

*Al Eterno Entusiasmo*

*Faith, Enthusiasm, and Botany*

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"And I attribute that to your faith", said my chairman. My enthusiasm for plants and botanical research linked to my faith? I fumbled some hasty response attributing this to a personality trait more than my Christian faith. Dan knew my belief system and he also knew my often irrational excitement about plants. According to him, this enthusiasm had not wavered in the almost quarter century we have been colleagues. Unlike myself, Dan saw a link between my botanical zeal and my Christian faith.

At a botanical symposium in Cordoba, Spain, just a few weeks earlier, I was presented with the *Al eterno entusiasmo* award. Honored by the recognition, I had failed to see any interplay between enthusiasm and faith.

I did not appreciate Dan's comment nor did I see its connection with the Cordoba award until I read the editorial in an issue of *Perspectives in Science and Christian Faith* (48/2:73) titled, "Are evangelical scientists practical atheists?" In it, we were challenged to consider "...the question of how ...Christian faith plays a role in...scientific work".

OK, I confess. Until recently I have been operating as a practical atheist. As Mark Noll painfully reminded us in "Scandal", many evangelicals are good, even notable, scientists but few explore the link between their faith and their practice of science. Reasons for that hiatus are numerous and would be a worthwhile study on their own. Opposition to a personal God, embarrassment by well meaning but often ignorant supporters of a "young earth", and a pervasive mechanistic philosophy are some of the reasons. We all bring our tenets of belief into our science

consciously or unconsciously. For me, one outcome of this belief system is enthusiasm.

Embarrassed that I had never considered it before caused me to ponder the question carefully, "What is the link between faith and enthusiasm?" At its simplest, I believe my unabashed enthusiasm for plants is based on the fact that I know, really know in my heart of hearts, that these wonderful organisms have been designed by a skillful Creator! And I know That Creator in the Person of Jesus Christ! He has given me the opportunity to spend a career engaged with plants, studying their beauty, diversity, and utility.

Much of my research has been in Africa on a diversity of parasitic angiosperms, plants that form attachments to host plants and from them derive water and/or nutrition. These plant cannibals include the bizarre *Hydnora* along the Nile in Sudan that is totally subterranean except for flowers that break through the cracked clay. I am investigating the witchweeds of the genus *Striga* that are some of the most refractory problems in subsistence agriculture in the African Sahel. Even after two decades, I am still intrigued by their parasitic behavior. With a group of eager students we are working with an engaging group of furtive fern allies, *Isoetes*, abundant in parts of the Southeastern United States, yet so poorly known that new species are being discovered. The variety of form, function, and human use plants amazes me! There is something intrinsically interesting in each plant, population, and community. And behind it all I see the Creator.

Are there biblical patterns for a deep appreciation of plants? Certainly. Although not one of the best known Bible characters, one of my heroes is Jotham. Like myself, he lectured on Mount Gerazim. He was addressing a political question, I was a Fulbright Professor at An Najah

National University located on the same mountain. In Judges 9 in a few verses Jotham outlines the salient features of important plants. To do this, Jotham had to have a knowledge of plants, such a working knowledge that he could use it in a political entreaty.

The greatest student of natural history in the Bible is Solomon. He had a profound appreciation of plants, perhaps inherited from his shepherd father who wrote worshipful psalms about creation. More plants are mentioned in connection with Solomon than anywhere else in the Bible. "He [Solomon] described plant life, from the Cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall" (I Kings 4:33). The breadth of Solomon's interest belies an enthusiasm for plants.

The Lord Jesus also spoke about plants. On one occasion He linked them with Solomon. In Luke 12: 27, Jesus says that one of the common "lilies" (likely *Anemone coronaria*) was more resplendent than Solomon in ALL his glory! And Solomon was the most glorious king recorded in all of Scripture! Doesn't this imply an appreciation and enthusiasm for this strikingly beautiful but common wildflower?

Ultimately, enthusiasm for the creation leads to worship of the Creator. This is the paramount "eterno entusiasmo"! I am thankful to have been reminded of this and jolted into considering the connection between my faith and my practice of science.

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