

Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Moving from Moral to *Spiritual* Formation

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A. Introduction:

- Dedicated believers and those in the ministry: 1) have a great desire to grow and be used of God yet 2) often struggle with a secret/great burden of guilt and shame that they are not as mature as they should be, that their lives are dry and withered at times. They wonder “Where are the rivers of living water” and “Why do I struggle so with growth.”
- What they may not know is that they may be in the grips of a great temptation (1) to despair, tune out, accept spirituality of “dry bone” (the “Gentle Christian”), (2) to act out immorally and (3) (particularly for the leader) the **Moral Temptation**: the attempt of the hidden heart (not conscious) to try to perfect oneself in the power of the self, the attempt to use formation, the spiritual disciplines, being good etc, to relieve the burden of spiritual failure, lack of love and the guilt and shame that results. To try to relieve that burden that Christ alone can relieve.

B. My Thesis or Concern for those believers struggling in their faith:

1. That no amount of effort can ever relieve them of their burden of shame and guilt except Christ.
 2. That the Christian life is not fundamentally about being moral in itself or being a “good boy or girl.” It is not fundamentally about obedience to a set of principles, it is not most deeply about character or about imitation of Christ as a model external to my soul. It is not fundamentally about doing spiritual disciplines.
- This life of *moralism*, in fact, is what we are saved from: a life of trying to be good and pleasing to God in the power of the self as a way to deal with our guilt and shame.
 - Rather, the Christian life and spiritual formation are about *denouncing* the moralistic life as a way to find happiness and please God, though it may have been the way as a beginner in the faith. However, there is a time to grow up
 - So the Christian life is about a certain kind of **obedience** and **effort** of opening the heart to a relationship. It’s about a participation in the Vine, a dependence upon the indwelling Spirit, the need to abide in Christ. This is our obedience, this is what the disciplines are about.
 - I don’t want to be a good boy any more, I don’t want to fix myself – I can’t fix myself- I want to learn to give up on the project and open more deeply to Christ’s work and the Work of the Spirit in my deep.
 - But I am still daily tempted by “moral formation”: Paul the Apostle know we would be tempted by this:

Galatians 3:1-3 “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit (a relationship by faith) are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

First Question: Why on earth would a Christian or anyone be tempted to be moral – isn't the temptation to be immoral?

Answer is simple: morality or being good is probably the most common human solution and seemingly effective way to avoid dealing with the problem of sin and guilt before God.

1. We see at the very beginning in Adam and Eve, the human answer to sin and guilt was to
 - (a) cover shame and badness (Gen. 3:7) and

(b) hide from guilt and God and blame others

2. For the Christian, the flesh habits of the heart die hard and come into the faith. Thus the believer can be tempted to use the regimens of formation and spiritual disciplines unconsciously as a way to

(a) cover deep feeling of shame over spiritual failures by trying to be good, by regimens of formation and

(b) to hide from feelings of failure and guilt by repression of the truth of oneself and unwillingness to experience one's failure

Second Question: How do you know whether you are a Christian moralist, that you are susceptible to moral temptation?

Two Tests:

- (1) Regarding guilt: whenever you are convicted by sin and your first and abiding response to conscience and guilt is “I will do better” then you know you are a moralist, you know you are tempted to fix yourself by your own effort.

- (2) Second Test: Whenever awareness of failure, sin and guilt result in overwhelming and abiding feelings of frustration, sense of failure, self rejection so that one does not want to feel these things and represses them, then you know you struggle with being a moralist.

Third Question: How did we get this way, how did we become Christian moralists?

1. The first and primary explanation: Habits of the Heart from Original Sin
2. Added to this problem: Most of us were parented to be moralists. Two ways:
 - (a) Parenting by Guilt: When the child does bad, the parent cannot endure the bad of the child and becomes condemning, punitive and splits off relationally from the child. This is the rejecting parent who cannot tolerate, love, discipline and correct the child in their bad.
 - (b) Parenting by Shame: when the child does bad, the parents are unable to help the child enter more deeply into experiencing their badness in the context of parental love and discipline. Rather, the parent merely moves the child into covering their bad by being good.

Fourth Question: How can we resist this temptation to be a Christian moralist and learn to depend upon the Cross and Spirit?

- By Opening the heart to the reality of the *Cross* (our Justification by Faith) and the *Spirit* (our Regeneration and the Filling by the Spirit)

Three Prayers of Intentions:

1. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my guilt in the power of the self, to be afraid of seeing myself as I really am, to hide from seeing my badness, sin and failure. I do not want hide anymore from my guilt. I want to come out into the open with you who forgive me entirely.

2. Lord, I no longer want to deal with my shame in the power of my self. I do not want to fix myself anymore, to grow myself, to cover my badness with good works, with regimens of formation. I want Christ's righteousness to be my covering. I want to learn to obey and engage in formation in the light of my badness and sin, not as a cover of my sin.

3. Lord, I no longer want to live the Christian life alone, in the power of myself. I want You, to depend upon you, to be filled with Your Spirit, to abide in the Vine.

Fifth Question: What will happen to me, my spiritual life, if I cannot resist the moral temptation.

1. First, Christ will be of no benefit to you in the spiritual life.

Galatians 5:1-3 "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you."

2. Second, we will become more like a Martha than a Mary- you will slowly dry up and wither in your service and attempts to be good. Luke 10:38ff.

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1. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding the degree to which you are tempted by moral formation, to use obedience and spirituality to cover your shame or hide from personal guilt. Enter into this deeply with the Lord to experience the truth as to what degree this permeates your life. Be not afraid, for He knows and accepts you in Christ.

15 minutes

2. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding the degree to which you struggle with "neurotic guilt," that is, the degree to which your first and abiding response to personal awareness of sin are as follows:

- a. "I will do better" -- rather than opening more deeply to forgiveness/Cross, or
- b. General frustration and self-condemnation -- rather than allowing awareness of sin to be a door into love and a meaningful conversation with the Lord.

Enter into this deeply with the Lord to experience the truth as to what degree this permeates your life.

15 minutes

3. Read Luke 10:38-42. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding the degree to which you are a Martha and/or a Mary as discussed in the lecture and from the gospel account. Open to God in the truth of this, for He loves you.

15 minutes

4. Open your heart deeply to the reality of the Cross and the Spirit. Meditate on the following Scriptures and pray the following prayers of intention for several minutes each.

a. Read II Cor. 12:9-10. *Pray:* "Lord, I no longer want to deal with my guilt in the power of my self, to hide from the truth of myself. I wish to come into the open with you about the truth of myself. I want to open to you in weakness, in my neediness so that I may depend upon Christ and the Cross to deal with my guilt. Teach me about this."

b. Read Phil. 3:7-10. *Pray:* "Lord, I no longer want to deal with my shame in the power of myself, to cover my sin and badness by being good. I no longer want a righteousness of my own derived from obeying the law but that which is through faith in Christ. Teach me about this."

c. Read John 15:5. *Pray:* "Lord, I no longer want to live my life alone in the power of the self. I want to learn to depend upon your Spirit, to be filled with your Spirit. Teach me about this."

Open your heart in prayer to whether these prayers really are the desire of your heart. If so, open to this. If not, then talk with God about what really is going in your heart.

30 minutes

5. If a spiritual friend is doing this prayer project as well, share together what each has learned and what happened in the prayer time. After each shares, pray for one another regarding what you heard the other share.

20 minutes

Moving From Moral to Spiritual Formation: Redirecting the Heart in the New Covenant

John Coe

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One of my greatest concerns for our graduate students in the Institute for Spiritual Formation is that coursework intended to open the heart to the depths of sin and the ongoing need for Christ will, instead, move them to use spiritual disciplines as a cover for shame and guilt. Since the Fall, there has been a great temptation to respond to sin by covering moral failure with a regimen of character formation and good works done in the flesh. Unfortunately, these pre-conversion habits of the heart can enter *unconsciously* into the Christian life, distorting *spiritual* formation into a moral self-help program whereby the believer attempts to please God by modeling Christ's character and meeting intimacy needs with God apart from openness to the Cross and the Spirit. This lapse into "moralism" or religious "moral formation" is present in any attempt to perfect oneself in the power of the flesh. For some this is a heavy yoke leading to moral or spiritual frustration. For others it is simply fuel for the will in natural fortitude to sustain this moralism. In any case, no believer would consciously affirm or do this, but fleshly habits of the heart die hard, and remain alive in our behavior.

The corrective to moralism in the Christian life is to relentlessly ground one's human efforts and the formational elements of spiritual formation *experientially* and *theoretically* in the central salvific realities and doctrines of the faith, i.e., in Christ's loving and finished work of dealing with sin on the Cross and the new birth experience by the Spirit. This is not to deny the formational and human elements in growth.

However, it is to understand their true meaning in light of the *loving Divine initiative* in salvation. I want to explore this moralistic temptation in our spiritual lives as well its corrective in light of a New Covenant approach to spiritual formation grounded in the Cross and Spirit.

The Temptation of Moral Formation

At first it appears counterintuitive that Christians, having begun their faith in the Spirit, would be tempted to perfect themselves in the power of the flesh. This heresy, encouraged by the Judaizers in Paul's day (Gal. 3:1-3), certainly has no relevance to the contemporary church or those of us in the spiritual formation movement. How could moralism tempt the believer? The answer is simple. Moral formation is the most common and "seemingly" effective human solution to the problem of sin without having to become aware of and deal with it before God. From Adam and Eve on, the human default of persons born in original sin has been to form a *human* answer to the problem of sin by covering shame (Gen. 3:7), hiding from guilt (Gen. 3:8), and filling the empty soul with something other than God in idolatry (Is. 44:14-20). This human propensity to repress awareness of sin can take the form of violence and vice but more often appears in moral fortitude and character formation as a *cover* of sin.

Although both vice and moralism represent sinful ways to live apart from God, moralism is more in harmony with the way God created human nature and, thus, reaps the benefits of natural goods (e.g., good character, healthier families, friendships, a sense of well being etc.). This explains why unbelievers often choose some kind of moralism over a life of pure vice. Furthermore, moralism provides a subtle way to appease

conscience and cover the true state of the heart, making it a deeper form of self-deception than vice. From the elaborate ethical musings of Aristotle to the moral regimen of the Roman Stoics to the decent upright living of the common man, the natural moral impulse represents the most pervasive means to cover original sin and find happiness apart from God.

It becomes clear, then, why the believer can be tempted by moralism. After conversion, the flesh-habits of the fallen heart, habituated in moral autonomy, become mixed into the believer's motivations in sanctification and spiritual formation. This should be expected, given that the pre-conversion habits of the heart are not yet completely transformed by becoming a new creature in Christ. This will take time as the person opens the heart to the transforming work of the Spirit. The new believer may be tempted to use the spiritual disciplines to perfect him- or herself in the flesh whenever shame, guilt and autonomy of the heart are not honestly dealt with in light of the work of Christ. Even prayer, worship, acts of service etc. can unintentionally be used to keep away painful self-awareness of sin and moral failure in much the same way as the unbeliever employs moral formation. In this case, acts of apparent obedience and practicing spiritual disciplines can become unconscious means to:

- (1) cover deep residual feelings of shame by trying to be good or "spiritual" in the power of the flesh, rather than considering this as rubbish in light of being in Christ's righteousness (Phil. 3:9);
- (2) hide from feelings of guilt by creating and engaging in a regimen of spiritual disciplines to appease conscience as a moral tutor rather than allow conscience to

show ourselves as moral failures to lead us to a deeper experience of the forgiveness we have in Christ (Gal.3:24); and

- (3) fill the human heart with *feelings* of religious intimacy and consolation as a substitute for the character-bearing fruit of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22, Eph. 5:18).

This temptation is *unconscious* in the sense that although we sincerely intend to live with open hearts to the reality of our sin, the Cross and the Spirit, we too easily fall prey to that part of the *hidden* heart that is still habituated by the old manner of life of hiding and covering. Although it is not evident in our *conscious* theology and intentions, it is implicit in our actions. This moralism is evident in our prolonged sense of frustration, feelings of failure and self-rejection when we become aware of sin. The problem only worsens when we *unconsciously* cover this frustration by using spiritual disciplines and acts of service to feel like “a good boy or girl” to satisfy or lessen guilt feelings. *Whenever awareness of sin results only in spiritual frustration or the need to fix ourselves, we have missed its meaning.* Awareness of sin and failure is a door to a heartfelt conversation with our loving and gracious God, a reminder that we cannot fix ourselves but that only Christ can atone for sin. As was true of our initial repentance at conversion, so too does real growth involve entering deeply into the truth of our sin, our need for Jesus and His work on the Cross and new life in His Spirit, and *only on that basis* to open the heart to a robust regimen of spiritual formation. However, the deceit of moral formation is so subtle and pernicious, for it looks so much like formation in the Spirit but gives no nourishment to the soul. Paul warned the Colossians of this temptation in terms of the Judeo-Gnostic heresy of fleshly, religious moral formation,

which has “the *appearance* of religion in self-made religion and self-made abasement and severe treatment of the body but [is] of no value against fleshy indulgence” (Col. 3:23, my italics). Moralistic formation looks good, feels bad and doesn’t work! Thank God for his loving patience in teaching us to surrender the works of natural fortitude to Christ who alone takes away guilt and covers shame.

The Move to Spiritual Formation

Our efforts in spiritual formation must be clearly grounded in the New Covenant reality of the Cross and Spirit. This is the only way to avoid moralism and, ultimately, frustration and despair in the life of the believer. In particular, (1) the *forensic* elements of justification in salvation, i.e., God’s declarative actions for the sake of His people based upon Christ’s work and (2) the Spirit’s work in regeneration, are the interpretive context for the *transformational* elements of sanctification. These forensic and salvific elements are the bedrock *realities* making possible the *reality* of the transformational life of faith and abiding in Christ by the Spirit. The implications for living out a life based upon these realities of the Cross and new-birth experience by the Spirit cannot be more dramatic.

Justification by Faith regarding Guilt

In the first place, opening the heart deeply in the Spirit to the reality of our being justified by faith is the only cure for *guilt* before God. The fact that our sins have been imputed to Christ in His passive obedience to the Father on the Cross results in there being no condemnation from God towards the believer (Rom. 5:9, 8:1, 2 Cor. 5:21). By opening

the heart to experience this reality in the Spirit, the believer has every reason to come out of hiding from sin, no longer to be afraid of seeing oneself honestly in the light of God's constant acceptance, and of finding in confession and honest self-awareness a door to deeper dependence on God and His grace.

Justification by Faith regarding Shame

Secondly, opening the heart in the Spirit to the reality of our justification is the only cure for *shame* before God. The fact that Christ's "alien" righteousness, a righteousness that is His, has been imputed to the believer on the basis of His active obedience to the Father while on earth implies that God relates to the believer no longer as a criminal but as "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:21, Phil. 3:9). By opening the heart in the Spirit to this reality, the Christian has no need to respond to sin in despair, excessive frustration and disgust or attempt to cover it by being good to please God, as in moralism. If shame results only in frustration or working harder to fix the self, then we have not allowed awareness of sin to take its course. A deep knowledge of personal sin and failure is intended to be a daily guide and friend, opening us to our neediness, to the reality that we cannot fix ourselves and to gratitude for Christ's imputed righteousness that alone covers sin. Only this forensic reality, to which the Spirit bears witness to the human heart, can open us to a true obedience in humility and dependence upon Spirit. This is the only ground for doing spiritual disciplines that guards us from moralism.

