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Research, Results, and Reading

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Storytelling and Evangelical Identities

Joel Halldorf

In this chapter, I discuss autobiography in the Evangelical tradition, and how this genre can help us understand Evangelical identity. Conversion – the experience of “new birth”, or being born again – was the center of these stories. The emphasis on personal storytelling (witnessing) united Evangelicals, but the way they told their stories divided them. As the movement grew more fragmented over the centuries, this pattern becomes more evident. Personal storytelling was part of what made this a modern movement, but the way they told their stories set it apart as a distinct modernity.

Mapping conversion: The Puritan background

At the age of nine Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was, in the words of his biographer George M. Marsden, “a model of sanctity”: he prayed five times a day and even organized prayer meetings with other boys.¹ But his fervor waned, which, according to the Puritan tradition to which he belonged, was a sign that he had not experienced true conversion. Eventually he would have what he felt was a more permanent breakthrough, but doubt still lingered in his mind, since “my not having experienced conversion in those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it”.² Marsden suggests that even Edward’s father, who was a congregational minister, was skeptical that young Jonathan had experienced a true conversion and thus was really saved.

Jonathan Edwards belonged to a context shaped by the Puritan heritage – geographically as well as ecclesially.³ The Puritan tradition also provides the background

1 Marsden 2003, p. 25.

2 Marsden 2003, p. 57.

3 Marsden 2003, p. 3.

for the Evangelical conversion narrative in general. Writing autobiography first became a widespread practice among the Puritans, and this was no coincidence. It was perceived as a spiritual practice, and reflected the theological doctrine of predestination. This doctrine might have liberated the faithful from trusting their “works” but it still caused some anxiety, for how could a person know if he or she belonged to the elect? The spiritual biography sought to answer this. It was, as described by Shea, an attempt by the writer to “assemble the evidence for divine favorism towards him”.⁴ Through self-examination a person would, hopefully, be able to discern the hand of God in one’s life and soul, and thus be assured, or at least find indications, that one was saved and did indeed belong to the elect.

But what signs should one look for? The great Puritan divines knew. Known as doctors of the soul, they provided road maps for the way to salvation – the *ordo salutis*.⁵ People were invited to compare their experience with these models in order to understand their spiritual state. In New England, the practice of public witnessing emerged among Congregationalists.⁶ Here an individual testified before the congregation who then decided if his or her personal story fitted their map. Only true converts were admitted into the congregation, but it was not enough to claim that you had been converted, since a person, it was thought, could easily be deceived. All paths did not lead to Rome – some cases might look like conversions, but were in fact roads of perdition. To be certain that your conversion was true, you had to check if the development you had undergone fitted the established road maps. I will call the act of comparing experience and map an act of *mirroring*.⁷ Historian Patricia Caldwell describes the process as an attempt to locate your own life among the scriptural figures.⁸ This is a reminder that the Bible was the touchstone for this process – the particular road maps provide the hermeneutical “filter” through which the Biblical stories are read.

There is a somewhat counter-intuitive relationship between the personal and the objective in the Puritan ideal of autobiography. The story is personal, but the individual experience is expected to conform to a rather strict script. Accordingly, the person shrinks to the background and it becomes a story about God’s dealing with the individual. The idea of a common road map for personal experiences rests on the idea that God, as formulated by the Puritan minister Richard Baxter (1615–1691), deals much

4 Shea 1988 (1968), p. xxv.

5 Hindmarsh 2005, pp. 36–37. Hindmarsh writes about the works of William Perkins: “Here then was a map for the spiritual geography of the soul. Perkins provided the detailed religious terms for an individual to describe his or her own sense of spiritual inwardness, and to understand how this interiority changed though time and in the midst of crisis.”

6 Caldwell 1983, pp. 48f.

7 I have borrowed the concept from literary historian Greger Andersson, see Andersson 2014.

8 Caldwell 1983, p. 107; Shea 1988 (1968), p. xv.

the same with every man.⁹ Spiritual autobiography is, as Shea has described it, “creation myth written in the first person”. But even though the story is personal, the individual *mythos* must mirror the grand narrative – the road map – of the community.

