

The Price of Cultural Engagement: What Evangelicals Could Learn from Pope Francis

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Early news stories following Pope Francis's election saw media hyping a positive response from Protestants. This could come from leaders of mainline, liberal leaning churches eager to interpret the Pope's words on sexuality as evidence for a modernizing perspective that resembled theirs, or from prominent evangelical or charismatic Protestant leaders in dialogue with Pope Francis, among them Pastor Rick Warren, the late Bishop Tony Palmer in the UK, Pentecostal leaders in Latin America, and more.

An opinion survey by the Barna Group in March last year puts these stories provides some perspective for stories like these. Among any kind of Protestants, at most 45% held very favorable or favorable ratings; among non-mainline (in other words, evangelical Protestants, Pentecostals, and so on) the number dropped to 37%. When respondents were asked if Francis's election had altered their view of the Catholic Church, the numbers roughly mirrored these: 70% of Protestants were unmoved. Barna Group President David Kinnaman concluded that Protestants remain "on the fence" about Pope Francis.^[1]

I should note that some of the individual initiatives are most interesting, even if they give a misleading impression on the response of most Protestants— especially initiatives that have attempted to resolve old disputes—around the doctrine of salvation, for example, where the Catholic-Lutheran joint declaration of 1999 has, it appears, acquired some new traction for addressing hoary old mutual suspicions about what Catholics and other Christians believe. Interesting as those initiatives are in their own right and as evidence of the willingness of the Francis papacy to reach out to fellow Christians, they will not be my focus in these brief remarks.

What I want to focus on instead is the potential for learning from Pope Francis in the area of cultural engagement with an emphasis on Evangelical Protestants. I am myself an Anglican, who underwent an evangelical conversion at university that brought the Faith to life, and I teach at a college in the evangelical tradition.

Protestants' approaches to cultural engagement vary widely, as you know. Anabaptists confine their engagement to service and to critical-prophetic pronouncements on politics and government, their historically and theologically formed convictions on the powers and principalities confirming their

separation from the world. Lutherans emphasize the realist tradition of the two kingdoms, Augustine's *Cities of God and Man*, negotiating the two by appeals to prudence. The Reformed traditions stress cultural engagement as central to Christian witness—the neo-Calvinist tradition forged by Abraham Kuyper, for example, complements and parallels Catholic social thought since *Rerum Novarum*.

Evangelical Christians hover between these, displaying apolitical, sometimes separatist, instincts for the most part, punctuated by periodic urgent attempts to recover the culture for Christ or to stem the worst effects of trends of secularization. This gets them into various kinds of hot water, for which James Davison Hunter aptly appropriated the term “culture wars” some two decades back. It's that hot water Francis has shown an aptitude to cool. For his part, James Hunter has called for a posture of *faithful presence* in response to what he sees as the failed cultural reform strategy of the Religious Right. But I don't see in Francis the kind of passivity that this term implies as a remedy for over-reaching social and political initiatives—instead, I see him bringing a confident but thoughtful reading of church and culture to bear, coupled with certain, good, probably natural, instincts, for engaging his hearers.

Writing back in 2013, I observed that the Pope had managed to propel the full scope of the Church's mission to center stage^[ii]—and this at a time when that mission was (indeed remains) vulnerable to capture by a few hot button issues. He has acknowledged and challenged a diminished view of the Church as focused exclusively on issues of the culture war. His actions and words do not simply push those issues into the background, however, and still less do they change doctrine. But they remind Catholics and by extension other Christians that there is more to the Christian message than the reiteration of doctrine, however important that doctrine remains. The body of Christ is called to preach the good news of our Hope in Christ to the poor, and to bring the many faces of care to a hurting world.