Regeneration by the Holy Spirit regarding Spiritual Death

Although persons are born in a state of spiritual death, cut off from the covenantal love of God, the Spirit in the heart of the believer attaches them to God through the reality of the New Covenant and the new birth experience. Regeneration forms the ground for all subsequent dependence upon and filling of the Spirit in sanctification and is itself grounded in the forensic work of God in Justification. True spirituality does not consist in the natural modeling of Christ's character by doing spiritual disciplines in the power of human autonomy and fortitude. Rather, it is by *participation* in this new life of the indwelling Spirit of Christ begun in Regeneration on the basis of the Cross that we learn to do the spiritual disciplines in humility and dependence upon Him and not our own efforts. Thus, the transformational life in the Spirit is not understood primarily along the lines of a *character formational* model like that of Aristotle and the Stoics. Instead, the spiritual life is fundamentally a *salvific* model of growth in the sense that all true moral and character development *is on the basis of Christ's justifying work on the Cross and His work in the heart of the believer by the Spirit*. We certainly participate in this work, as a sanctifying synergism of the human person in conjunction with God. Nevertheless—and this cannot be stressed enough—all true, fruit-bearing obedience and transformation is *based on* and *motivated by* God's prior salvific work on behalf of the believer.

Conclusion

Spiritual formation is first and foremost a salvific model of growth that grounds all attempts to theoretically develop and live out the robust transformational elements of

formation. From beginning to end, true spirituality is founded upon the forensic realities of the Cross in the context of new life in the Spirit. The realities begun in salvation—the repentant heart motivated by the Spirit, clinging to Christ alone as sin bearer, being opened to His righteousness as the ground for new life dependent on the Spirit—these are the same realities that only deepen in sanctification. The cry of my soul at conversion in high school thirty years ago has only deepened as the joyful refrain of my heart today:

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress, Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly, Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

O, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me *daily* hide myself in Thee. Amen.

Why We Sin When We Know So Much: Healing the Hidden Heart by the Spirit

Musings on Calvin's View of the Double Knowledge

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Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

John Calvin

"I desire to know God and the soul." "Nothing more?" "Nothing whatever."

Augustine

Nothing is more helpful to reduce pride than the actual experience of self-knowledge. If we are discouraged by it, we have misunderstood its meaning.

Thomas Keating

A. Introduction:

Why is spiritual change sometime so difficult and slow? How is it that a believer can know so much truth & desire the good and yet so deeply struggle with sin, with being loving, with obedience etc.

The Problem:

The Incontinent Person: Knows the good, desires good, chooses good but fails to do the good.

The Continent Person: Knows the good, desires good, chooses good, does the good with no joy

The Virtuous Person: Knows the good, desires good, chooses good, does the good with joy.

B. The Christian Faith is foremost about the heart

Mk. 12:29: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with your whole heart"

Prov. 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart"

I Sam 16:6-7 God looks not at the outward like most men but at the heart.

I Tim. 1:5: the goal of all instruction is love from a pure heart

1. "Heart" is used for the real or core person: Nexus of Will, Affect and Intellect

Prov. 27:19 "As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man."

I Pet. 3:3-4 Women are not to adorn the outward only but "the hidden person of the heart"

Lk. 16:15 Pharisees looked good on the outside but "God knows their hearts."

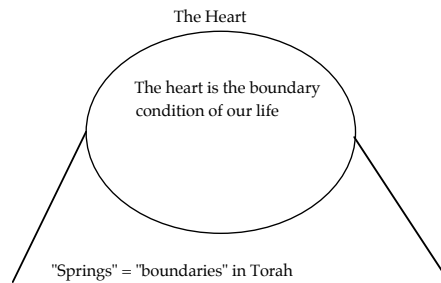
Prov. 23:7-8 Heart is what he really thinks and is about: "As a man thinks in his heart, so he is."

2. The heart directs our life: What is in the heart determines our whole of life

Prov. 4:23 "Guard over your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life."

a. Externally:

b. Internally:



Principles:

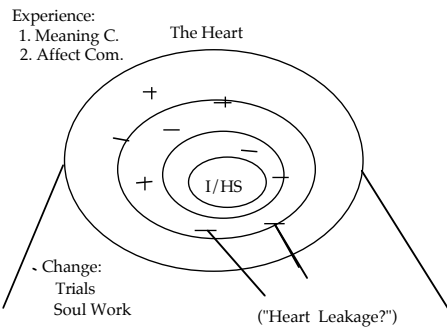
1. In general, what comes out of one's life is not by accident but is already in the heart.
2. The degree to which one is surprised by what comes out of one is the degree which one does not know his heart.

C. Why is the heart is so impregnable (as a fortress) and slow to change? (Bible's view of the Hidden Heart or Unconscious heart)

Jer. 17:9-10: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick, who can understand it. I, the Lord, search the heart"

Prov. 16:2 we think we are clean but God alone knows and weighs inner person

Prov. 14:13 "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, And the end of joy may be grief."



D. Things to Know about a Biblical Understanding of the Hidden Heart (Bible's view of the "Unconscious"):

1. There is always more going on in the hidden heart than what is on the surface. This explains why we often do not know why we do what we do and the contents of our heart – what we really think. Our heart's motives are often hidden.
2. The degree to which we have a hidden heart of negative beliefs and desires that have not been dealt with is the degree to which we are not in control of that material and it can control us.

3. Thus, most Christians do not intend to sin; rather, they just leak. This leaking of sins of the heart does not excuse the believer from responsibility, for one is as responsible for his character as much as intended actions, despite the complex manner in which character is formed.
4. This “leaking” is all about warring beliefs and desires in the heart. This explains for why we so often act against our better intentions, why we sin when we know so much.
5. Thus, most sins are not intentions of the moment but are merely the tip of the habitual iceberg where beneath the surface is perhaps a glacier of sin and vice that has deep relational and historical roots.
6. Thus, beware of “prayers of magic” or avoidance to have God take away sins; be open to letting God teach you in humility about these.
7. No amount of (a) surface correcting of deep sinful beliefs (or overlaying the beliefs by the truth alone) or (b) immediate behavioral change in conformity to the Word will transform the heart or resolve or alter the deep beliefs and desire behind the sins of the heart (II Cor. 3:4ff).

E. How Does God Open the Heart and Begin the Process of Change-transformation:

Someone is going to have to help open the heart (1) to bring out the heart, (2) to apply love and truth to the heart and (3) to begin to assist the person in new habits of the heart. This involves both a

- Negative process of Formation (“Putting off” or Detachment): opening the heart to Biblical truth with others and with the Spirit in prayer to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ and expose idols of the heart (II Cor. 10:5) and
- Positive process of Formation (“Putting on” or Attachment): opening the heart to Biblical truth as well as the love and truth from others in the Body and the Indwelling Spirit who is able to penetrate into the heart in love to convince the believer to trust God that all one’s needs are met in God’s love.
- Practically speaking, transformation will involve:

1. The Word (Heb. 4:12)

2. Trials and "Thorns in the Flesh" (II Cor12: 7-10)

3. Opening to God's Sovereign Work of Transformation in all Circumstances (Romans 8:26ff)

4. Fellow Believers (Eph. 4:15)

Incarnational Knowing of the Heart (Opening the heart with a Soul Friend)

1. Know the other hears from the "Hidden Heart"
2. Provide others with a context of safety and acceptance:
3. Bring out the hidden heart: ask questions or articulate the heart for the other.
4. Speak truth and love into the heart: interpret defenses etc.

5. Prayer and Soul Work

Divine Knowing of the Heart (Opening the heart with God in Prayer)

God alone is the master Soul Surgeon ("Divine Therapist") and is in the business of exposing men's hearts and transforming them by love and truth. All the one-another passages are to model this (encourage, love, rebuke, help one another etc.). His goal is to make our heart His home.

Ps. 139:23-24 "Search me O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way."

1. God's Knowledge: God knows that we hear him, pray to him, hear his Word from the "Hidden Heart."
2. God's Acceptance: We are justified by faith; there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1).
3. God's Invitation: The Spirit invites the believer to fellowship with Him in the weaknesses of our heart (Rom. 8:26) that the power of Christ may be real (II Cor. 12:10).
4. God's Interpretation and Healing of the Hidden Heart: In the context of love and self-awareness, God wishes to speak the truth into the heart: to interpret our deep sinful beliefs motivating defenses and us and to lead us into a free life in Christ. etc.

F. The Result: A Broken and Open Heart (the beginning of the process of growth)

Ps. 51:15-17 God delights not in sacrifice but a broken and contrite heart

Joel 2:12-13 "return to me with all your heart, rend your heart and not your garments"

**Why We Sin When We Know So Much:
Healing the Hidden Heart by the Spirit
Intentionalizing Spiritual Formation through Soul Work**

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1. Take counsel in your own soul and with the Lord regarding 3 characterological sins or struggles you are experiencing. Enter into these deeply with the Lord to experience the truth as to what degree these permeate your life and affect others. Be not afraid, for He knows these already and accepts you.

15 minutes

2. Read Ps. 139 thoughtfully, paying particular attention to vs. 23-24. Ask the Lord to search your heart regarding these 3 characterological sins, to open you deeply to the knowledge that He has of your heart. Ask the Lord to “try” or test your heart, to show you the deep desires, feeling and beliefs that are driving those sins.

15 minutes

3. Read Romans 8:1 prayerfully. Allow the Lord to take you into your deep neediness and weakness in light of your understanding of those 3 characterological sins. Bring those sins and your weakness to the Lord and the cross, to once again open to the fact that “there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.”

15 minutes

4. Read Rom. 8:26-29 thoughtfully and prayerfully. Then open your heart to the Lord regarding something in your life that bothers you, that is a trial or a hassle. Allow yourself to see how this has affected you and the way in which you have responded to it. Now open deeply in prayer to discover and discern what God is doing in this, what *good* he intends for it in your growth.

15 minutes

5. If a spiritual friend is doing this prayer project as well, share together whatever one is comfortable sharing regarding those deep beliefs and feelings. Pray for one another regarding what was shared.

30 minutes

The Hidden Heart: Why We Still Sin When We Know So Much

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Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound
wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."
John Calvin

One of the great frustrations for pastor and parishioner alike is when the response to the Word of God in teaching or counseling is "I know those scriptures pastor, so what is wrong with me? Why do I still struggle with that same sin?" This is a significant situation and opportunity for the church, for it is both telling about *the complex nature of sin* in the Christian life and about *the complex process of transformation*. It is also telling about our training of pastors. Unpacking this situation reveals the following observations:

1. Most believers' sins of omission and commission are not conscious intentions of the will but are typically contrary to their better judgments and intentions, that is, they are in some sense against the their will and what they know to be good.
2. Thus, most Christians do not seem to intend to sin but rather "leak," a descriptive term for a habitual response to certain situations stemming from deep characterological sins or vices of the hidden heart that to some degree enslave the heart and for which the believer both is responsible and feels regret.

I do not have time in this brief examination to thoroughly argue for these observations. Rather, I will build upon them in order to develop some of the groundwork or contours for a theory of the nature of sin in the life of the believer and the process of transforming the heart. I do not intend to argue for or provide a thoroughgoing account of these matters but merely hint at what might be a productive research project. If time permits, I look forward to my audience's comments and criticisms for future investigation. If my suggestions are correct, it will be significant for a pastor to come to grips with the fact that (a) most of his parishioners do not intend to sin but do so from a hidden heart and (b) that no amount of quick correcting of sinful, irrational beliefs will alter the course of these vice habits. This is also significant for theologians, for perhaps our seminary training has room for developing an even more robust hamartiology regarding the complex dynamics of the sins of the heart and pneumatology regarding the complex process of transformation that would be helpful to the church. From this vantage point, the spiritual formation movement, with all its excesses and goods, is perhaps providing the church an opportunity in the history of doctrine to address these issues in a more thoughtful and exhaustive manner.

The fact that believers sin against their better intentions is borne out by both experience and Scripture. Most believers that I am around do not wake up in the morning intending to sin but, rather, the opposite: they hope and pray that they live for God and sin less. This is their conscious daily intention. We work on our sins – we memorize verses not to worry, to love our spouses, to not exasperate our children – we pray about these things – we might even see a wise counselor about them. But once in

the door of our homes, out comes our worries over finances, our anger towards our spouse, and impatience with our children's folly. Whence cometh sin?

The ancient pagans in Plato and Aristotle were also struck with this phenomenon of how we often act against our best intentions, which they termed *ακρασία*, a want of power, lack of self control or incontinence (by medical extension, a kind of moral bladder-control problem!). According to Aristotle, there were three types of experience that were not dominated by conscious intentions of vice:

1. Incontinence: The situation in which a person in some sense knows the good, desires the good, chooses the good but fails to do the good.
2. Continence: The situation in which a person knows the good, desires the good, chooses the good and does the good but with no joy.
3. Virtue: The situation in which the person knows the good, desires the good, chooses the good and does the good with joy.

We all know the experience of wanting to pray more, to love more, to not worry, to not be impatient and then, against our best wishes, do the opposite or resist but with great difficulty. In this case, *joy* is the operative word and the sign of full virtue – where the person loves, truly desires and “gets off on” doing the good. As the ancient pagans reflected on this problem of why someone would act against their desires and beliefs, they reasoned that *there must be another set of deep beliefs and desires which are hidden from simple consciousness but are in some way implicit in the deep habituated dynamics of the human soul and are triggered by certain human circumstances*. These deep beliefs and desires, upon being cued, control the behavior of the person against their better surface, conscious beliefs and desires, typically resulting in grief and regret.

Is something of this phenomenon of *ακρασία* discussed by the Greek pagans reflected in Scripture? On the surface, this seem to be evident in the standard Reformed interpretation (e.g. Charles Hodge, John Murray etc.) of Romans 7 regarding the struggle of the mature believer in which the good that he wishes he does not do but practices the very evil that he does not wish (Rom. 7:19). This is also apparently evident in Paul's discussion in Galatians in which the flesh sets its desires against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are in opposition to one another so that the believer cannot do the things that he pleases (Gal. 5:17). Of course there is much controversy over these text as to the precise nature of this struggle and to whom it applies (see, e.g., Moo's excellent discussion of Romans 7: 14-25 as being Paul's “pre-Christian situation, as a Jew who reverences the Mosaic law but finds that the power of sin is too strong to enable him to comply with the demands of that law . . .” (Moo, *Romans*, NICC, 465).

However, I would argue that the problem of *ακρασία* is evident with either interpretation and, interestingly, could even be predicted given Moo's interpretation of Romans 7. According to Moo, the believer no longer belongs to the old age of flesh (sin and death) but of the new age or realm of the Spirit (life and righteousness), and yet despite this still continues to sin. Thus, perhaps we can best make sense of the believer's experience of *ακρασία* on Moo's interpretation given two facts:

1. that the *power of sin has been broken* in the believer's life by his participation in the new eschatological realm of Spirit in the New Covenant resulting in new, Godly intentions of the heart (Rom. 8:9, 6:6, Jer.31: 31), coupled with

2. that we still live in an unperfected state in which we must continuously “put off” and resist the sinful habits of the heart that remain and plague the believer as the residue of the pre-converted dynamics of the heart habituated in the weakness of human autonomy that are carried into the Christian experience and have not as yet been transformed as instruments of righteousness (Eph. 4:22ff., Col. 3:8, Rom. 6:12ff).

