A classroom's crucible for evangelical ideas

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*In our "Reflections From the Classroom" series, seasoned teachers talk about their experiences walking with students and guiding their learning.*

“Is there a back door out of hell?” I asked the students seated across the table from me. The question hung there for a minute as they considered it. If they said yes, what would that mean about how they had always thought about hell? If they said no, what would that mean about how they had always thought about God?

In fall 2014, I had the opportunity to teach a class called Contemporary Religious Thought. Although the title says “religious,” the course is meant to be an examination of contemporary evangelicalism. I only had three students enroll. But considering who the three students were, I knew there would be good discussion.

I decided to spend the first few weeks looking at the history of evangelicalism from the post-World War II period to the present. Then we would look at four authors and books and really get in depth in their thought, as well as analyzing their historical contexts. The books I chose were Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Philip Yancey’s *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Jeffrey McDonald’s *Thieves in the Temple*, and Rob Bell’s *Love Wins*. Since Faulkner University, where I teach, is a confessional school, we would also weigh the books’ worth theologically. Looking back, I wish I had been more diverse in my selection of authors. But I was trying to address specific issues within evangelical thought: social activism, the difficulty of grace, consumerism, and the rise of emergent evangelicalism.

These are issues that have faced evangelicals for many years. In the 19th century evangelicals created a variety of organizations to battle social ills. This “benevolent empire” consisted of groups interested in reforming society in various areas. In the 20th century, many of the more conservative heirs of these evangelicals—fundamentalists—turned away from this institutional approach to societal reformation, believing it was too connected to liberal theology. In more recent years, conservative evangelicals have joined progressive evangelicals and

others in action against poverty, global warming, disease, and other problems.

Similar trends have occurred around the question of grace. Although many 18th-century evangelicals were Calvinists who believed grace was only extended to select people, 19th-century evangelicals involved with revivalism turned more Arminian, at least in their rhetoric. Salvation was open to all who would receive God's gift. This trend continued in revivalism. Even though many revivalists might give lip service to limited atonement, they preached as though anyone could be saved. In recent years, though, some have sought to reclaim the Reformed heritage and re-emphasize teachings such as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

But grace also becomes a troubling concept for evangelicals in thinking about how to be gracious to those outside their fold. Yancey tells the story of his friend Mel White, a ghostwriter for many evangelical celebrities. White came out as gay and was suddenly ostracized by the evangelical fold. In one chapter Yancey struggles between evangelical condemnation of homosexuality and his friendship with White. Contemporary evangelicals—especially those among the millennial generation—find themselves asking the same kinds of questions about same-sex marriage.

Similar trajectories could be plotted out with the other topics we covered. Evangelicalism has always been a movement in flux. It has changed, adjusted, and sometimes accommodated to cultural forces. The students in my class struggled with these issues, attempting to discover for themselves what they thought was the appropriate way to conceptualize such challenges. In the end, I think this struggle was the most useful part of the class.

Each of the students had to engage the material. They had to participate, and it would be obvious if someone was unprepared. This meant that they had to reflect on topics and viewpoints they had not encountered or considered. The classroom became a crucible for testing these subjects in ways they would not have on their own. Instead of making hasty responses, they had to think about the consequences of accepting specific positions. It was a valuable experience for me, and I hope it was profitable for them as well.

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