If I'm seeing this rightly, Pope Francis possesses an ability to change the subject without changing his mind, something Evangelicals could learn from, given their high sensitivity to any appearance of backtracking, of retreat, or of surrender in the context of the Christian witness they are called to. Evangelicals often frame cultural engagement somewhat awkwardly by virtue of, well, one of their virtues. That is the desire to have people meet Jesus Christ. But this sometimes presents them with a strategic dilemma to which the Catholic Church may not be prey—whether this or that act of service helps win people to Christ or may instead draw resources away from that core objective. A similar virtue of standing up for the truth also tests strategic competence, especially as what they see as absolute Christian standards for marriage, family and religious liberty, face the new absolutism of the American liberal tradition. Many an evangelical leader has displayed a kind of tunnel vision here—seeking to stand for the Truth, he or she risks shrinking the mission of the Church to one or two commandments or worse one or two Republican policy positions, and few of them have found a way to stand firm on these matters and yet display to the wider world the grace of God and the invitation to respond to the suffering love of Christ. Evangelicals need to renew a theology of encounter, to borrow from this morning's talk.

It's here, as a matter of how to conduct themselves, that Protestants in general, Evangelicals in particular, could learn a second lesson from the Pope. This is his essential simplicity, his gentleness in engaging people. In a *Boston Globe* interview, Cardinal O'Malley put this very well when he observed, “The word [Pope Francis] uses over and over again is ‘tenderness’ — so often, he talks about our need to take care of each other, that we have responsibility for each other... In a world that's grown so individualistic and so polarized, his message is the antidote to that.”^[iii] Examples are legion and the media have picked up on them. The emphasis conveyed is the Christian life as something to be lived as well as believed, a precious resource for navigating a hurt and often dangerous world.

Here, Evangelical Protestants may not need to divert their rightful attention to seeking God's guidance, or as they sometimes say, God's will for my life—notwithstanding its individualistic overtones. What they may need to do better is to place alongside it that larger sense of being under the grace of God in the

messy business that life is. It doesn't hurt that when Pope Francis speaks in simple terms about having faith and trusting in God that, for outside observers, his words de-institutionalize the Catholic Church, let alone the Vatican bureaucracy, or at least distance him from that bureaucracy or that it makes him appear more accessible than either of his predecessors. One has only to think of how much Christian doctrine is packed into his washing the feet of prisoners, for example—it's so very Franciscan: Preach the gospel and if necessary, use words.

At this point, I'm sure many a Catholic could be muttering, yes, please, use even *fewer* words, in response to some of the Pope's off-the-cuff remarks, such as the infamous, "Who am I to judge?" regarding same-sex attraction, that was so predictably taken out of context by the secular media. But in anticipation of this sort of objection to Francis as a role model, I would insist that he has by now fully contextualized his off-the-cuff remarks with his steady commitments to preaching the gospel, caring for the poor, upholding the unborn as precious in the sight of God, affirming the centrality of Christian marriage, and so forth.

On economics, surely, few can take him as a born-again Marxist. And as for yesterday's encyclical on the environment this, too, will not mark him out to be the second coming of Al Gore! Regarding *Laudato Si*, I wanted to say that two things struck me. First a simple note was sounded—obvious, what you'd expect a Christian leader to say, perhaps—that "nothing in this world is indifferent to us"—in other words that everything is a proper object of our care, of our stewardly responsibility as beings made in the image of God. Running through the encyclical (I skimmed it) is the implied theme of refocusing on what the environment is for, just as we might ask, what's an economy for, what is a family for, and so on. The critique of acquisition and consumption follows naturally such a moral refocusing and the Pope calls us to take action together in line with our moral responsibility as stewards. It also struck me that Pope Francis' appeal for urgent, concerted and global action rings true because that's how he has framed almost everything he's written. He speaks and writes to Catholics first, of course, but then to Christians more widely and to people of goodwill everywhere, so his framing of climate crisis in these universal terms emanates from his already established "sweet spot" as a communicator, not from the obligatory formulas of globalization.