The reality of the power of sin being broken at the core of the believer’s spirit or heart by being a new creation in the Spirit accounts for the new *intention* of heart by the Spirit to obey God’s law or will from the heart (Jer. 31:31). However, we still sin and must *resist* the inclination to act against this new intention of the will by the Spirit – even though it may not be a surface conscious intention to disobey. This tendency or inclination of the heart still resides within the self as the pre-converted *residue* of the old domination of σαρξ or the “old man” (τον παλαιον ανθρωπον, Eph. 4:22). Although the believer enjoys being in a new sphere of existence in Christ and is slowly being made new in reality into the image of Christ by the Spirit, the old residue of the Fall is still at work in the *recesses* of the heart and, as such, is often hidden from the believer’s more conscious renewed intentions by the Spirit. *Interestingly, this new inclination of heart by the Spirit may even put sin more at a distance from conscious awareness, which makes it feel unnatural to uncover. That is, the emphasis on the believer’s consciousness is to be aware of the good or God’s will and pursue it and not necessarily focus on the bad.* This is particularly evident in the new convert’s sometimes exuberant though mistaken, if not absurd, belief that his long-time sins of the past have been entirely rooted out at conversion. (Just ask his wife on that question!)

All of this is even more *complicated* by the fact that part of the pre-converted sinful strategies of dealing with sin were, in fact, *to not be aware of sin*, to deceive others and even oneself about the true state of one’s heart. As we will discuss, the sinful strategies of deception and self-deception of the heart evident from the first sin and inherent in original sin come right into the Christian life as a habit that obfuscates what is really driving sin from the deep. This is born out by the fact that most believers know little of what really drives their sin, only the regret that they do sin.

The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 helps illustrate this fact that the human strategy of the corrupted nature in original sin is to obfuscate the truth of one’s evil deeds. Though the couple was naked and unashamed, with the first sin and the feeling of uncomfortable exposure, their inclination of nature was to seek to not be seen by covering themselves (Gen. 3:7). Furthermore, their first inclination of their fallen nature in response to God was to hide and blame due to the fear of His wrath in light of their guilt. In both cases, the human strategy in relation to self-awareness of sin and truth about the self is to conceal this from the self and others. From the very beginning, we find a penchant in distorted human nature towards deception and, particularly, self-deception. Sin and guilt are known but *not wanted to be known in present experience* and are, thus, repressed, becoming part of the deep or “hidden heart.”

This attempt to obfuscate or make unclear the truth of oneself to the self and others comes into the Christian experience in two ways. First, sometimes the believer does not want to know what is driving his heart and will *consciously* seek to deceive

himself and others from seeing the sin beneath. Second, even in those cases where the intention of the will is good as motivated by his renewed nature, *the pre-converted habit of obfuscation of motives of sin* carries on habitually or unconsciously and hinders the believer from having any inclination to look at the motives of sin beneath – and this is not due to any conscious sinister intention. Rather, the believer is intent on the good and, perhaps especially in his early stages of growth, content to ponder more his good intentions and *look at his sin only when he is forced to when it leaks out into his behavior*. This is born out by the fact that many believers do not know what really drives their sin; they know only the regret that results when they do sin. That is why they come to the pastor to help them figure out what is wrong when they act against their better intentions and do not know what to do about this. In their case, they do not know what is going on in their heart. It is the result of experience and even maturity to begin to wonder at what is going on below the surface and thoughtfully explore the hidden motives of the heart.

Of all the psychological terms used for the person in the Bible, perhaps the concept of the “heart” is most central for understanding the person.¹ The heart is used for the core of human personality and is the nexus of human will, affect and intellect (Prov. 27:19, 23:7-8). The heart is what really drives a person and dictates the direction of his life (Pr. 4:23, Ecc. 10:2). With the heart we think, feel, doubt, believe, remember and act. The goal is to love God with the whole heart (Mk. 12:29), to trust in God with all the heart (Pr. 3:5), to love from a pure heart (I Tim. 1:5). In particular, the man of God is to have a clean heart (Ps. 51:6) and a heart of integrity, speaking truth from the heart (Ps. 15:1-2). However, fallen human nature distorts the functions of the heart.

The fallen human heart can become hidden to itself, able to so deceive itself that it is no longer fathomable or transparent to itself. It becomes proud (Pr. 16:5) and fat or unresponsive to the Word (Ps. 119:70). As such, the heart can harden itself to God (Zech. 7:12) and become incurably deceived and deceiving (Jer. 17:9-10). This can include both the simple self-deception of repressing painful experiences into the hidden heart as well as the more sinister self-deception of deep motives of sin and hiding from guilt and shame. In the case of the former, we repress those things we know that we no longer want to be aware of continuously (“Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, And the end of joy may be grief. Pr. 14:13). In this case, the development of various levels in the heart is the result of an ability to repress parts of the unwanted memories into the recesses of the heart.

However, more serious is the conscious intention since the Fall to not want to experience the truth of one’s own sinfulness and guilt. Though God designed the heart to have a certain integrity in being transparent in truth, He also gave it the unusual capability in the Fall to be able to deceive itself, to become opaque to know the truth of its own state and other realities that are painful and too revealing. The extent of the self-deception can be so extreme, according to Jeremiah, so that there is part of it that

¹ I am indebted to years of team-teaching with Dr. Robert Saucy a course on “Theology of Human Nature” in which we have together discussed the nature of the heart and, particularly, the hidden heart. I am indebted to his biblical insight on these matters.

cannot even be known by the self, only by God (Jer. 17:9-10). Even the believer does not always know what is going on in the deep and knows that the Lord can see into the deep motives better than himself (Pr. 16:2). Similarly, the psalmist asks God to “Examine me, O Lord, and try me, test my mind and my heart,” (Ps. 26:3), to search and try the heart (Ps. 139:23-24). This resulting “hidden heart” becomes the repository of a host of scattered false beliefs and sinful desires which become part of the memory and character of a person of which one may be more or less aware.

Though the pre-converted conscious sins of the heart may no longer be reflected in the conscious beliefs and desire of the believer, nevertheless, these sins of the heart with their deep beliefs and desires *remain implicit in the very fabric of the dynamics of the habituated vices of the heart*. This is in spite of the presence of true beliefs and good desires that have developed since conversion and are to the contrary. These deep “fleshy” beliefs and desires, if they are strong enough in habits, can continue to drive the person against their will. For example, I may believe consciously that I am not to worry over finances because God is good and cares for me. Nevertheless, worry “leaks” out as the result of irrational deep beliefs, for instance, that no one really cares about my problems, that God is not really good so that I must take life into my own hand and deal with my problems on my own. This may be coupled with sinful desires that I must have life on my terms, that I should have no troubles or hardships. These are not my conscious desires or beliefs. And no quick rational correction of these beliefs will suffice to change the deep beliefs and desires of the heart. Instead, they lie buried, implicit in the flesh-residue habits of the heart that remain hidden from superficial awareness. And this scenario could be multiplied over again with each vice of the heart. Although this raises questions about the believer’s role in unearthing or “putting off” these deep beliefs with the Lord for the sake of growth, ultimately, He alone at the judgment will “bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motive of men’s hearts” (I Cor. 4:5).

Given this discussion of the sins of the believer’s hidden heart, I conclude with a laundry list of implications and hints that might provide some of the contours for a theory of sin and the process of growth. These require full analysis and argument for another occasion. I offer them for your comment and assistance to determine their value and truth content in understanding the process of spiritual formation.

1. Most believers do not intend to sin; rather, they “leak” or respond to situations out of the more or less strength of the vice habits of the heart that seek to enslave the heart and behavior.
2. These sins or vices of the heart are reflected in the Bible’s view of the “hidden heart” in which deep sinful beliefs and desires are embedded within the habituated vice dynamics of the heart-body connection which are capable of controlling the believer’s behavior to act against their intentions.
3. These sins of the heart and their corresponding deep beliefs and desires in the hidden heart have an etiology most fundamentally in original sin (the “flesh” residue in the life of the believer) that provides the deep structure of these sins

which, subsequently, receive their particular directionality in our relational histories, particularly in childhood.

4. These vice habits of heart do not entirely enslave the believer insofar as the Spirit's empowering the heart by love and truth results in new second-order desires on the part of the believer to love God more and not be dominated by sin despite the fact that he still act against these better intentions.
5. Thus, the believer "leaks" in the sense that these sins are no longer under his total control insofar as these deep desires and beliefs of the heart lie hidden and undisturbed in the heart, ready to control the believer against their intentions resulting in regret.
6. This leaking of sins of the heart does not excuse the believer from responsibility, for one is as responsible for his character as much as intended actions, despite the complex etiology of how character is derived (cf. the ancient Greek-Medieval-Reformed concept of the "voluntary").
7. No amount of (a) surface correcting of deep sinful beliefs (or overlaying the beliefs by the truth alone), (b) behavioral change or (c) human love will resolve the deep beliefs and desire behind the sins of the heart (II Cor. 3:4ff). These are fueled by a sinful attachment of the self in autonomy to meet some perceived need. Thus, Aristotle, Freud and all the Pagan moralists cannot experience the radical change of heart spoken of in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31, Ez. 36:25ff.).
8. Self awareness of one's sin through the means of the Word, truth, prayer, or counseling, and the panoply of the spiritual disciplines is a required beginning for the transformation of the heart and is part of what it is to "put off the old man" but is insufficient on its own for salvation or sanctification.
9. The process of conversion and transformation of the sins of the heart is complex and ultimately requires a power strong enough to penetrate into the heart and resolve the self's fleshy deep attachment to those sins (deep beliefs and desires) to meet some perceived need. This power can mirrored by the love of the believer in the truth but ultimately can only be met in the ministry of the Holy Spirit loving and speaking His Word into the heart, for this alone is capable of convincing the self that its needs are met in love. This is both for conversion and ongoing transformation of the hidden heart.
10. Thus, the process of spiritual formation involves the panoply of the spiritual disciplines (such as meditation on the Word, prayer, obedience, receiving counsel etc.) as legitimate means of grace, (a) insufficient on their own but (b) capable of opening the heart to (c) the ministry of the Spirit in truth, who alone is the agent of change in the heart of the believer (I Pet. 1:2, I Thess. 2:13, Gal. 5:22ff., cf. also I Thess. 5:23, Heb. 9:20ff.).

Drawing Near to God When God Seems Far Away: Practicing the Presence of God Despite Feelings

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"God, who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present."
Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

Introduction

A. Developmental Spirituality: Biblical Data (I John 2:12-14)

12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. 13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. 14 I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Spiritual Children:

Spiritual Maturity (Fatherhood/Motherhood):

Middle: Spiritual Adolescence/Early Adulthood:

Corresponds to Three Loves:

1. Beginner: Love of God for Pleasure's Sake

- a. This stage corresponds to Children whose sins are forgiven, having a "relationship with God" (I John 2:12-14)
- b. Characterized by Spiritual Pleasure:
 - (1) As mother gives milk to an infant, God feeds us as spiritual babes where we are at in our love of pleasure.
 - (a) II Cor. 5:17: We are a New Creature with a New Affection for God at the Core of our spirit or heart by the Holy Spirit
 - (b) God gives the believer the "bottle of spiritual pleasure" without any labor on our part.
 - (c) God gives spiritual pleasure by means of the same psychological structures as in one's non-Christian days. The only difference is a new object of pleasure

(d) Thus, the soul is moved to spiritual things due to the consolation of pleasure that we get from them.

(2) Some spiritual strength begins.

(3) Vices take on a religious dimension; vices become mixed with Spiritual disciplines and exercises.

2. Sins of the Beginner:

a. Our spiritual "change" deludes us to think that the self made the changes

b. Our appetite for pleasure has as its goal to feel good in our spirituality.

(1). Spiritual Gluttony

(Def): Our drive to do the spiritual disciplines is more for spiritual pleasure (the bottle) than for purity.

Test:

(2) Spiritual Pride

(Def): The deep belief that in some way we are making our spiritual life work.

Test:

(3) Spiritual Greed/ Avarice:

(Def): The deep belief or discontent with the Spirituality that God has given us

3. Dark Night of the Senses:

- a. Biblically this stage is likened to Young men: wrestles with the evil one, overcomes him, you are strong, the word abides in you. (1 John 2:12-14)
- b. God withdraws spiritual pleasure
- c. The Experience: Equipose in the heart (ambivalence over loves)
- d. Signs of Being in a Dark Night
- e. The Temptation: = certain road to spiritual burn out
 - (1) to feel guilty, that some particular sin is responsible for God feeling distant.
 - (2) to engage in the spiritual disciplines in order to make religion feel good again (fleshy works righteousness).

(3) to despair of doing the spiritual disciplines, or

(4) to despair of experiencing God

f. Remember: This dryness is a new, more profound work of God in our deep in order to have a true, honest relationship. The Spirit is attempting to reveal the truth of ourselves in neediness, to help us despair of ourselves and independence and open us to declare our dependence on the Spirit (= "**purgative contemplation**").

B. The Point of the Dark night:

1. Brokenness
2. Need of the Cross

C. What to do/not to do:

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1. Talk with the Lord regarding the degree to which you have exhibited and experienced the sins of Spiritual Pride, Spiritual Gluttony and Spiritual Greed.

10 minutes

2. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which and in what ways you have experienced spiritual dryness, how you responded to this in the past and how this has affected your spiritual life. Explore with the Lord some better ways for you to respond to this dryness?

10 minutes

3. Discuss with the Lord or a spiritual friend each of the following suggestions given by Coe regarding how to respond to spiritual dryness when in a dark night of the soul. If you do this with a spiritual friend, pray for one another over each point.

40 minutes

- a. The need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself in the power of the self and rather to open up to the truth of what God is trying to show you.
- b. The need to resist the temptation to make something happen, to generate a spiritual experience or bring on a spiritual feeling.
- c. The need to let go of all expectations of what you should experience in prayer and the spiritual disciplines and rather to want only what God would give.
- d. The need to enter deeply into the dryness and what the Spirit is trying to teach you about your life, about your neediness and about His goodness, and to wait for Him who is always present within.

MUSINGS ON THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: INSIGHTS FROM ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS ON A DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

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This article investigates the nature of the dark night of the soul from a biblical, psychological, and experiential perspective, particularly in the context of St. John of the Cross' "developmental spirituality." As there is a "developmental psychology" that provides an understanding of the dynamics at work in a person's life as they progress through life, so there is a "developmental spirituality" that investigates the various dynamics involved in the spiritual growth of the human spirit across time and the diverse manners in which the Holy Spirit works within the person at different times. Hopefully, the reader will better understand his or her own developmental spiritual life (and, if applicable, that of his or her client) since conversion with regard to what God is doing in the dark nights of the soul, and thus learn how to cooperate with the Spirit who is doing work in the depths of the human heart.

God who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.

Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

At some point in our spiritual pilgrimage, we or our clients have cried out to God or wondered in our deep: "God, where are you? What is wrong with you? Why are you so distant? God, what is wrong with me? Why do I feel so dry inside? Why do I not seem to care the way I used to about you? What have I done wrong?" I have heard these confusing cries from my own heart as

well as from many students at the school of psychology, the seminary, and undergraduate college. The experience is typically quite confusing, particularly for struggling Christians who feel that they alone are at fault for their spiritual dryness, and their guilt feelings are often reinforced by other Christians who tell them that they are indeed responsible for their distance from God.

This article argues that these times in the believer's spiritual pilgrimage often correspond to what the ancient Christian spiritual writers called a 'dark night of the soul' in which the Spirit secretly does a deep work in the human spirit—a work that is so profound but feels so foreign to the Christian's experience that it is often interpreted as the absence of God. Thus, it is helpful for both client and therapist to be able to understand what in fact God is doing in these times.