Evangelical conversion narratives

Jonathan Edwards stands on the threshold between Puritanism and international Evangelicalism. With his report of the revival in his congregation in Northampton, *A Faithful narrative of the surprising work of God in the conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton* (1737), he wrote a book that would define “the standard expectations for Evangelical conversion”.¹⁰ Edwards had once been uncertain regarding the match between his own experience and the road map of his tradition, but now he created a map of his own, one that other individuals could and would use as a mirror. And he was himself acutely aware of the power of storytelling: “There is no one thing that I know of, that God has made such a means of promoting his work amongst us, as the news of others’ conversion.”¹¹

Conversion – to be born again – became the hallmark of Evangelicalism as it spread worldwide from the 1730s. It was more dramatic, a shorter process and perhaps also more widespread than among the earlier Puritans, but the continuity was still clear, and some things remained the same.¹² Historian Mark Noll writes:

“Also growing in number were instances of life-changing conversion. At the heart of the more formal evangelical movement that emerged in the 1740s was the experience of conversion, but also anguished turmoil over how to be sure that one was converted as well as intense theological controversy over the respective roles of God and humans in the process. [...] Although mostly unknown to each other, the converts were undergoing experiences that became paradigmatic for later evangelicalism – both for what they expected to happen and for how they then “preached up” the grace they themselves had experienced.”¹³

Evangelicals wondered, as the Puritans had done before them, about assurance and how to know if one’s experience was the real thing, and not some glimmering counterfeit. For discernment, they, too, provided road maps for spiritual guidance, maps

9 Shea 1988 (1968), p. 89.

10 Noll 2003, p. 80.

11 Noll 2003, p. 101.

12 See Hindmarsh 2005, p. 80: “It remains the case, however, despite all these predisposing conditions, that the international Protestant awakening of the eighteenth century was constituted chiefly by the repeated experience of evangelical conversion, and that there was an irreducibly religious element in this experience that was in continuity with seventeenth-century Puritanism and related traditions.”

13 Noll 2003, p. 74.

that in turn inspired more conversions – especially when they were presented in the form of witnessing. Storytelling thus became a feature that united the movement. To the many attempts to define Evangelicalism one could add this one: An Evangelical is a protestant who can give an account of his conversion, and who understands this as the moment when he or she became a child of God.¹⁴ But the different stories and the different maps are also what divided the movement.

This is evident already from the start, even before the movement reached England and America. In Germany, Pietist leader August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) underwent his conversion influenced by Puritan writings.¹⁵ His spiritual breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) was slow and painful, and came only after a period of inner darkness, during which he felt despair over his own sinfulness. He called this experience *Busskampf* (the struggle to repent). This, then, became his map: True faith is born in the midst of darkness, as the individual comes to full realization of his own shortcomings and his dependence on God's grace.¹⁶

His partner in Pietism, the Moravian Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) had a quite different experience, however: no darkness, no *Busskampf*, but a straight road to salvation. There was no need for an obligatory struggle, Zinzendorf concluded, since Christ had done this for mankind in Gethsemane. He acknowledged willingly that according to Francke and the Halle Pietists he was no true convert – his experience did not match their map. However, instead of backing down, he presented his own road map to salvation. With regards to the followers of Francke, he was not as strict to them as they had been to him. They ended up in the same place, he claimed, it just took them a bit longer to get there: “Pietism is not a mistake, only another method; we ride and the Pietists go on foot.”¹⁷ But the Moravian road map did not go unchallenged. In England, John Wesley (1703–1789) experienced conversion at a Moravian gathering, but was later deeply skeptical about the movement's map. Particularly the idea that the unconverted should wait in “stillness” for the Lord, without using means of grace or doing works of piety. This sort of quietism was nothing short of antinomianism according to the practically minded Wesley, whose Methodist movement broke with Zinzendorf and the Moravians.¹⁸

A century later two prominent Swedish Evangelicals endeavored to match their stories with Francke's map, which seems to have been the established model in Swedish Pietism. The young Carl Olof Rosenius (1816–1868) feared that he had come to

14 For an overview of definitions of Evangelicalism and the discussions surrounding this, see Sweeney 2005, pp. 17–26; Halldorf 2012, pp. 32–36.

15 Ward 2006, p. 41.

16 Ward 1992, p. 61; Ward 2006, p. 41 f.; Hindmarsh 2005, p. 58f.; Matthias 2005, p. 103, 107f.

17 Quoted in Ward 1992, p. 137. For the conflict between Francke and Zinzendorf, see Weinlick 1956, p. 113; Ward 1992, p. 61; Ward 2006, pp. 100, 103f.; Hindmarsh 2005, p. 164.

