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American Baptist Seminary of the West in direct affiliation with TSF adopt in one accord the following statements of purpose:

1. We shall continually seek to encourage and build one another up in our lives of Christian discipleship. This fellowship is therefore specifically directed at providing a Christian community conducive to the authentic Christian spiritual formation of its individual members. We are thus seeking to provide an environment in which the theological word will become flesh. In this sense, ours is a pastoral task and fellowship intended that we might individually and corporately "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:14)
2. We are devoted to accepting and learning from the witness of kindred brothers and sisters learned in the evangelical theological disposition. However, we seek not only to gather from the insights of fellow evangelicals, but likewise to "witness of what we have seen of Christ, and what He will show us." (Acts 26:16) It is our motivation to glorify God with our works and thus proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, He who is the fullness and only complete manifestation of the mystery of God. In that we are committed to the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ in both word and deed, the "social dimensions" of the gospel stand firmly, though not uniquely, within this fellowship's concern.
3. The ESU/TSF is committed to maintaining the well-minded, level-headed, and warm-hearted evangelical theological commitment of the American Baptist Seminary of the West. It shall be ours to use our God-given gifts and talents to work for the betterment and unity of ABSW. In this light, we express our conformity with the evangelical Christian doctrinal confession of the trustees, administration and faculty of ABSW. We shall endeavor to cooperate with the ABSW community's devotion to this confession and commitment. It shall be ours to be instruments for the furtherance of the unity of the whole body of Christ.

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION** (*Probing questions, suggestions, encouragement in areas of personal/spiritual growth.*)

#### SEASONS OF PRAYER

By Gregory A. Youngchild

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven..." (Eccl. 3:1) In the spiritual life, not less than in nature, there are patterns and rhythms; prayer is a process, and therefore change is an intrinsic part of it. Yet change is somehow always a surprise for us when it occurs, as if contrary to observation we expected things to remain constant--especially in our spiritual life. And many times the changes we experience in prayer are not altogether pleasant, and may even be quite confusing.

I have in mind here particularly those readers who have undergone a deep conversion, be it dramatic or gradual, and who find--in the months and years following--that their prayer life has grown cool, and find themselves disoriented and uneasy at heart about the change. One's prayer was usually exciting, perhaps in tongues and filled with

bubbling praise in the days right after conversion. One could hardly wait until the next time the group met for its prayer meeting; one's sense of joy was so abundant and lively that prayer was always spontaneous and effortless. Now, though, things feel different. The inner fire seems to be dying down. There are lots of reasons why one cannot get to the prayer meeting this week, and praying is becoming a little more like a chore than a chance to feel God's tangible presence.

Not everyone experiences this shift from enthusiasm to subtlety, as I call it. There are rare individuals who seem never to lose the initial fire of joy first felt in their moment of conversion, and we can easily recall having met such people. But we can easily recall them because they are rare, as if God has bestowed on them a special grace for a mysterious and wonderful purpose. I am convinced personally that we cannot choose to become this kind of person, though indeed we may covet their gift of grace; the choice is God's alone.

Most people do experience a change in the character of their prayer life as time passes, however, and many of them feel uneasy about the shift. In the course of my work with theology students and young ministers on their personal prayer life, I frequently find that the uneasiness is at bottom a kind of fear about the unknownness of this new spiritual place. It is difficult to articulate the feelings that accompany this change, but usually what is verbalized is a vague, gnawing doubt about whether one is really on the right path, whether one has begun drifting away from the Lord. It isn't a crisis of faith as such, but rather a confusion about where faith is leading and a worry about how to discern the prompting. In many instances this seems in turn to lead to a kind of amorphous guilt that generates a frenzied attempt to return to the old way of praying, trying to recapture and rekindle the fires of enthusiasm as if just maybe one could--with enough will power--become that rare kind of person whose initial joy seems never to fade. One begins feeling that perhaps he or she doesn't have faith enough anymore, and begins wondering about the validity of the earlier conversion experience, especially when one discovers that the showers of spring cannot be forced to rain down on the summer's parched land.