This article investigates the nature of spiritual dark nights from a biblical, psychological, and experiential perspective, particularly in the context of St. John of the Cross' developmental spirituality. There is a developmental *psychology* that provides an understanding of the dynamics at work as a person progresses through life, encountering diverse hurdles at each stage. Along the same lines, a developmental *spirituality* provides an understanding of the various dynamics involved in the spiritual progress of the believer through the Holy Spirit across time. Understanding a developmental spirituality allows one to better (a) understand what God has been doing in one's developmental spiritual life since conversion, particularly in difficult dark nights of the soul, (b) learn how to cooperate with the Spirit and find true rest in this darkness, and (c) learn how the Holy Spirit employs the

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spiritual disciplines at various developmental places and why the disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, meditation and fellowship may have a qualitatively different feel at different stages in one's journey. The goal is to assist clients and ourselves to be more open to the Spirit as the Teacher and personal Counselor who is doing profound work in the depths of the human heart.

THE IDEA OF A SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY

Theologians, pastors, and devotional writers over the centuries interested in the spiritual life have been captivated with the idea that each believer has a spiritual developmental history, that the Holy Spirit is on a journey with the human spirit, working in diverse manners at different times in a person's life (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1977). They not only witnessed this in their own lives and those of their disciples, but relied on certain biblical texts for guidance.

Perhaps the most explicit scriptural text on the subject of a developmental spirituality, which has been recognized and commented on over the centuries by the Church, is in 1 John chapter 2. The text reads as follows:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1 Jn. 2:12-14)

The book of 1 John is probably an epistle written to the church at Ephesus, of which John had been the pastor for a number of years. At the time of the writing, John had been gone for some time. In this section, he writes as if he and the readers are familiar with who and what he is talking about. For us, however, his comments appear cryptic. Who are these little children? Who are these spiritual young adults and fathers?

What does seem clear is that John had in mind at least three developmental stages: spiritual children, spiritual adolescents, and spiritual adults. Notice that the first stage (spiritual children) is characterized by a sense of forgiveness of sin and of knowing God. This points to a personal spiritual awakening in which religion has the feel of freedom and personal relationship: My sins are forgiven; I know the

Father; I have a relationship with God. The second stage (spiritual adolescence) has quite a different texture than the first. This stage appears to be characterized by a sense of struggle, a sense of wrestling with the evil one. The word of God is not merely something to which one joyfully assents; rather, it abides in or is integrated in one's person, with the result of overcoming spiritual adversity. The third stage (spiritual maturity) is the most cryptic of all. John merely says that the spiritual father (and mother) has come to know Him who is from the beginning. Most commentators say that this may have something to do with coming to know the sovereign God who rules over history from the beginning. In the case of the spiritually mature, they have seen God work His will in their lives: He has taken their spouses, friends, and children; He has worked in a way that has seemed confusing at times. In any case, these spiritual fathers and mothers have come to recognize through time that God is God of their lives, that God's will, not their own, is the central reality. He can do as he pleases, and is in fact invited to do so.

Though we do not get much from the Apostle John by way of commentary on these stages or seasons of life, the ancient Christian spiritual writers did agree that John had in mind some kind of spiritual developmental history. In particular, for our purposes, they noticed that the middle stage appeared to be a transitioning period of wrestling and struggling, which is clearly distinguished from the beginning excitement and joy and from the later sense of spiritual confidence that comes from a life of trials and walking with God. For writers over the centuries, from Augustine of the 5th century to St. Bernard of Clairvaux of the 12th century, the concept of a dark night of the soul had emerged in the literature, culminating with the thoughts of St. John of the Cross in the 16th century (Merton, 1951; Garrigou-Lagrange, 1977).

This article will focus upon the dark night of the soul in St. John of the Cross, adding illustrative comments and additions throughout. A brief outline of St. John's developmental theory of spirituality is provided, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the earlier stages (typically called Purgation) leading up to the first dark night of the senses. Other texts can be explored for a more detailed treatment of this topic (cf. Kavanaugh, 1999; Dubay, 1989; Payne, 1992; Merton, 1951).

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF A DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

In order to better understand the first dark night in its context, it is helpful to locate it within the following brief outline of the various developmental stages which, in turn, correspond to various types of love for God.

1. Purgation: The Love of God for Pleasure's Sake
 - (a) The Beginner
 - (b) The Spiritual Sins of the Beginner
 - (c) The Dark Night of the Senses
2. Illumination: The Love of God for Love's Sake
 - (a) Illumination
 - (b) The Dark Night of the Spirit
3. Union: The Love of God for God's Sake

The three developmental stages correspond to three types of love for God. The first stage (Purgation) corresponds to the love of God for pleasure's sake. According to St. John of the Cross, the person comes to God as a beginner or spiritual infant for the sake of pleasure. God condescends to the pre-conversion characterological level and meets the believer in his or her habituated need for pleasure. This love is likened to early infant-mother attachment which is object oriented, but to some degree characterized also by pleasure. As necessary as this is for spiritual development, the sins and vices of the person's former manner of life once governed by pleasure become intermingled in one's spiritual life, resulting in the sins of the beginner. As a result, God must purge the believer of these spiritual vices, particularly of spiritual autonomy and the need for spiritual pleasure as well as the habit of measuring the presence and favor of God by spiritual feelings or senses. This work of God on the believer's behalf is the first dark night of the senses.

This first dark night opens the way for the second major shift or stage of growth (Illumination) in which God is loved less for pleasure sake and more for a love in-and-of-itself. This is a love based upon a real relationship between two persons, more along the lines of a marriage than a romance, or of love between child and parent. This, in turn, leads to the second dark night of the spirit in which the soul must be cured even of wanting God for the sake of experiencing mutual love. Instead, the soul must learn to love God just for Himself in such a manner that He, and not the need to be loved, is the center of all things. This latter experience might best be likened to Jesus' experience at Gethsemane in which He ulti-

mately chose the love of God for God's sake. For Jesus, the will of the Father would be more central than His love for conscious fellowship with the Father, or the love of God for the sake of love. We will not have time to focus upon these later stages but will limit our discussion to Purgation, paying particular attention to understanding the first dark night of the senses that most believers seem to encounter.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Prior to discussing the stage of Purgation, a brief word about how the spiritual stages develop and their relationship to psychological development is warranted. St. John of the Cross presents these stages developmentally, though not necessarily in a linear or chronological sense. The stages have to do with growth into greater love, and are only roughly linear insofar as growth in love and maturity has some chronological dimension. Interestingly, spiritual development by the Spirit begins in the midst of natural development and thus is to some degree impinged upon by the believer's psychological development up to that point in time. In the ancient's terms, grace perfects nature, meaning that the Spirit is doing the transformation upon and within the human soul. Thus, the work of the Spirit takes place within a natural, developmental psychological history already in process. This is not to be understood reductionistically by explaining spiritual development in psychological terms only. However, the psychological factors and development do, to some degree, determine the material with which the Spirit will do His transforming work, what pathology is there to work with, and what natural capacities must be transformed for the glory of God. Consequently, the Spirit's work may differ from individual to individual, depending upon the person's psychological developmental history.

Nevertheless, the ancients noticed that many of their disciples did experience to some degree a developmental spiritual history that had some linear dimensions to it. They were quick to qualify, however, that these somewhat linear stages of experience may manifest themselves as seasons in a person's life, which may work in a cyclical rather than linear fashion. In either case, their point was that the Spirit has intentions that are common for all believers, that they grow and mature in their love for God. Interestingly, I have observed in many discussions of this material that believers who convert later in life tend to relate to these stages quite literally and linearly,

while those raised in the church appear to be more split on whether these stages apply chronologically or seasonally.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind throughout this article that the goal is not for the believer to understand a developmental spirituality for its own sake, or as a tool to enable one to make the spiritual life work in the power of the self. God's specific goal in a dark night is to bring one to a deeper knowledge of one's need for Him and a deeper embracing of Jesus' statement, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). What does not feel very spiritual in a dark night, in the believer's dryness and spiritual doldrums, turns out to be a profound work of the Spirit that acquaints the Christian with the truth of him- or herself. Because this is a life-long journey, the goal is for the Christian therapist and client to learn how to track the Spirit's ministry throughout the seasons in life, to learn to cooperate with His work and intentions, and to depend upon and be filled with Him.

PURGATION: THE LOVE OF GOD FOR PLEASURE'S SAKE

The Beginner. St. John of the Cross does not necessarily think of the beginner as a new convert, but as one who is going through a period in which faith comes alive. In cases such as my own, that period was rather obvious. I was converted at age nineteen, at which time my faith became personally integrated in what seemed to be a moment's time. I *felt* alive to Christ. I *felt* like a new creature. I *felt* loved by God. With respect to those raised in the church, however, the beginner stage may not refer to the initial point of conversion, but later (typically in junior high, high school, or college) at a time when the faith is personally internalized as the prized possession of the possessor. This is often a time when one experiences a certain degree of excitement or zest over the faith, when God seems so relationally present, when Christianity becomes alive and feels good. The beginner seems to be in the Apostle John's first stage (spiritual children), a time of personal awakening to *feeling* the forgiveness of one's sins, a time when Christianity does not feel like a religion but an exciting relationship.

This spiritual awakening is characterized by St. John of the Cross as a love of God for pleasure's sake, a spirituality characterized by pleasure. As St. John of the Cross states,

It must be known, then, that the soul, after it has been definitely converted to the service of God, is, as a rule, spiritually nurtured and caressed by God, even as is the tender child by

its loving mother.... The loving mother is like the grace of God, for, as soon as the soul is regenerated by its new warmth and fervor for the service of God, He treats it in the same way; He makes it to find spiritual milk, sweet and delectable, in all things of God, without any labor of its own, and also great pleasure in spiritual exercises, for here God is giving to it the breast of His tender love, even as to a tender child. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 38)

God provides spiritual infants with pleasure regarding spiritual things in accordance with their pre-converted appetite for pleasure in finite objects. This intimacy is felt as relational intimacy.

There is certainly a new affection for God as object at the core of the believer. This is what it means to be a new creature, to have the indwelling Holy Spirit at the core of human personality, bearing witness that one is a child of God, giving a new expulsive love for God from the heart (see the Apostle Paul's discussion throughout Rom. 8). Nevertheless, God must also meet the beginner at the developmental level of his character and desire for pleasure. Thus, God gives to the beginner the bottle of spiritual pleasure, without any labor on their part, in much the same way as a parent gives her child a bottle of milk to satisfy his hunger. The truth is that spiritual infants do not as yet have the characterological growth to love God with a more mature love. They *require* spiritual pleasure in their love in order to grow.

Thus, the spiritual infant's heart, from a characterological perspective, is still to a great degree habituated by the old sin habits that reside in the members of the body (Rom. 6:13). Though a new creature in Christ with a new orientation of love for God, there are still the old ways of the heart governed and habituated by pleasure and self-love that only time and submission to the Spirit will transform.

Notice the following diagram (Figure 1) representing the pre-converted person and his or her psychological structures. The core of the pre-converted self depicted at the bottom of the diagram is in a state of spiritual death, made for union with God, but in fact alienated from the life of God which is existentially felt as a deep loneliness in the human spirit (Eph. 2:1ff). In general, the unconverted are driven by a profoundly distorted love for self and of pleasure in order to fill that relational void in their deep. Even pre-converted natural virtues, object attachments, and fortitude that enable unbelievers to postpone gratification are arguably driven and formed by these inordinate loves and pleasures. The result is that all of their psychological capacities for

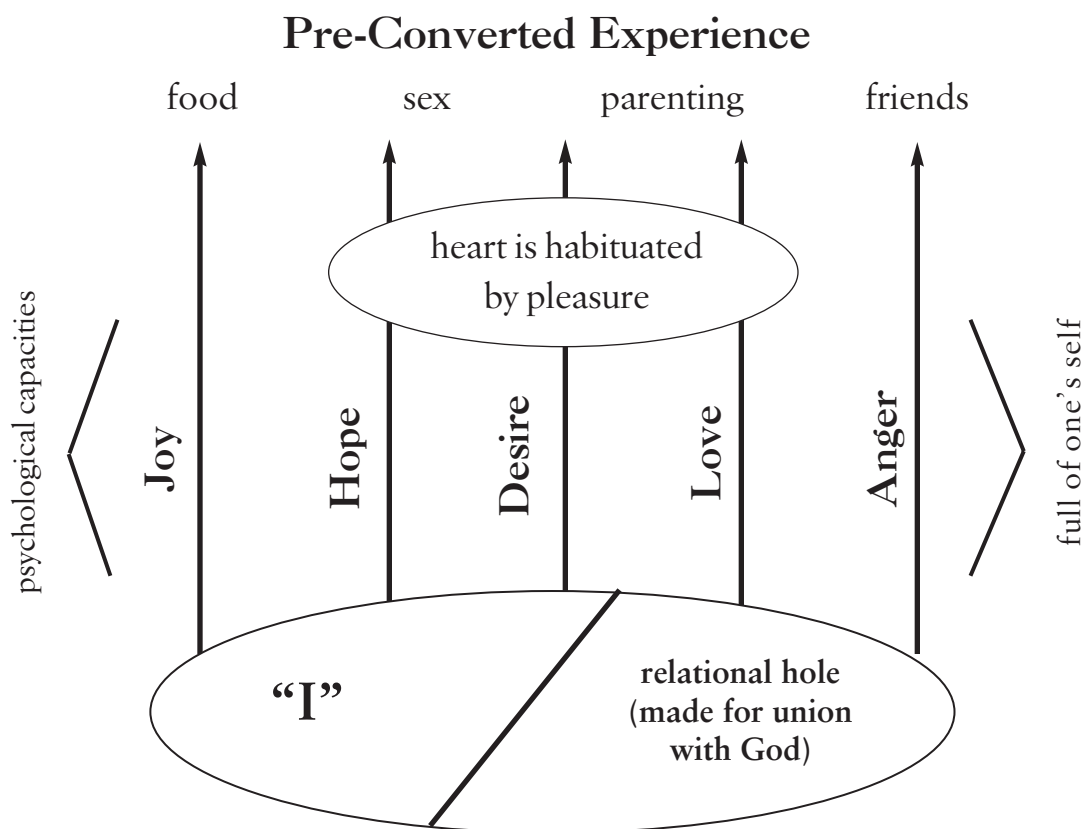


Figure 1. Pre-converted experience.

hope, love, desire, anger, kindness, etc. (the vertical lines) are to a great degree governed by this deep pleasure as they reach out for finite goods of nature such as friends, food, money, family, and education.

Notice the following diagram (Figure 2) with reference to the psychology of the convert or beginner. The new convert as a spiritual babe is still generally driven in his heart by the same motivations that governed life prior to conversion (or in the earlier days of childhood for those raised in the church). The habituated psychological dynamics of the soul have not altered nearly as much as the beginner may imagine. There is a new deep concern and love for God at the core of the person; the convert is a new creature in which the new manner of life has begun in the heart (2 Cor. 5:17).

However, converts or beginners often mistake this new love for characterological change. They do not yet know as they will in the dark night just how much they are the same as before. Therefore, God meets them where they are developmentally with

the bottle of spiritual pleasure, providing the same feelings that drove his or her pre-converted self with respect to finite objects. Thus, the spiritual disciplines are often felt as very pleasant, enriching, and zestful. The beginner enjoys going to church, reading the scriptures and praying. This is a wonderful time of beginning growth, of forming attachments to new spiritual objects of pleasure, and of making new alliances and allegiances.