18 See Heitzenrater 1995, p. 106; Rack 1989, pp. 202–205.

faith too soon, without enough penitential remorse.¹⁹ In other words, his *Busskampf* was insufficient, and this made him uncertain of his state of grace. Paul Peter Waldenström (1838–1917), one of the founders of the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, also battled with his lack of struggle, and wrote in 1859:

“I wanted to add some work of my own, I first wanted to regret my sins fully, feel the pain of sin, and know the fear of the law even better, before I was willing to accept the grace. And so I fell into working out my own righteousness.”²⁰

Francke claimed inspiration from Martin Luther (1483–1546), specifically the latter’s emphasis that man was unable to fulfill the demands of the law. But by turning his experience into a set pattern, Francke created what some perceived to be a legalistic type of Christianity. Grace was not free according to this *ordo*, the critics claimed, since you had to pay for it by tears and agony in the *Busskampf*.

Rosenius and Waldenström experienced the great remorse as something they had to achieve, but in the end their autobiographies did not mirror this map. Eventually they abandoned Francke’s map, and accepted the one provided by the Moravians instead; there they found a model of conversion which better fitted their experience. The slogan of the movement they lead – *nyevangelismen* – became “Come as you are!”. To come “as you are” was not possible according to Francke’s road map, since you had to acknowledge your sinfulness before coming to Christ – “Come after you have been crushed by the realization of your own sinfulness” would have been his much less catchy slogan. The Pietists preached the law to the unconverted, and the gospel only to the contrite.

In 19th century popular Evangelicalism, however, Zinzendorf largely prevailed over Francke. Moody, for instance, followed this model.²¹ Unconverted sinners were invited to experience instantaneous conversion; this model made mass-evangelism possible.²²

More chapters in the story: The emergence of the Holiness movement and Pentecostalism

Evangelicals were united by storytelling, but divided by the ways they told their stories. So far, this division has been illustrated by the different ways they told their conversion

19 Johansson 1936, p. 238 n. 51.

20 Bredberg 1938, p. 59. The original reads: ”*jag vill nödvändigt lägga något eget arbete till, jag vill först ångra mina synder riktigt, jag vill först känna syndens sveda, lagens förskräckande litet bättre, innan jag vill annamma [sic] sådan nåd, och så faller jag in i ett egenrättfärdighets-arbete, och blir så den sista villan värre än den första.*”

21 Gundry 1999, pp. 129–133.

22 Cf. Evensen 2003, pp. 46f.

stories. But with the emergence of the Holiness movement in the late 19th century and Pentecostalism in the early 20th, a new kind of fragmentation occurred. These movements changed the storytelling by adding new chapters to it.

The Holiness movement began in the USA in the middle of the 19th century with Asa Mahan (1799–1889) and Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874) as early and prominent proponents.²³ The movement drew on the writings of Wesley and stressed holiness as a second work of grace, subsequent to conversion. Central to the movement was the experience of entire sanctification understood as a spiritual breakthrough. When Mahan told his story, he began by describing his conversion:

“My conversion, in the judgment of all who knew me, was very marked and decisive. None doubted its genuineness. It was characterized by very clear conviction of sin, undivided consecration to Christ, and during several subsequent years, by deep and abiding joy in God.”²⁴

Mahan wanted to make sure that no one got the idea that his second, subsequent experience of entire sanctification was really a conversion experience – i.e. that his first experience was only counterfeit. Therefore, he emphasized that his conversion story followed the script: it included penitential remorse and was confirmed by the spiritual gift of joy – “None doubted its genuineness”.

After making clear that this was indeed a conversion experience, a true work of grace, Mahan was able to argue that his next experience, later in life, was something different. It was a distinct second work of grace. He described it as an experience that took him even further: his “whole moral and spiritual nature seemed to be transformed”²⁵ This was, according to Mahan, the “doctrine of sanctification, by faith in Christ, and of the mission of the Spirit”.²⁶ In other words, he added another chapter to his spiritual autobiography. The conversion story was not the whole story, but was followed by a story about another, subsequent work of grace. This second work of grace was presented as available to anyone who sought it.