And last, Protestants might learn something from the Pope's Latin American background. A somewhat dismissive article from *Christianity Today* last year declared, "Sorry Pope Francis: Protestants are converting Catholics across Latin America."^[iv] And the statistics are fascinating: Latin American Protestants are predominantly converts whose families were Catholic; and yes, their views on core issues are strikingly at odds with their Catholic counterparts. This is nowhere more visible than in views on addressing poverty. While Catholics turn emphatically to charitable work as remedy, an almost equally strong Protestant response is to bring the poor and needy to Christ. Survey respondents report that Protestant churches reached out to them—unquestionably, Catholics across Latin America, who carry much baggage from their sheer historical influence in the region, have much they could learn about growing churches from their Protestant counterparts.

Even so, Pope Francis has negotiated this difficult political, religious and bureaucratic terrain in his native Argentina, and has done so without resentment towards those who are finding Christ in Pentecostal churches. Far from it, he reaches out to them and finds common cause where he can. And there's more. Ross Douthat has noted the importance that attaches to the Latin American setting for better understanding Francis (and of course we heard a very full account of that this morning, too). Where John Paul and Benedict witnessed Marxists sending Catholics to the Gulag, reactionary dictators in the Dirty War were murdering Latin America's Marxists while a complicit Church stood by.^[v] What we see here is the importance of steady, faithful adherence to the church in ways that keep the gospel as the top priority and level criticism at the theological and political hierarchy when events call for it. Only in this way can the good news be free from ideological capture as God's gift to human beings rich and poor. Crisis emerges predictably in all human institutions, however unpredictable each one may be

individually. What is vital is to adhere to the mission. So the Francis who takes on the Vatican hierarchy, and symbolizes the Church's core location by living in a modest apartment rather than a palace, articulates a critical loyalty that is good for the Church and the gospel alike. Protestants, with their sorry history of schism over disagreements large and small, always need help to discern the difference between departing out of obedience to God, and succumbing to the temptations of getting control and asking God to bless it.

Let me reiterate my appreciation for the wisdom Francis has displayed in resetting priorities that for many Protestants have remained trapped in those of the culture wars. As Peter Wehner put it, contrasting the Pope's approach with Franklin Graham's, "Pope Francis ... understands that Jesus' main mission was to persuade a world in need of God's love and mercy. If the pontiff speaks of the church primarily as a field hospital," he wrote, "Mr. Graham sees it as a sentencing court."^[vi] Cultural engagement can be costly, but just because you pay a high price doesn't mean that you chose the right strategy.

In closing Ulrich Lehner, writing in *First Things*, identified six axioms of the Francis papacy, drawn from the writings of St. Francis de Sales, which sum up for me what Evangelical Protestants could do well to emulate: Reform is central; simplicity trumps polemics; leaders should be gentle; marriage is a Christian vocation; engagement with media is useful; and last, one must keep a sense of mission, without which the church will die.^[vii] Evangelicals to be sure do not fail on all of these but it is important that they keep all of them together in a lively tension. †

^[i] David Kinnaman, "What Do Protestants Think of Pope Francis?" March 18, 2014, www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/660-what-do-protestants-think-of-pope-francis#

^[ii] "A Papal Antidote for Our Doctrinaire Politics?" *Capital Commentary*, Washington, D.C., Center for Public Justice, November 15, 2013.

^[iii] Lisa Wangsness, "Cardinal O'Malley stresses work for the poor," *Boston Globe*, November 12, 2013.

^[iv] Morgan Lee, *Christianity Today*, November 13, 2014.

^[v] Ross Douthat, "Will Pope Francis Break the Church?" *The Atlantic*, May 2015 www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/05/will-pope-francis-break-the-church/389516/

^[vi] Peter Wehner, "Why Evangelicals Should Love the Pope," *New York Times Sunday Review*, April 4, 2015

^[vii] Ulrich Lehner, "A Fourth Francis: Reform for a Self-Content Church," *First Things*, February 1, 2015.