However, because the heart has not had that much time to change, it is still much governed and habituated by pleasure. Even though a beginner might be a psychological adult, he is still a spiritual baby when it comes to knowing how to depend upon the spirit. True change of the heart's habits will be a slow, painful learning process that the Spirit is committed to in order to conform the believer into the image of Christ. Thus, St. John of the Cross encourages the beginners to build strong habits in the spiritual disciplines that will be a resource to draw upon for the dark night that is to come. He does this know-

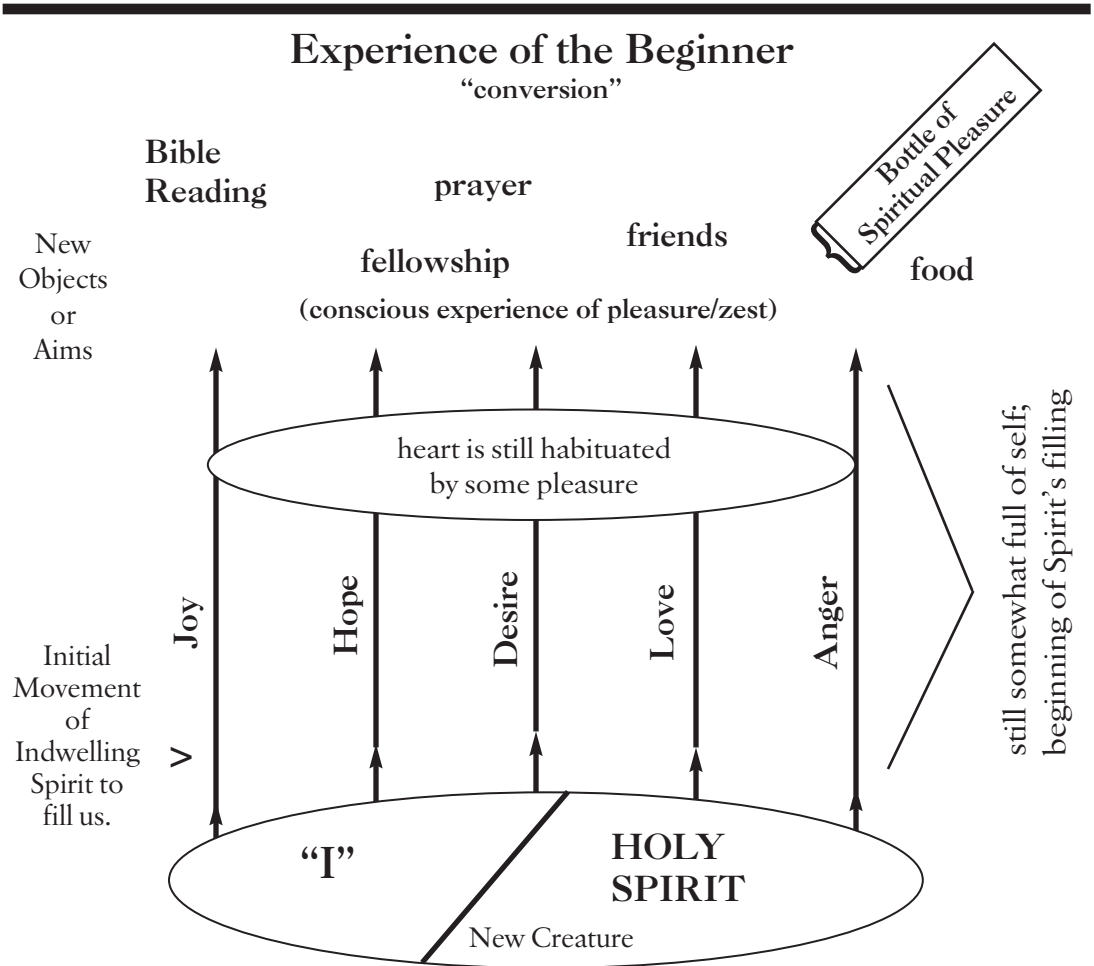


Figure 2. Experience of the Beginner.

ing that the beginner is moved to spiritual things due, in part, to the consolation of pleasure, and that this is the very thing that will work vice into the spiritual disciplines and will need to be purged in the first dark night. Though the beginner will have to be purged of this love of God for pleasure's sake, thank God that He condescends to the beginner's level lest those with less fortitude not go on in the faith at all. Nevertheless, this pursuit of spirituality for pleasure's sake, along with all the other pre-converted vices, become infused into the beginner's spirituality as the sins of the beginner.

The Spiritual Sins of the Beginner. According to St. John of the Cross, the beginner is still beset by characterological sins. It will require time for the Spirit to bring these to the surface for transformation, a process that involves the believer's conscious cooperation. Though the beginner often mistakes his or

her new-found enthusiasm for character transformation, the disappointing truth is that character vices become integrated into the spiritual habits. This is inevitable, according to St. John of the Cross, given that God motivates spiritual habits in the beginner by means of the same pre-converted characterological needs for pleasure and autonomy. As he states,

For since they [beginners] are moved to these things and to these spiritual exercises by the consolation and pleasure that they find in them, and since, too, they have not been prepared for them by the practice of earnest striving in the virtues, they have many faults and imperfections with respect to these spiritual actions of theirs.... (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 19)

Thus, the spiritual sins of the beginner should not be shocking as this is all part of the growth process.

Particularly significant to understanding the sins of the beginner is that the experience of affection and

love of God for pleasure's sake will delude beginners into thinking that *they* are centrally responsible for making the changes. As they go on in the faith, they come to believe that their affection and experience of closeness to God is largely the result of their acts of obedience and energy in the spiritual disciplines. In truth, beginners have neither the maturity, self-awareness, nor insight to realize that it was always God's love and infant-grace that made the difference, that they did not have the character to really take such joy in God of their own accord. They believe that if they are doing the disciplines correctly, God will feel close. Thus, a two-fold problem ensues in their spirituality: first, they come to use their senses for pleasure (their feelings) to measure their spirituality and God's love for them; secondly, they think that their diligence made the difference.

St. John of the Cross applies the ancient's view of the seven deadly sins at work in the unbeliever to the spiritual life of the beginner. As a result, the seven deadly sins of pride, gluttony, sloth, envy, wrath, greed, and luxury become integrated into the spiritual life and disciplines which, in turn, are transformed into the seven deadly *spiritual* sins. Exploring these in depth is beyond the scope of this article; but it is worthwhile to introduce a few of these sins that typically become entangled in the beginner's efforts in spiritual growth.

The first sin of spiritual gluttony (and greed to a certain extent) is defined simply as the believer's drive to do the spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible reading, fellowship, etc.) that is motivated more by spiritual pleasure than purity. The beginner's appetite for pleasure has at its goal to feel good in spirituality. Thus, the vices of the heart and its pursuit for pleasure now come to bear on the motivation for spirituality. As a result, one becomes a glutton for spiritual pleasure and feeling good in the spiritual disciplines, rather than desiring purity and transformation of the heart.

It is important to note here that St. John of the Cross takes into consideration the case of spiritual luke-warmness, which refers to a willful turning away from God with no interest in the spiritual life and with no uneasiness of conscience. This could be one explanation for the lack of zest in the spiritual life. The experience of the spiritual glutton, on the other hand, is one in which the person has done nothing different than before, is sinning no more than usual; yet, the spiritual disciplines no longer provide the same pleasure payoff as before. The beginner is no

longer receiving the same zest experience in prayer, Bible reading, and going to church, and cannot account for this by reference to actions alone. As a result, the beginner works harder at the spiritual disciplines in order to get back the pleasant feeling. Such spiritual gluttony is, in fact, a necessary developmental step. However, the infant must grow up, and God is going to do something else by the Spirit to reveal the true nature of his or her desire for God. This experience of dryness is actually a sign that God believes one is ready to have the bottle taken away and move into a deeper place of growth and love by means of a dark night.

One of the deadliest of the seven deadly spiritual sins is spiritual pride. This is the deep, perhaps unconscious belief of spiritual beginners that they are in some way making their spiritual life work. As St. John of the Cross observes, through their imperfections often comes a certain kind of secret pride, a hidden satisfaction with their works and with themselves (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 39). Most would not consciously assent to the arrogant claim that they are the ones making the spiritual life work. But for many spiritual beginners, frustration sets in when the spiritual life does not work as before. Thus, they feel guilty and are thus tempted to work harder, to pray harder and attend to their quiet times with more energy. They think their efforts will make the difference. This is the essence of spiritual pride, which does not necessarily have an arrogant face. On the contrary, the essence of this vice is merely the secret belief that one's work was the difference in making the spiritual life happen.

Such a vice as spiritual pride in the beginner should not be surprising. Its presence is developmentally necessary on account of the believer's heart still having a residue of the habituated, pre-converted autonomous inclination to be filled with the self and to reach out in the power of the self to gain happiness. In fact, God gives beginners spiritual pleasure in response to their reaching out in their own power to grow spiritually. They are incapable of anything else because they are still spiritual babies in terms of learning to depend upon the Spirit. Because this process is developmentally required, believers need to be encouraged, knowing that God now thinks they are ready to face the truth of their spiritual pride. The discovery of such truth is painful but necessary for growth.

One of the seven deadly spiritual sins closely related to spiritual pride is spiritual avarice, which is

the deep discontent with the spirituality that God has given. St. John of the Cross notes,

Many of these beginners have also at times great spiritual avarice. They will be found to be discontented with the spirituality which God gives them; and they are very disconsolate and querulous because they find not in spiritual things the consolation that they would desire. Many can never have enough of listening to counsels and learning spiritual precepts, and of possessing many books which treat of this matter.... (St. John of the cross, 1684/1990)

In this experience, beginners often become bothered and disquieted in their spirit in that they no longer find the consolation of pleasure in their spirituality. They struggle with anger or frustration at God for not being as close as he once was in their prayer time or at church. As a result, they often give themselves to reading devotional books, attending conferences on spirituality by their favorite spiritual gurus, perhaps even practicing ancient spiritual practices and the spiritual disciplines, all out of spiritual greediness in an effort to get back that feeling of spiritual zest and pleasure they once knew. They want to get the monkey of guilt off their back due to the deep belief that lack of work is responsible for the lack of spiritual fervency.

In summary, spiritual pursuits manifested as sins of the beginner become a way to avoid the kind of soul work that will expose the true state of the heart. The pre-converted vices become more pronounced in the beginner's spiritual life despite the fact that some good spiritual endurance and habits have begun. What one fed upon earlier as a beginner is typically the very thing that one shall be weaned from in order to become aware of just how much these vices are at work, thus exposing one's true need for God. To accomplish this, the Spirit moves the beginner into the first dark night, which is the focus of the remainder of this article.

The Dark Night of the Senses. In this stage of development, God is growing spiritual beginners away from mere love of God for pleasure's sake to love of God for *love's* sake, a relationship involving the real self and not merely a love for pleasure in the relationship. St. John of the Cross elaborates,

The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to sense, as we shall show ... Since, then, the conduct of these beginners upon the way of God is ignoble, and has much to do with their love of self and their own inclinations ... God desires to lead them farther. He seeks to bring them out of that ignoble kind of love to a higher degree of love for Him, to free them from the ignoble exercises of sense ... and to lead them to a kind of spiritual exercise wherein they can commune with

Him more abundantly.... (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, pp. 61-62)

This movement into the dark night can be likened to the shift that takes place from romance to marriage, the latter being a relationship based less upon romantic feelings of love and more upon the truth about each other. In romance, one can always go home when the relationship experience starts feeling bad. In marriage, one is home with no place to go. This is why marriage can be so painful at times. In fact, every couple in marriage is eventually confronted with the truth of their love: Do they want the pleasure of the relationship, or do they want the relationship itself? Spiritual beginners are confronted with the same choice in the first dark night of the senses: Do they want the spiritual zest and feeling that they receive when God is felt as relationally close, or do they want the relationship with God even if it may not feel so good, even if it involves seeing themselves as they really are?

In general, the dark night of the senses is a special time when God intends to move spiritual beginners into a place of growth where they would not go on their own. The following two specific goals he has for believers at such a time are: (a) to assist them in letting go of something that they trust in more than him (e.g., the spiritual disciplines), and (b) to encourage them toward a deeper trust in him without any corresponding pleasurable feeling or experience. The dark night is clearly a movement of God on behalf of spiritual beginners, who typically look for something other than painful self-awareness leading to humility by which to measure spirituality and determine whether or not God is present. They were habituated as beginners in their earlier life to look to a *spiritual feeling* as the criterion for spirituality. However, God is deeply committed to helping them re-focus, to see that a feeling is not the proper measure of his presence, and to see that he has been and will be the only true difference. God takes the initiative to encourage beginners to trust him by faith, even in darkness, rather than in themselves and their senses.

The dark night for beginners is a period of wrestling with the evil one, with their own internal evil, with the need to be in control, with the need to always feel good, to *feel* that God is close (1 Jn 2:12-14). According to St. John of the Cross,

This is the first and principle benefit caused by this arid and dark night of contemplation: the knowledge of oneself and of one's miseries ... which in the time of its prosperity it was unable to see.... So we have now arrived at this, that from this arid night there first of all comes self-knowledge, whence, as

Experience of the Dark Night

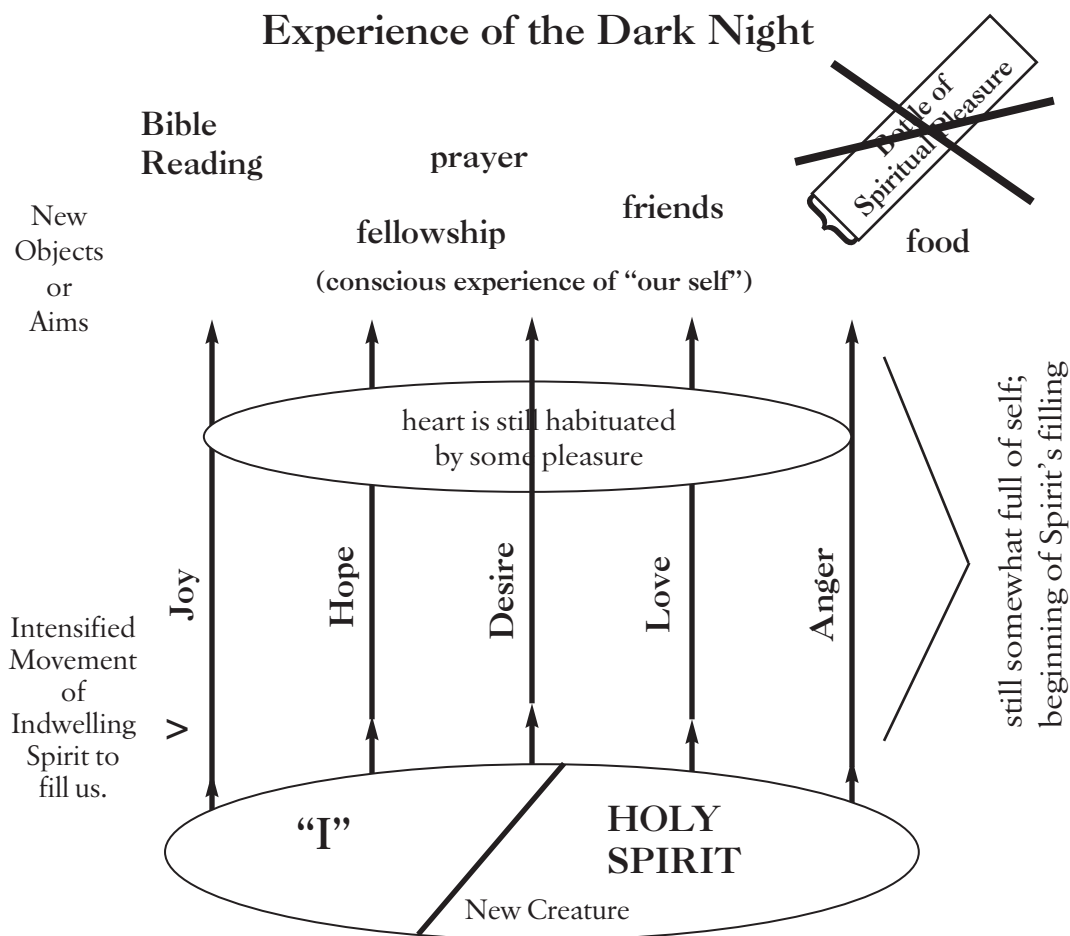


Figure 3. Experience of the Dark Night.

from a foundation, rises this other knowledge of God. For which cause Saint Augustine said to God: Let me know myself, Lord, and I shall know Thee. For, as the philosophers say, one extreme can be known by another. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 80)

Rather than provide spiritual pleasure, the first dark night aims at leading them into the painful reality that apart from God, they can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).