Not everyone within the Evangelical movement accepted this second work of grace, the added chapter to the spiritual biography. The Holiness movement had a strong ecumenical impulse, but at the same time it introduced a qualitative split within Evangelicalism. Before, Evangelicals had made a distinction between themselves – the born again – and the outsiders, those who might confess Christianity but did not live it in their hearts. Now a similar distinction arose within the movement, between those who had experienced sanctification and those who had not – the mere converts.²⁷

²³ See Dieter 1996 for an overview.

²⁴ Mahan 1870, p. 133.

²⁵ Mahan 1870, p. 135.

²⁶ Mahan 1870, p. 135.

²⁷ Halldorf 2012, p. 175.

This pattern was repeated when the Pentecostal movement appeared in the early 20th century. The movement introduced a third work of grace: the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This was not conversion nor holiness, but an endowment of power that enabled bold witnessing and/or the gifts of the Spirit.²⁸

Again, some within the wider Evangelical movement accepted this added chapter, while others rejected it. As had been the case when the Evangelical movement first appeared, testimonies about the experience became a central vehicle to spread the movement, and also established a pattern for receiving it.²⁹ Maps were developed which helped the faithful to answer the central question: how do I know that I have received the Holy Spirit? To this question, Pentecostalism was able to give a clear answer: speaking in tongues.³⁰ In some parts of the Pentecostal movement speaking in tongues was seen as the decisive sign that settled the question of whether a person was Spirit baptized or not. According to others, tongues was *a* sign, but not necessarily *the* sign of the experience. In other words, the maps differed within the Pentecostal movement. The fragmentation within the movement was furthered by the fact that one branch of Pentecostalism saw Spirit baptism as a third work of grace, while others – rejecting the entire sanctification of the Holiness movement – saw it as a second work.

The pattern is in other words the same as I have identified before: Pentecostals, as part of the wider Evangelical movement, are united by the fact that they tell stories, but divided by how they tell them.

Evangelicalism and modernity

The more or less mandatory conversion story is part of what makes Evangelicalism a modern movement. A modern understanding of the self is, as Hindmarsh has noted, in dialogue with Charles Taylor, one of the conditions of this kind of autobiography:

“The modern identity or sense of the self goes hand in hand then with societies in which self-determination is given significant scope, for it is in these situations that the individual may construe his or her life not in terms of a traditional role handed down, but rather of a goal-directed narrative, where past and present choices of certain courses of action, among many possibilities, are projected into an open-ended future.”³¹

28 Wacker 2003 (2001), pp. 59, 62.

29 Wacker 2003 (2001), pp. 58–69. Cf. Gerger Andersson: “I hold that all these [Pentecostal] writers have, in this interpretative process, consciously or not, contributed to the formation of the narrative pattern [of the movement].”

30 Wacker 2003 (2001), pp. 35–57.

31 Hindmarsh 2005, p. 337.

This sense of the self as something that needs to be created also reflects a pluralistic society where there is more than one possible identity. In other words, the Evangelical conversion narrative indicates the movement's dependence on secularization, or at least the breakup of a unified Christian culture. There would be no drama in the story if it was not possible to choose something else – i.e. the possibility of not being a Christian.³²

The Evangelical autobiography is a modern storytelling, but was different from other kinds of modern narrations. The rise of the Evangelical conversion narrative is parallel to secular storytelling – the story of the modern, self-made man who goes from rags to riches, which is one of the most familiar narratives in the 19th century.³³ There are, however, some fundamental differences between the Evangelical conversion narrative and the secular story. To begin with, Evangelical stories have a much stronger sense of the role of the community, i.e. the congregation. The individual is not “self-made”, but guided and fostered by other Christians.³⁴ Furthermore, there is a strong stress on divine agency in the Evangelical autobiography: the individual tells her story, but does not claim to be self-made. As we have seen, the story has little originality to it, but is rather supposed to repeat a well-known script. It is not so much a story about the individual, as of God's dealings with the individual: God is the author, the one who writes the story of the individual's life.³⁵ Personal storytelling was part of what made Evangelicalism a modern movement, but the way the Evangelicals told their stories set them apart as a distinct modernity.

Postmodern Evangelicalism and the loss of the metanarrative

David Bebbington has argued that Evangelicalism can be best understood as a combination of firmness and flexibility. It has a few distinctives (conversion, Bible, cross, activism) but is at the same time able to adapt to its context.³⁶ Thus it changes over the centuries, as it adapts to, in turn, Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Modernism.

