant to Evangelical is that ministries can or should also pursue the same kind of spiritual maturity that individuals do. Growth in metrics is a good and, at some times, necessary phenomenon, and we celebrate it, just as the early church, in its own "first half of life experience" celebrated the growth in those who were being added to the kingdom. Yet, there are also stages in which our committed pursuit of kingdom realities will cause people to walk away, as thousands did when Jesus declared that he, not

free bread, was what they really, truly desired. They left him in search of loaves and fishes elsewhere. It's no wonder that Caesar would throw bread into the crowds that gathered to watch the gladiators do their bloody work! Who wants to do the hard stuff of taking up our crosses when there is entertainment and food to be enjoyed? "Bread and circuses" kept the emperors in power for centuries, and sometimes keeps people in church pews, while the Bread of Life has always been the narrow way, even, often, within the people of God.

Evangelical Seminary is in a growth trajectory right now, particularly in terms of enrollment. We had some hard years, but due to our digital marketing efforts, innovative programming, and persistent networking, we have experienced this academic year the single biggest increase in enrollment in our history. Our new Doctor of Theology program is carrying much of that freight. We started 28 students in that program in the fall, added 4 more this spring, and at the end of March have 40 admitted for fall. Not all of those 40 will come, of course, but our numbers are nonetheless encouraging. If we reach our enrollment goals for next year, we will have the largest student population in Evangelical's history! That's amazing, and a breath of fresh air for our good people.

Since numbers are necessary but not primary, I will also add that the learning environment our faculty have created for and in that ThD program has been wonderful, particularly for the first year of an experiment. We have never tried doctoral level education before, and our faculty and students have risen to the challenge, to my great delight. That observation is not limited to the doctoral program, of course; students seem quite pleased with five new programs we have added in the past five years (there are a total of eight now), along with our noncredit, continuing education options.

The doctoral program is offered at a somewhat higher tuition rate than our master's programs (but still significantly less than the market average for research-based doctorates), which means that the impact on our financial situation is outsized. We had just achieved financial equilibrium a few years ago, but national conference defunding, along with some aggressive competition in our market, created a fresh and sometimes overwhelming financial challenge. Due to this year's planned burst in enrollment we are climbing out of that pit, and anticipate a financial sustainability, if all other factors remain constant, by this time next year. In short, we have a plan, we are working our plan, and our plan is working. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Thank you, Jesus!

But all other factors do not remain constant. All things change, and change requires growth, and growth creates its own need for change. Five years ago our board created a financial sustainability plan with several key components, all of which we have pursued with enthusiasm. The most significant of those was that long-term sustainability would likely require us to be embedded in a larger institution. Infrastructure costs, limited market reach, and inadequate resource depth are the primary reasons for that, and those factors, sadly, have not changed. So we've been pursuing institutional partnerships, most notably with Huntington University a couple of years ago. They pulled back from merger due to financial challenges of their own, which was disappointing, but we've trusted the good mercies of God to lead us to another partnership when the time was right.

This year we received not one, but two invitations to join other institutions. One was from a seminary in the Midwest that has adopted an entirely new model of theological education ("competency-based education") that I believe is the wave of the future, and has, as a result, experienced a powerful turn-around of their own enrollment and financial challenges as a result. They are similar to us theologically and missionally. To join with them would keep us on the cutting edge and is therefore enticing, but would also be disruptive to both our business model and our learning model. Everything would change. At the time of this writing we have kept that conversation open but have directed most of our energies to an option closer home.

Lancaster Bible College acquired Capital Seminary five years ago and, to our regret, became a fierce competitor in our market. (We had previously been the only evangelical institution of theological education between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.) Quite a few of our enrollment challenges are directly or indirectly due to their decision to create and offer graduate programs that compete directly with ours, usually with a "lower cost, lower quality" Walmart-ish marketing strategy. And they have thus been successful, in terms of metrics, where we have struggled. The fact that the seminary is embedded in an undergraduate institution that boasts expanding networks of partners also gives them a deeply-envied advantage. We were therefore delighted to explore the opportunity to turn a competitor into a collaborator, and even to seek synergy—to do together what neither institution could do on its own. We bring credible, accredited, innovative programs led by passionate, knowledgeable faculty in an ethos of spiritual formation and relational instruction. We have over 65 years of experience with graduate theological education; we know our stuff. We have friends and networks of our own. We have much to bring to the table, in other words.

As a result, we have been engaged for a period of months in extensive conversations with LBC about the implications and opportunities of their invitation to "union." There are significant challenges in such an idea, including but not exclusive to theological positions and postures, although those gaps are not as large as they once were. A primary concern for us, of course, is the continuance of mission, which we believe to be expressed primarily through our programs and personnel. At the time of this writing, we do not yet know what the outcome of those conversations will be. Our Board of Trustees meets next on May 2, which means that by

conference time we may have agreed to do something with them, or with our other conversation partner, or both, or neither. If you are reading this prior to that time, we appreciate your prayers for wisdom and we discern what God would have us do going forward. We appreciate your prayers all the time!

It may seem incongruous to consider giving ourselves away at precisely the moment when our strategies are being most successful. But success for us has never been measured solely in terms of those metrics; it's been measured by the transformation of our students and what they, in turn, offer the Church and the world. We decry the competitive nature of American Christianity, particularly much of evangelicalism, and have witnessed one of the consequences of that ill-placed focus in the self-destruction of several celebrity church leaders in recent years. That is not, has never been, the way of the kingdom of God. Jesus showed us another, better way... and while it may for us include a bit of loss of identity or loss of control, it may also include the opportunity to deepen and expand our mission in ways we have been unable to do heretofore. We'll let you know.

In the meantime, please be assured that while we continue to need your going support, financially and otherwise, we do deeply value the reciprocal nature of our relationship. We are here to serve you—your pastors, yes, but also others in your congregations who are called by God to specialized service that requires or invites Christ-centered, biblically-based, spiritually-mature preparation (and not always in the form of graduate degree programs). No matter whose name is on our sign, or even where the sign is located, we are still committed to asking, “How can we best serve you, as you serve Christ?”

Gratefully,

***Dr. Tony Blair, President***