Central to understanding the dark night of the senses is realizing that God withdraws from the believer much of the spiritual pleasure that was initially felt by the beginner. As John of the Cross states, When they [beginners] are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of Divine favor is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness, and shuts against them the door and the source for the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whensoever

and for as long as they desired ... And thus He leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whether to go with their ... meditation. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 62)

One of the central signs of being in the dark night of the senses is when, for no reason attributable to one's own efforts, one no longer receives the same pleasure in the spiritual life and in the spiritual disciplines as before. This is portrayed in the above graphic (Figure 3) that helps explain the experience of the dark night. Notice that God moves from giving the believer a sense of his presence on the basis of spiritual pleasure, and He is no longer interested in a top-down spirituality whereby the beginner feels that spirituality and God are good apart from the truth of oneself.

Again, St. John of the Cross distinguishes the experience of the dark night from the state of lukewarmness in which the believer simply turns away

from God. In a dark night, it is not the believer turning away from God. Rather, it is God turning away from merely giving infant-grace from the bottle as a sign of his presence and moving to provide the love and grace that comes from filling the believer with his very presence. This is a bottom-up spirituality in which the Spirit wants to live his life *through* and with the believer's own psychological structures and capacities. But, there is a problem: Beginners are not yet capable of experiencing this as God's presence. In fact, they are still developmentally quite filled with themselves and their desire for pleasure. Nevertheless, God thinks they are ready to know this truth of themselves, to see themselves as they really are in their character, to see the flesh at work in their members. He knows that now they are ready to begin the journey of loving him, apart from feelings, by faith alone.

THE EXPERIENCE OF EQUIPOISE IN THE DARK NIGHT: SPIRITUAL UNEASINESS

St. John of the Cross explicitly wants us to know that the experience of the dark night will be one of spiritual confusion and dryness. He believes that in the equipoise—the counterbalance, between the experiences of being filled with ourselves and being filled with the Spirit who works right through our psychological functioning—we will typically experience the truth of our character: spiritual dryness, distance from God, frustration, sense of moral failure, loneliness, spiritual impotence, and confusion over allegiance to the world, self, or God.

... when a soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, it also fails to find it in any thing created; for, as God sets the soul in this dark night to the end that He may quench and purge its sensual desire, He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990)

St. John of the Cross explains the dark night as a middle state of experience in which beginners no longer know what they desire. On one hand, they are still so filled with themselves that they are unable to explicitly experience the Spirit as the Spirit. On the other hand, they are experiencing the filling of the Spirit to the developmental degree they are capable.

The result is that believers in a dark night feel trapped. They become aware of how little they really love God, how little joy they take in the spiritual disciplines. Yet they also perceive, with a kind of sadness, that the world and its pleasures cannot satisfy. In equipoise, the human spirit does not know what it

wants, feeling quite guilty and uneasy about this without knowing how to rectify the problem. The believer begins to lose his grip on the Christian life. What seemed to be easy during the beginner stage is no longer easy at all; spiritual pleasure and growth seem illusive, if not impossible to attain. This is precisely where God wishes his growing child to be.

Consequently, the experience of the dark night is no longer an experience of spiritual zest but of the truth, particularly the truth of oneself. The spiritual disciplines at this stage serve as a *mirror* to the reality of the believer's sinfulness and need for God. The measure of spirituality is not pleasure, but truth and reality, which is what God is interested in helping the beginner experience at this stage. Thus, this season of growth will seem foreign to beginners and will feel more psychological than spiritual in orientation. Beginners are used to feeling close to God, but the Spirit is interested in giving them a real experience of themselves, their pain, their psychological material, their neediness. They are now ready for real love.

This stage is called a dark night of the senses precisely because God is moving beginners away from a sensual Christianity in which they used the senses as a means of measuring God's presence. He is moving them into a deeper, more profound experience of themselves and his indwelling presence. The confusion for beginners at this stage is that they are not yet developmentally capable of experiencing this as the filling of the Spirit because they will typically feel his work through their psychological material in equipoise. Nevertheless, this spiritual dryness and confusion is exactly what it means to be filled with the Spirit at this point in the dark night, which coincides with their capabilities at this point in their development. This corresponds to the characterological filling of the Spirit (Eph. 5:18, Gal. 5:22) which has the feel of the growth process in general, in contrast to the empowering filling of the Spirit which is typically for the sake of ministry and often has a certain exhilarating feel to it regardless of character (Coe, 1999; Stott, 1964).

Typically, the dark night's characterological filling of the Spirit will feel bad and unspiritual and thus will be interpreted by beginners as the absence of God rather than his presence. This idea is captured well in Merton's thought:

God, who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to

us when He is absent than when He is present. (Merton, 1954)

Though the feel of the dark night is precisely the opposite of the truth, beginners are inclined to avoid this experience altogether and go back to the old way of experiencing God on the basis of their senses. Therefore, God must initiate this process because few would willingly go to the place of trusting in God in darkness, by faith, rather than by what can be felt. According to Merton, this is why it is so important to know God and his ways prior to the dark night, lest we despair of his felt absence. Spiritual guides and therapists can be very helpful by their love, sympathy and understanding, assisting the beginner in staying in this uncomfortable place with God.

THE NEUROTIC TEMPTATION IN A DARK NIGHT: FIXING THE SELF

The dark night of the senses renders beginners vulnerable to temptation, which, if given into, can put them on a behavioral treadmill that can beset them for years. Therapists and spiritual guides need to be particularly aware of this defensive behavior. The cycle of temptation is:

- a. To feel guilty and believe that particular sins are responsible for God feeling distant
- b. To engage in the spiritual disciplines with more rigor in order to make religion feel good again and atone for feelings of guilt
- c. To weary of doing the spiritual disciplines insofar as they fail to provide the desired spiritual pleasure and thus avoid their guilt feelings, and
- d. To despair of the spiritual life altogether, which is not a turning away from God, but a deep resignation that God is not present in one's life as he used to be. The spiritual disciplines are either abandoned or done minimally in order to minimize neurotic guilt feelings.

Believers in the dark night often feel an incredible amount of guilt over not feeling close to God in the spiritual disciplines. As a result, they are often tempted to deal with this guilt by working harder at the spiritual life. This is typically true of those who attend more dogmatic bible-teaching churches that in healthy cases appeal to the conscience, but in worst cases often appeal instead to neurotic guilt as a motivation for godly living. The tender or neurotic conscience is often motivated, in turn, to generate a spiritual experience that certifies God's presence and one's spiritual

growth. But God is no longer interested in granting the bottle in a causal response to such behaviors.

Believers in the dark night of the senses often find themselves on a spiritual treadmill that they do not know how to stop, except to give up on experiencing God altogether. As a result, there is typically a vacillation between doing the spiritual disciplines with no joy and with failing to do them altogether. Though they certainly love God in the deep where the Spirit abides, they discover how little there is in their character that enjoys prayer and the Bible, how little they really love God *characterlogically*. As a result, they struggle back and forth between feelings of failure and a minimal obedience, their hearts filled with warring passions. However, what they often miss in the dark night is that God actually intends to bring forth these warring, sinful, passions (unhealthy hopes, desires, loves, and angers) from the depths of the heart. He then graciously lets them in on the secret that they are more filled with themselves and their desires than those of the Spirit. Unfortunately, beginners typically do not recognize the work and presence of God in this dryness.

The healthy option to this neurotic spiritual treadmill is not to bite the bullet or become a resigned spiritual minimalist. Rather, one is being called by Divine love in darkness to a new obedience of faith, to gently open oneself to God in truth, to be willing to go on a journey internally with God where the Spirit dwells in the depths of the heart. Much wisdom and guidance is required for the beginner in the dark night to avoid spiritual resignation or unhealthy despair in the dark night. But the Lord is faithful to assist his children into this new exploration of their need to depend upon the Spirit.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES AS PURGATIVE CONTEMPLATION

It is most important at the onset of a dark night of the senses to remember that this spiritual darkness and dryness is a new, more profound work of God in the believer's deep for the purpose of developing a true, honest relationship. The Spirit attempts to reveal the believer's true need to despair of his independent efforts to grow spiritually in order to depend more deeply on the Spirit. This work of "purgative contemplation" is in stark contrast to what westerners associate with contemplation. We tend to associate contemplation with the image of a mystic sitting on a hilltop in lotus position, experiencing joyful bliss in the presence of

nature and God. Notice how this association is more consistent with New Age spirituality, which is essentially the result of human efforts to feel better.

Contrary to New Age spirituality, the Christian tradition thinks of contemplation at this developmental level as a work of the Spirit in prayer and communion within the human spirit to purge the believer of false attachments and the false self. At this stage, the experience of contemplation is likened to a spiritual cleansing (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, pp. 62-63). The beginner's autonomous hopes, desires, wants, joys, hatreds, and sorrows are purged and filled with the infusing of the Spirit's hopes, desires, and loves into the believer's psychological structures, pushing the pathological material up from depths of the heart to the conscious level. The Spirit does not replace or negate the believer's inner world, but works within and through it. As a result, the spiritual disciplines within a dark night do not typically result in experiencing the bliss of God; rather, the Spirit uses them to push the psychological material up for the beginner to see and bring to the cross. Despite the negative feel of this purgative experience, this is the beginning of contemplation and the infused work of the filling of the Spirit. In medicine, when the cure is administered, often the symptoms of the disease may initially get worse before the healing takes effect. Unfortunately, it is easy for the beginner to associate the filling of the Spirit primarily with feeling healthy spiritually, and the lack thereof as disease. Unless a wise mentor is available to interpret the signs of the work of the Spirit, the beginner may reject the cure altogether.

COOPERATION WITH THE SPIRIT IN A DARK NIGHT: THINGS TO CONSIDER

Having discussed the nature of a dark night, let us briefly discuss what to consider, what to do, and what to not do in a dark night. The Spirit of God initiates this time when one is ready for a more revealing journey into truth, even if one does not think so. But how is one to cooperate with this obscure work of the Spirit? I do not ask this question in order to help believers simply get through the dark night and on to something better. That would be self-defeating. Before going *through* the dark night, believers are first called to *enter* more deeply into what the Spirit has for them in terms of painful self-awareness, insight into relations with others and God, and gentle

attending to God by faith without the senses. The following are considerations for the believer who accepts the Spirit's invitation to stay in the dark night.

First, beginners should be open to the fact that their spiritual dryness and uneasiness about their disinterest in the spiritual disciplines may be a sign of God working inwardly in a dark night of the senses and not merely the causal result of their own sin. Certainly their sin is implicated, but it is not necessarily the direct cause of this experience, except in the case of flatly turning their back on their relationship with God. It is only neurotic grandiosity that moves them to believe that if they were a better person, that if only they did something more or sinned a little less, then that would make the spiritual difference. Instead, the Spirit wants them to be open to the possibility that it is he who is responsible for this dry time. He is purging them and inviting them into deeper fellowship with him in the truth of their character and of his love.

Second, the spiritual disciplines have changed in terms of their purpose or function in the believer's life during a dark night. For beginners, the disciplines were felt as nourishment. However, the disciplines in a dark night become a *mirror* into the reality of the heart for the purpose of character transformation in the Spirit. At this point, the disciplines do not feel good; rather, they point to the truth of oneself and one's need for God. As with all exercise and disciplines, be it mental, physical, or spiritual, beginners will experience those disciplines where they are at. For some, the spiritual disciplines may be joyful, for others agonizing, or even boring. The important thing is to cooperate with and be open to what the Spirit is doing in the disciplines.

The third and perhaps the most important thing to do in a dark night is to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself. Beginners in a dark night who discover their spiritual lives to be boring and dry, with a sense of deep apathy and lack of love, need to resist the temptation to rush into their souls to figure out the problem and fix themselves out of a need to assuage guilt. *This is exactly what the dark night is trying to cure them of.* The Spirit is attempting to fill them with himself; their need is to allow him to do his work by being committed in prayer to no longer doing it for him.

Fourth, believers in a dark night should expect and want nothing from God in doing spiritual disciplines except what he has to give. This is a foreshadowing of what the second dark night of the spirit will teach, to want nothing for the self other

than God's will which is the love of God for God's sake. This love, however, is confusing. The soul is made dizzy in a dark night with its own inability to make the spiritual life work. In a moment of temptation, the soul will try to generate good religious feelings. In fact, believers in a dark night often go on retreat in order to bring back pleasant spiritual feelings. But even on retreat, the darkness will come; nothing can ultimately stall the work of the Spirit in helping one to let go of natural inclinations. The believer, upon sensing this work of the Spirit, should simply pray, "God, I want nothing but what You have to give." Whether or not doing the spiritual disciplines results in joy or sorrow, exhilaration or despondency, there will invariably be an opportunity for fellowship with the Spirit. For the believer, everything is fodder for soul work, and the wise therapist and mentor can be a guide to the beginner in looking for the Spirit's presence in the dryness.

Fifth, believers in the dark night need to resist making more of their religious experience than what it actually is. Guilt will motivate beginners in a dark night to either construe their experience as more than it is, or attempt to make something happen out of fear that it is not working. Particularly, leaders in the church (those who counsel, preach, teach, and lead worship) need to resist the temptation to generate an experience for their people. Rather, leaders need to assist them in being able and willing to encounter God and the truth at their developmental level. They need to provide their congregation the space to experience what God has for them and no more, an experience that must begin as an intention in the leader's own life.

Sixth, those in a dark night need to be faithful to the spiritual disciplines despite the fact that practicing them may feel painful and lonely. This minimal obedience of presenting one's body as a spiritual sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2) and as an instrument of righteousness (Rom. 6:13) is less an act of the will to accomplish transformation by the self and more a willingness to be open to the Spirit's transforming work as one submits and cooperates with him. To present oneself to God as open to discovering ever anew one's neediness in the mirror of the spiritual disciplines is the work of faith in the dark night of the senses. The payoff will be truth, reality, and transformation. From this vantage point, a new sense of love of God for love's sake is capable of breaking into one's horizon of experience.

Seventh, believers in a dark night need to consider that their spiritual dryness and boredom may be God's way of getting their attention inwardly in love. The focus is away from measuring the presence of God by the way it feels and towards attending inwardly to what the Spirit is doing in the soul—teaching, attending, praying for, and loving. Notice the ministry of the Spirit in the soul according to the Apostle Paul.

And in the same way the Spirit helps our weaknesses, for we do not know how to pray as we should. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined [to become] conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. ... (Rom. 8:26-28)

The Spirit abides in the human heart, ministering within its weaknesses and besetting characterological sins. God knows us and what is good for us, for his Spirit abides in our weaknesses, but we often do not know ourselves and perhaps do not even want to. As a result, Paul says that we do not know how to pray for ourselves. The Spirit, however, experiences those weaknesses within us and is always praying for our anxieties, worries, impatience, envy, etc. When believers become aware of these weaknesses during a dark night, this is the Spirit's invitation to fellowship with him by an inward journey into the depths of their hearts, into the truth of themselves, into the place of conviction and neediness where his presence and love are capable of transforming the heart. In the midst of this purgation and painful self-awareness, the soul comes to its own end. At this point, according to the advice of St. John of the Cross, it is best to allow the soul to remain in peace and quietness. Although it may seem clear to them that they are doing nothing and are wasting their time, it is best to content themselves with simply a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God without the desire to have a felt experience of him or to perceive him (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, pp. 70-71). Everything from anxiety to guilt, fear to worry, boredom to distraction in the prayer life can open the way to love.