The process of mirroring, of understanding your life in light of a clearly defined, larger story, fits well with the general modern acceptance of metanarratives. The established maps of the different Evangelical movements function as the metanarratives of these contexts. But what happens in postmodernity, defined by Lyotard as the death of the metanarratives? Can Evangelicalism adapt to this new context? More research is needed on this topic, but there are indications that the road maps in general have a

32 Sanders 1995; Gelfgren 2003, pp. 202–204.

33 Sidenvall 2009, pp. 10–12; Tjeder 2003, pp. 220–225; Hindmarsh 2005, pp. 341f.

34 Hindmarsh 2005, pp. 343–346.

35 Halldorf 2012, pp. 88f.

36 Bebbington 2000 (1989), pp. 2–17.

weaker status in postmodern Evangelicalism. They tend to have been relativized. And this includes not just particular maps, such as Francke's or Zinzendorf's etc., but the idea itself: the idea that your story has to fit an established pattern.

Karl Inge Tangen has investigated what he calls the "commitment script" of some Pentecostal congregations, that is what it means for an individual to identify with a particular congregation. The traditional expectations within this tradition have been that members "believe and behave in accordance with the church's interpretation of the Bible".³⁷ Now, however, it is possible to become a member without adhering to the doctrinal or ethical teaching of the congregation, or following the traditional road map to salvation. One example is that people can be admitted as members without undergoing baptism by immersion if this conflicts with their conscience.³⁸ There is, in other words, a reluctance from the community to impose a specific pattern on what is more and more seen as the individual's unique story. This in turn indicates that the metanarrative has a weaker status. Even if the individual story does not match the road map of the congregation, he or she will not be turned away.

A similar pattern can be found in the teachings on Spirit baptism produced by the Swedish Pentecostal Movement. While encouraging a life in the Spirit, these Pentecostals warn of too strictly defined narratives: "At times, the models for how the filling of the Spirit shall occur has been too narrow."³⁹ Instead of a distinct and punctual experience, the life in the Spirit is described in more open terms, as an ongoing process.

The relativization of metanarratives makes different kinds of experiences and models possible within the same branch of Evangelicalism. The other side of this increased flexibility is that the individual to a lesser degree can be guided by a clearly defined road map of the community. The opportunity to understand your life in light of a clearly defined, larger story, is undermined. This might result in challenges with regards to spiritual guidance within Evangelicalism: how can you guide someone if you do not have a map?

Concluding reflections

Evangelicals have been united in a common emphasis on personal storytelling, but divided by the ways they have told their stories. In the 18th and 19th centuries, different branches of the movement – Halle Pietism, Moravianism, Methodism – presented different road maps of the way to conversion. The Holiness movement and the Pentecostal movement added chapters to the personal story by including stories of

³⁷ Tangen 2012, p. 47.

³⁸ Tangen 2012, p. 48.

³⁹ Teologiska nätverket i Pingst 2007, p. 52.

entire sanctification or baptism in the Holy Spirit. Personal storytelling was part of what made Evangelicalism a modern movement, although the way the stories were told – with a strong sense of divine agency – set it apart as a distinct kind of modernity. In postmodern Evangelicalism individualism seems to be stronger, and there are indications that the road maps have lost their central place. Evangelical congregations seem increasingly willing to accept people whose stories do not fit their established salvation guides.

Evangelicals of today are thus not likely to be tormented like Jonathan Edwards, who worried that his experience did not mirror “those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it”. The growing openness to a variation of stories is welcomed by many, but at the same time it is a signal of a fundamental shift within the movement. Evangelicalism is, as has been shown, a movement that contains a large diversity. The stress on personal storytelling is a common trait, and also the idea that your story is not your own only but relates to a metanarrative which is shared by a community. However, the aspect of this shared metanarrative now seems to have receded or become relativized.

How much can a movement change and still remain the same movement? David Bebbington has argued that the strength of Evangelicalism lies in its ability to adapt to different cultural moods or movements.⁴⁰ But the movements he discusses – Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism – all belong to modernity. Could it be that Evangelicalism, that emerged on the eve of modernity with Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) and the German Pietists in the 1670s, disintegrated or became transformed into something else with the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s?

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