In summary, believers need to cease from doing the work of God in their dark night. When they pray, they need to refrain from talking to themselves in order to answer their prayers. When they read the Bible, they need to expect nothing and do nothing to

make something happen, but only expect what God has to give. In general, they need to learn to wait, to watch, to listen, to be open in all their work. No one does this well. In the bleakest periods of my own dark night, I could not endure waiting on the Lord. When seeking the will of God, I used to pray, wait a moment until I could bear no longer the painful noise of my soul and seeming silence of God, and then go on to answer for God. I now know, in part, that the Spirit is doing a profound work in these dark times. Merton is correct: Sometimes God is more present when he seems absent than when he seems present. The profound truth of this apparent riddle is made clear in the dark night. If we do not know him well, then it will be hard to think this possible of our God.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE DARK NIGHT

According to St. John of the Cross, the dark night of the senses is not an end in itself or the purpose of human existence. It is an expected time or season in a Christian's life in which God grows one from one type of love to a more mature one—a love of God not merely for pleasure, but for love's sake. Movement through this dark night is punctuated by moments of spiritual pleasure to encourage the beginner, followed by moments of dryness and, as the purgative action takes effect, by illumination in the Spirit. What St. John of the Cross means by illumination is that the ministry and presence of the Spirit will be experienced in the soul more and more in love, not by the senses but by faith as an experience of person-to-Person interaction in the depths of one's soul. In this case, the believer is beginning to be filled with the Holy Spirit in the light of the purgation that has taken place, so that the degree and manner in which one experiences the filling of the Spirit is no longer overshadowed by the fear of God's absence in the darkness and dryness of purgative contemplation.

As one cooperates with the dark night, there begins to emerge a new conviction of faith by the Spirit-to-spirit, even while in darkness, that God is present. There is an almost conscious experience of the Spirit's work in our own spirit by which we cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15-16). In this case, the purgation has done its work in effecting a deeper awakening of the heart to the conscious presence of the Spirit within, the presence of the indwelling Lover of the soul. Of course, this comes in all shades and degrees developmentally. The goal, of course, is con-

formity to Christ by means of absolute union of the human spirit with God's Spirit, but that is a discussion that is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the goal of the dark night is not for its own sake, but for the sake of love.

Due to the great difficulty the believer has in understanding and dealing with the dark night of the senses, St. John of the Cross and the ancients attest in one accord of the importance of spiritual directors in helping beginners navigate through these difficult waters. St. John of the Cross comments,

These souls turn back at such a time if there is no one who understands them; they abandon the road or lose courage; or, at the least, they are hindered from going further by the great trouble which they take in advancing along the road of meditation and reasoning. Thus they fatigue and overwork their nature, imagining that they are failing through negligence or sin. But this trouble that they are taking is quite useless, for God is now leading them by another road, which is that of contemplation. . . . (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 70)

The dark night is precisely what it implies—it is an experience in the dark for the one traveling through it. That is, it is intended to set beginners along a path in which they will not know what to do on their own and in the power of their own strength and cleverness. It is supposed to bring them to their end. Thus, it is easy for beginners to become confused by the spiritual dryness, leaving them with the temptation of working out their neurotic guilt in the power of works righteousness. In moments of deeper despair, it is easy to give up on the spiritual disciplines altogether. Thus, a wise mentor, therapist, or spiritual director can be of great aid in assisting the believer to be faithful to the disciplines in a way as to assist in the soul-work God is intending at this time. Such a person can make all the difference in assisting the believer to cooperate with and not work against the ministry of the Spirit on the journey inward.

Along more clinical lines, it is particularly important to distinguish a spiritual dark night from symptoms of psychopathology such as major depression. I am not a clinician, but perhaps the following comments may help. From an objective standpoint, the dark night is a movement of the Spirit on behalf of the believer, whereas clinical depression can have a more historical or biological etiology. From a subjective viewpoint, depression may involve no particular object or focus other than a diffused sense of loss of pleasure, a difficulty in sleep, a generally depressed mood, and overall energy loss. The dark night, on the contrary, has a more refined focus, namely, upon one's relationship with God, which is particularly

brought into view in the practice of the spiritual disciplines (prayer, reading the Bible, fellowship, hearing preaching, worship). If there is a generally depressed mood while in a dark night, it can be brought into sharper focus to distinguish between feelings that emerge in relation to the spiritual life alone and those that persist in general. Interestingly, a believer in a dark night, instead of feeling depressed, may feel quite energized in life's activities in general and, as a result, repress the religious dimension in light of the fact that this is the objective focus of the internal turmoil. A skilled therapist can be particularly helpful by being alert to these issues.

In more general terms, therapy can greatly assist believers in a dark night to have the courage to journey into the depths of their deepest issues. An entire volume could be written on the differences and similarities between how therapy and spiritual direction can assist a believer in the dark night. Suffice it to say here that *both* can provide the incarnational support and love necessary for believers to explore the depths and dynamics of their heart and their relations with God and others. A loving and insightful therapist can model in therapy what God as Counselor wishes to do in the life of the believer.

Unfortunately, many believers have not been parented in such a way that they, on their own, can see the enigmatic ways in which the Spirit works in the heart as its Resident. Thus, therapy can be a good place to begin to model this work. Those who do therapy or spiritual direction must keep in mind, however, that the human counselor points to a more perfect Lover of the soul who works in the

believer from the inside out, in pleasure, through dark nights, to a richer, deeper union and love with his children.

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Going on with God in Dark Nights: Maturing the Saints by Spiritual Hunger and Love

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"God, who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present."
Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

Introduction

- Teresa of Avila says that our greatest struggle in prayer is when God feels silent. (1) In consolation, the Christian life works despite the vices and "stuff" in the heart. Go with the flow. (2) But in times of desolation, our "stuff" comes out, we are faced with it and *we do the craziest things*: we work harder, answer our own prayers, despair of working harder, try to get back the loving feelings, resign our self to dry bones, try to fix ourselves, or think that this is no more to the Christian life than what we have experienced.
- **My real concern in this talk is for the "maturing of the saints."** It is for those who have been a believer a good while, have heard so much, are committed to the Lord and have developed a general good character and good disciplines, have been churching for 20, 30, 40, 50 years and are faithful, but secretly wonder in their deep: "Is this all there is?"
- The older saints may not know that perhaps they are in the grips of a great temptation. **The Ministerial Temptation**: the temptation to turn *from* the task and call of growth, putting off the old self, and hungering for God *and turn to* the task of ministry, to bypass the dark nights, to misinterpret the darkness for the absence of God and believe that God is not present in the darkness, to avoid the journey into the deep, to think that introspection is not a good thing and to resign the self to ministry as what the life of maturity is about. Now it is a good thing to minister to others, especially as we get older in the faith. However, ministry is not to become a *defense* against the pursuit of God.
- **My hunch: in those who are in their 40s, 50s, 60s and 70's there is a storehouse of potential for growth if they are willing to journey into the cauldron of the sins of the heart to discover a deep love beyond what we can imagine or think. However, this journey is being swapped for a pottage of ministry in dry bones!**

A. Reminder: Purpose or Goal of Dark Nights in General is twofold:

1. **Development of Spiritual Hunger and Purging of the Heart (Deut. 8:1-5)**
God let his people go hungry for the purpose of testing them, humbling them, to see what was in their heart (if they love the world or God). They were fed manna (God's food and not their own) to see whether they would depend upon God or self.
2. **Union with God in love as the power for change in the spiritual life (Eph. 3:16-19)**

The telos or goal of the Xian life is not a dark night but full love, being full of the presence of God right in our psychological structures. This is not just the goal but it is what transformation is all about, how we are transformed into the image of Christ by being filled entirely with His Spirit.

B. Kinds of Dark Nights for the Sake of Developing Hunger and Love

1. Initial Dark Nights

- Recall the beginner stage: a Wonderful time of consolation – God so gracious
- Meets us right in our need (could be something other than pleasure: safety, security etc.)
- This was more a time for spiritual disciplines to be encouraged and reinforced than true transformation of the deep.
- Thus, sins of the former manner of life come right into our spiritual life, the doing of disciplines and spirituality much in the power of the self.

As a result:

- God turns out the light on the sensual spirituality to begin the work of filling us with the Holy Spirit – result is a “purgative filling of the Spirit” to the degree one can at that place.
- Stages go from dark to pitch black (“3:00 a.m. dark nights” in which spiritual disciplines are almost painful to do).
- But if one will stay in the weeds, watch for God, continue to resist fixing oneself and enter truth of oneself with Him, something may begin to happen -- a new sense that God is here despite the lack of felt presence.

2. Ongoing Dark Nights (our present topic)

When God thinks I am ready for more growth, for receiving more of him and for more purging for this purpose, then new types of dark nights will begin to cycle in and out of my life.

a. Ongoing Dark Nights are a Further Transition or Movement in Love by the Spirit:

The movement here is from the love of God for love’s sake to the love of God for God’s sake.

b. The Nature of Ongoing Dark Nights:

1. Ongoing seasons and process of purgation:

- The Spirit continues cycles of seasons of consolation to encourage, then cycles of seasons of dark nights to purge us initially of our sensual spirituality, to let go of relying upon feelings of spirituality to measure the presence of God, to open to love and the filling of the Spirit in darkness
- Further movement to dark nights that take us deeper into purgation that open us to look into the whole of character – even to purge us of good character done in the power of the self – to move us from the fruit of the self to the fruit of the Spirit.

2. **Deep purging of beginner's natural character (vices and *virtues*) to develop fruit of the Spirit: (to deal with our "consciousness of goodness")**

The Spirit thinks we are ready for a deeper purging of the former manner of life in terms of the vices – impatience, envy, excess anger, jealousy, wrath, selfishness, pride etc.

Importantly, the Spirit will not only purge us of our vices but the *virtues* that we developed as unbelievers and as young Christians that was much in the power of the self.

3. **This involves a "stripping away" of our dependence upon *our* training of the psychological faculties in order to open them to the work of the Spirit of God:**

(a) Darkness in the Intellect:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

(b) Emptiness in the Memory-Character:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

(c) Dryness in the Will:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

c. The Experience and Signs of being in Ongoing Dark Nights:

- (1) Deep sense of one's own inadequacy of character.
- (2) Lack of zest from one's character and former accomplishments and even future endeavors.
- (3) A distrust in life's promises that seek to satisfy the heart, a new sense that this life is an inadequate home.

- (4) A renewed sense of loneliness as a result of your good character.
- (5) Ministry may be good and functional for the sake of others, but it does not satisfy the soul, it does not provide the rivers of living water.
- (6) A deep dissatisfaction in theological knowledge alone as well as our general knowledge and wisdom-base for life.
- (7) A sense that you will not be loved in awareness of the truth of oneself – a feeling that one is unacceptable.
- (8) A deep knowledge in my will that I am more filled with myself than God.

d. Temptations in Ongoing Dark Nights:

The issue has to do with knowledge, character and our treasures in the will and heart. Perhaps at the bottom is the deep belief that I will not be loved in the truth of myself, that dark nights will end in rejection and abandonment. It is this deep rejection point that keeps us from dark nights – we will be tempted to show and experience our good alone to be loved. This reflects the deep belief that there is no one down at the core of the self, that we will only be alone in the truth of our self = a major problem.

- (1) to hold onto our goodness and character.
- (2) to despair of the Rivers of Living Water and do the spiritual disciplines without openness to the heart and Spirit.
- (3) to defend against opening to the heart's desire for the rivers of living water and spiritual hunger due to unrequited love.
- (4) to resist entering dark nights by giving oneself to ministry as a defense against introspection and painful self-awareness.
- (5) to create Ministries of Consolation and Strength:

e. How to Experience/What to Do in Ongoing Dark Nights:

Regarding Early Dark Nights (reminder)

- (1) First, be open to fact that the spiritual dryness may be a sign of God working inwardly in a dark night of the senses and not merely the causal result of one's own sin.
- (2) The spiritual disciplines have changed in terms of their purpose or function in the believer's life during a dark night *from* being "felt" nourishment *to* that of a mirror into the reality of one's sinfulness and deepening need for the Cross.

- (3) In a dark night, there is a need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself in the power of the self, which is *precisely what the dark night is trying to cure one of*.
- (4) Believers in a dark night should expect and want nothing from God (particularly a feeling) in doing spiritual disciplines except what He has to give.
- (5) Believers in a dark night must resist the temptation to use spiritual disciplines to generate a spiritual feeling, to “make something happen” or to make more of their religious experience than it is.
- (6) Leaders in the church (those who counsel, preach, teach and lead congregational worship) need to resist the temptation to generate an experience for their people, but only assist others in being open to the truth of themselves in relationship to God, in being open to what God has for them.
- (7) Those in a dark night need to be faithful to present themselves in doing the spiritual disciplines despite the fact that practice of them may feel spiritually painful and lonely (Rom. 6:13, 12:1-2).
- (8) Believers in a dark night need to consider that their spiritual dryness and boredom may be God’s way of getting their attention inwardly in love, to attend less to a feeling and more to what the Spirit is praying for and attempting to transform by teaching them (Romans 8:26-30).

Regarding Ongoing Dark Nights

- (1) Learn to sit amongst the weeds with God as Gardener, not the self – open the heart to the truth of oneself relationally to God. Matt. 11:28ff.
- (2) Let go of one’s goodness, let go of one’s integrity, otherwise this creates such fragile believers. Begin to open to the freedom to be a failure in oneself to find oneself in Jesus.
- (3) Let go of one’s character as the road map you trust in for getting around in the world. Open to being “spiritually dizzy,” to seeing through the sham of trusting oneself and open to wanting to trust God.
- (4) Continue to be diligent to present oneself for obedience and the spiritual disciplines, to do one’s duty but from the heart and not as a way to “bite the bullet” in being good as a way to perfect oneself in the power of the self.
- (5) Be willing to open to a new power for ministry – reliance upon the Holy Spirit, to wait, to listen.
- (6) Resist ministries of consolation, resist “falling asleep” to what really is going on in one’s soul versus what one believes and teaches, lest you deceive yourself and others that your words are easily and readily true in your life. In this case, others will not be helped.

- (7) Join together with others who are willing to go on this journey together into the darkness, our cluelessness, the truth of ourselves in His love and acceptance.

f. Concerns and Qualifications about ongoing Dark Nights:

- (1) Depression distinguished from Dark Nights = important.
 - (a) From an objective standpoint, the dark night is a movement of the Spirit on behalf of the believer, whereas clinical depression has a more historical and/or biological etiology.
 - (b) From the subjective viewpoint, clinical depression may involve no particular object or focus other than a diffused sense of loss of pleasure, a difficulty in sleep, and a generally depressed mood with a physiological edge resulting in overall energy loss. On the contrary, the dark night has a more fine *focus*, namely, upon one's relationship with God, which is particularly brought into view in the practice of the spiritual disciplines (prayer, reading the Bible, fellowship, hearing preaching, worship etc.). That is, the individual may not experience any of the symptoms of clinical depression in general, and only experiences depression, loss of energy, anxiety, guilt and a general sense of uneasiness when one is consciously aware of God and the religious life. If there is a diffused depressed mood or uneasiness while in a dark night, it can be brought into fine focus by attending consciously to one's spiritual life. In fact, the believer in a dark night may feel quite energized in life's activities in general and, as a result, repress the religious dimension in light of the fact that this is the objective focus of the internal turmoil. It is helpful for a spiritual mentor and therapist at least to be alert to these issues.
- (2) Dark Nights and the need to have a mentor:
- (3) Remember: Dark Nights are what it is go be filled with the Spirit to the degree that we can experience this and to the degree God wishes us to experience his work in the depths of our heart and vices.
- (4) Caution: Beware of thinking that sin separates you from God and His holiness and that this is the explanation of dark nights – so that if you confess sin, you will experience consolation again.
- (5) The Demonic and Dark Nights: No doubt the demons will be involved in dark nights, but their goal is quite different to God.
 - Demonic goals are to get you to work harder to deal with your guilt, get you to strive for spiritual feelings over truth and God, to move you to despair.
 - God's goals are transformation and love: to move you into true self-awareness of the former manner of life in the presence of the cross, your neediness and His love.
- (6) Dark Nights versus external trials:

(7) When Dark Nights and trials are very painful:

g. Results or Fruits of Ongoing Dark Nights

(1) Greater freedom from grandiosity in ministry and attachment to our being successful.

(2) Greater freedom from arrogance in spiritual life and attachment to our goodness.

(3) Greater freedom from domination by emotions.

(4) Purification of our infantile idea of God.

(5) Development of the theological virtues in the Spirit:

(a) Moving from theological knowledge to Faith in God

(b) Moving from hope-trust in character to hope-trust in God

(c) Moving from the love of loving God (as experiencing God) to loving God as God (despite my experience) – letting God be the center and not my need-to-experience-God as the center of my life.

Conclusion:

What will keep us from opening to God in a dark night? The deep belief that I if I enter into the truth of myself, that I will be alone, that I will not be loved, that I will lose something. However, the truth is that God is here: what I have learned in life is that nothing can separate me from the love of God.

The journey is, first, to be who you are in his presence, and from there to become all you can be in Him. We will lose much in the journey into the dark nights (*our* sense of goodness, *our* faithfulness, *our* ability to love), but we have so much to gain in the Spirit – and we cannot lose His love.

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1. Read thoughtfully and prayerfully Eph. 3:16-19. Take counsel with the Lord and your soul regarding the degree to which the text reflects or does not reflect your present experience of the love of God and being filled with all the fullness of God. Do not try to muster up any experience; be open to the truth with God.

10 minutes

2. Talk with the Lord regarding the degree to which some of your good traits or virtues (kindness, friendliness, patience etc.) were generated more in the power of the self than the Spirit? Explore with the Lord the degree to which they tempt you to depend upon your own strength and hinder deeper dependence upon God. Open to your need for the Lord that lies even behind your strengths.

10 minutes

3. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which you have experienced the love of God in the context of your badness and sin. Ask the Lord whether you find within yourself a temptation to hide your badness from yourself and God in prayer? Briefly open to your sin and neediness with Him.

10 minutes

4. Talk with the Lord regarding the degree to which you have experienced "darkness in the intellect." In this case, the Spirit is less giving consolation to your intellectual knowledge of the faith but more is leading your heart to want the God who is "behind the written page." Open deeply to this desire and open to the indwelling presence of the Spirit.

10 minutes

5. Read prayerfully John 15:1-5. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which you are no longer impressed with or even experience a deep distrust with your character being sufficient to fuel your Christian life. Ask the Lord to show you the degree to which you really believe that apart from Him you can do nothing. Is this evident in your behavior? Come to him in the truth of this and your need of Him.

10 minutes

6. Take counsel with your soul and the Lord on the following: if you have a ministry of some sort, to what degree are you tempted to have what Coe calls a "ministry of consolation" in which you are tempted to minister out of *your* strength. Ask the Lord what it would look like to minister out of weakness so that His strength could be perfected in you.

10 minutes

How to Put on Christ:

Doing Spiritual Disciplines from the *Heart* in the *Spirit*

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"The Christian life is what you do when you realize that you can do nothing." Dallas Willard

Introduction

- We are to put on Christ and here is where obedience is crucial to the Christian life, in fact, it is a given! It is expected. It is your minimal service to present yourself in obedience. Eph. 4:22-24:
- **Spiritual disciplines are merely intentional ways to respond to the call of obedience, intentional ways to respond to the Word and Commands of God. So that is what we are talking about tonight: Obedience to the commands of God and their place in transformation.**
- The truth is: the Word of God is full of commands. What it asks of us, we are to do! Thus, it is important to get clear on how we hear the commands of God and what we do with them. And it is important to feel the confrontation of the Word, that is calling us to something and it is not to be repressed. It is crucial to get clear on this point, or we can get lost for much of our Christian life.

A. How Do We Hear [in fact] the Commands of God

- According to Dallas Willard, there is much magical thinking going on in Evangelicalism: that if we just hear good teaching long enough and believe it, it will transform our life.
- How have you responded to the Word-command of God lately?
- What are the possible ways to hear the Word:

B. Theology of Obedience and Spiritual Disciplines

1. According to Paul: the whole life is a training in Godliness or obedience to the will of God.

I Tim. 4:7: bodily discipline is of some value, but discipline yourselves for the purpose of Godliness, for this is profitable for all things in this life and the next.
I Cor. 9:27 I discipline my body and make it my self lest I am disqualified from the ministry.

2. The call of God to obey and train to become Godly is of two kinds:

a. General call of God (Word-command) to obey.

b. Specific-circumstantial call of God (Word-command) to obey. Obedience to the call of God (Word-command) in specific circumstances.

Point:

General Principle: we are to train ourselves in the General Call of God for the sake of developing a character that is ready to obey when called upon in the Specific-circumstantial call. (And some commands are for all the time, e.g., loving God, praying without ceasing etc.)

3. What is the relationship between this training in Godliness and the spiritual disciplines?

Spiritual Discipline: a specific training of the Heart by the Spirit to the General Call of God in order to develop a habit of heart to obey the Specific call of God at all times.

4. In spiritual disciplines and training, what do we lead with, where do we begin?

- We always lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit.

“lead with the body:” the focus is “do it.

“to open the heart” to the truth of oneself in relation to God. We don’t wait for the heart, but we don’t just bite the bullet.

“to the Spirit”

5. How to identify a spiritual discipline or an opportunity for training:

Structure:

1. Take any command (e.g. “Love your wife”) or
 - any vice trait to be put off or virtue to be put on (patience)
 - any reality to be experienced (in Christ, pardoned etc.)
 - any example to be modeled (Paul, Jesus in retreat or fasting)
2. According to Willard, it is magical thinking that just by a good intention, this will become a reality from the heart.
3. The question you must ask: “What kind of person must I become to live out this command from the heart by the Spirit as a habit?”
4. If you take this seriously, you must now discern with the Spirit what you must do, give yourself to in order to become that kind of a person.

- Note:

6. What kinds of training can we give ourselves to, how to decide which to do? As you hear the General Call of God:

- a. Ask yourself whether you are being called to Putt off the Former manner of life or Put On the New:
 - Some disciplines are designed to put off the old man or former manner of life. Often solitude, meditation on passages addressing vices and soul work in prayer help us explore the vices of the heart with God. These are also **disciplines of detachment** from inordinate loves and vices.
 - The putting on disciplines are the most practiced, which attempt to develop Christ like character in the Spirit (meditation, study, worship, celebration, adoration, silence). These are also **disciplines of attachment** to what is good in God.
 - When “putting-on” disciplines are felt as purgative in desolation (that is, they expose how little our heart is interested in meditation, celebration etc.), *then these “putting-on” disciplines by intention become “putting-off” in reality by the Spirit.*

- b. Ask whether I am to give myself to an Intention, a Rhythm or a Regimen (cf. Schema and notes on next page):

Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Regimens

[Specific Plans for
Obedience]

Spiritual Rhythms

[Classical Spiritual Disciplines
for the Sake of Love]

Lectio Divina Solitude Prayer Fasting etc.

Spiritual Intentions

[Foundational Disciplines as a Way of Being; How to Intend all the
Disciplines in Christ]

Presenting

Recollection

Honesty

Discernment

1. First, a Description of each:

a. Spiritual Intentions

- These **Spiritual Intentions** are **foundation-disciplines** to protect all the spiritual disciplines and obedience from moralism and inordinate effort or under-effort.

1. **Presenting Oneself as a Sacrifice:** the spiritual discipline of allowing the self to be confronted by the Word and command of God for the sake of a conscious response to the Will of God.

This protects the will from falling asleep to the will of God.

2. **Prayer of Recollection:** the discipline of reminding the self of its true identity “in Christ” (full pardon and full acceptance) and “Christ in me” (the Spirit is present).

This protects our life from moralism and making decisions out of false guilt, shame and my own power.

3. **Honesty or Truth-telling in the heart:** the spiritual discipline whereby upon presenting oneself to God, one opens oneself to what is truly going on in the heart so that this can be brought to God.

This protects the presenting of ourselves from arrogance, closed heartedness, superficiality etc. Let the heart be a mirror to the truth and open this to God.

4. **Discernment:** the spiritual discipline whereby we learn to watch what God is doing in us, what His will is versus our own or the devils, how we can better cooperate. Here we seek wisdom on how to respond to His work that is ongoing within us.

This protects us from responding to false calls of guilt concerning what to do in our life, to fantasy, to the demonic, to our grandiosity. Here we learn to wait on God and watch His work more than our own.

b. Rhythms of the Classical Disciplines:

- These are the classical spiritual disciplines such as solitude, silence, meditation (*lectio divina*), petitionary prayer, contemplative prayer, fasting etc. for the purpose of developing a *rhythm* in life of attachment to God, turning the heart to the love of God and loving God.
- This training of the character helps insure that *regimens* and *obedience* in general do not reduce to mere moralism and natural fortitude (Aristotle and the pagans could do “spiritual” regimens).

c. Regimens for Transforming the Character in the Spirit

- This involves the training of the person’s capacities with the Spirit into the fruit of the Spirit and a way to take seriously the commands, virtues, and realities of God.
- Structure: Take a command, example of or reality etc.):
 1. It is magical thinking that just by a good intention, this will be kept from the heart.
 2. The question you must ask: What kind of person must I become to live out this command from the heart by the Spirit as a habit?
 3. From there, you must set forth a short term plan to begin to try to practice this with the Spirit – a short term project as with the development of any new skill.

E.g. “Love God with all your heart”: I can spend 20 minutes each day opening my heart to adore, love, be with and treasure my Lord (or be open to how little I care for this = an opportunity for truth talking with God). You can develop a regimen like this for any command, practice, reality etc.

E.g. “Pray for one another”: you can take 20 minutes a day for petitionary prayer.

2. Second, how to Hear and Respond Reasonably to the Word from the Heart:

- Willard’s Point: If you shoot for nothing, you will surely hit it.
- In General: Spiritual Intentions as the foundation-disciplines are how we are to hear and respond to the Word from the heart by the Spirit:
 - a. Presenting the Self as a Sacrifice:

Intention: “God, I hear your Word; Here I am.”

b. Recollection:

Intention: "God, what ever I am to become or do, I want to do this in Christ and I don't want to do this alone but abiding in You."

c. Honesty or Truth-telling:

Intention: "God, what is going on in my heart regarding this truth/command – where am I about this, lest I deceive myself."

d. Discernment regarding what to become:

Intention: "God, what is that that you want me to become if I am to do your will?"

e. Discernment regarding what to do in light of what He is doing:

Intention: "God, What are you doing and what are you asking me to do?"

Ask: (1) Lord, should this only be an intention?

(2) Lord, should this be a rhythm?

(3) Lord, should this be a regimen?

f. Discernment regarding a plan:

Intention: Plan and do it. Lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit.

3. Third, the temptation to do the Spiritual disciplines in the flesh versus doing these in Christ and in the Spirit:

a. We will be tempted to use spiritual disciplines and obedience to create a Christian character by our effort and fortitude rather than open to the Spirit to do this in us.

b. We can be tempted to do spiritual disciplines motivated by the habits of the heart in original sin rather than as a way "In Christ" to *counter* these habits. That is, we can be tempted to
 (1) use spiritual disciplines to appease conscience; rather, let obedience and spiritual disciplines reveal a need to fly to God.

(2) use spiritual disciplines to hide from our guilt; rather, let obedience and spiritual disciplines expose you to your sin and fly to God *in* pardon.

(3) use spiritual disciplines to cover our shame; rather, open to Christ's cover of righteousness in the midst of your sin and shame.

(4) use spiritual disciplines to fill the deep loneliness with consolation; rather, let obedience and the spiritual disciplines open you to what the Spirit would give and teach.

c. We may be tempted to not want to feel the confrontation with the Word or Command of God at all.

4. Fourth, Things to Consider and Remember about this Training:

- a. Spiritual Disciplines are relationally understood and defined.
- b. The spiritual disciplines are not a set of esoteric practices only for a select few Christians but reflect a reasonable and sincere intention necessary for all believers if they are to become not merely hearers but doers of the Word from the heart, that is, as a habit of the heart.
- c. The Spiritual disciplines are not intended to fix the self or transform us but are opportunities for presenting ourselves to God in obedience for the Spirit's transformation work (Rom. 12:1-2, 6:12-13).
- d. The Spiritual disciplines begin as acts of fortitude for the beginner or child and over much time may be transformed by trials and dark nights into fortitude in the Spirit, in neediness, open to the Spirit.
- e. Though, the spiritual disciplines are what the mature person would do in the right circumstances, they start as intentional trainings of the human spirit at any time in order to set in motion a habit that will emerge when appropriate.
- f. We will experience spiritual disciplines where we are in our spiritual development. For beginners, they may be joyful, exciting, encouraging. For others they will be all love and good. But for those in dark nights, they may be dull and dry- but still good for looking into the mirror of one's heart.

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1. Ask the Lord how it is that you hear the Word or respond to the commands of God in recent times. Are you excited, bored, frustrated, despairing with the Word or wonder why you are not further along in your spiritual life? Open your heart to the truth of this.

10 minutes

2. Read prayerfully I Tim. 4:7. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which you have in the past and are now disciplining yourself for the purpose of Godliness.

10 minutes

3. Take counsel with your soul and the Lord the degree to which you are tempted to use spiritual disciplines and obedience to create a Christian character by our effort and fortitude rather than open to the Spirit to do this. Just be open to the truth of this with the Lord.

5 minutes

4. Discuss with the Lord the degree to which the disciplines of “spiritual intentions” of honesty, presenting, recollection and discernment are at work in your life. Briefly prayer the following prayers of intention and open to God:

Presenting: “God, Here I am. I am open to you and your will. ”

Recollection: “God, what ever I am to become or do, I want to do this in Christ and I don’t want to do this alone but abiding in You.”

Honesty or Truth-telling: “God, what is going on in my heart regarding the truth of myself in relation to You and others.

Discernment : “God, What are you doing in my life and what are you asking me to do?”

20 minutes

5. Ask the Lord whether there are any particular areas of your life that He might like you to establish a short-term *regimen* for the purpose of transformation.

- a. Discuss with the Lord whether there is any temptation towards magical thinking that this area could be resolved by mere self-effort and natural fortitude.
- b. Ask the Lord, “What kind of person must I become to live out this command or put off this sin from the heart by the Spirit as a habit?”
- c. Ask the Lord for wisdom regarding establishing a short-term plan to begin to try to practice something that will assist you in becoming that kind of person in the Spirit. This should be a short-term project appropriate to the issue (possibly 2 hours over a week’s time).

20 minutes