What is this shift from enthusiasm to subtlety all about? Provided that there is no evidence of actual, cultivated spiritual laziness, and provided that one indeed has desired, intended and tried to be vigilant and faithful to prayer and to the Lord in the rest of one's daily life, we can assume that what is taking place is of God. We can assume it is guided by the Counselor whom Christ promised us. The movement within us is of the one who would come to teach us all truth and would give us what we need to know in the proper hour, in due season.

It is divinely providential that our early experience of God's love should be strong and palpable, to create in us a desire for the goodness of the Lord. Eventually, however, we must learn to walk by faith, not by feelings, as the Spirit teaches us to stand on our spiritual feet without the props of satisfying sensations. As St. Paul wrote, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways." (1 Cor. 13:11) When we are spiritually children, the Lord gives us sweets and cookies in our prayer because these bring us delight and convince us of God's love for us. But, in due season, we must become spiritual adults and learn to feast on the more subtle manna which the Lord provides in the desert so that we may find our delight not in the favors of the Lord, but in the Lord himself.

Those who have discovered this truth in the season of drier prayer usually undertake a more quiet, meditative way of praying; now they will more often have a private hour with much silence, complemented by corporate worship. Frequently there will evolve a desire for more structure and self-discipline, maybe even a kind of "rule of life," though not without a different form of spontaneity co-existing. And if prayer itself is seldom exciting and sometimes even "dry bones," it does not matter much; they are growing more patient and more receptive to the advent of a new season of the Lord's mercy and presence.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in a treatise on *The Love of God*, writes of there being four degrees of love. The first degree is a love of self for the sake of self, what we would call pure self-interested, narcissistic love. The second degree is a love of God for the sake of self. In the final analysis, I suppose, much of our love of God is this kind, loving God for what God gives us and does for us. It stands in contrast to the third degree of love, which is a love of God for the sake of God. In this stage we are beyond a love of God that is self-interested and in the midst of a love that is "disinterested," that is, not attached to having proofs given before love will be returned. Those who experience the shift I have spoken of, are being invited into the third kind of love, invited to love God not merely for what God does for us but simply because God is God.

I wouldn't wish to convey the idea that there is a solid line between the second and third stages or kinds of love. It is true that the shift between the first and the second is more obvious and likely represents the conversion experience itself. But the next phase, for all the distinctness between degrees two and three, is perhaps a lifelong journey; our potential for a destructive kind of self-interest is indeed enormous and the ways of self-seeking are often very subtle and seductive. The desire to return to conversion joy and to turn away from a more subtle peace is itself an example of how ambitiously motivated even our good desires can be. We vacillate for a long time between love of God for our own sake and for God's own sake, before we begin to feel some sense of assurance that our love is growing purer and less egocentric.

This time of purification, in turn, makes our prayer a place of purgation and disillusioning, and the great mystical writers have produced numerous treatises about the progressive cleansing and enlightening that takes place here. Rather than describe the matter in detail, I would just note that one may feel an increasing sense of opaqueness settling over one's soul, rather than the increasing sense of clarity that might be expected. The reason for this is that God is both revealed and mysterious, immanent and transcendent, seen and unseen. To seek God as God truly is requires and results in a gradual but always uncomfortable shattering of our illusions about God. To our spiritual eyes it seems as if the way is growing less clear, more unknown. In fact we are only coming closer to the Truth, and going further away from our preconceived notions. The further we go in prayer, the fewer "statements" we can make about God and the more God becomes the mysterious Other. But it is by any means a way of ignorance. Knowing takes on a different feeling, if it can be called a "feeling" at all, because one is coming to truly know in a wholly different way--by faith alone.

To some people, I'm sure, this sounds needlessly arcane and esoteric. Yet St. Bernard tells us that to journey this way is indeed to venture into

the fourth degree of love, a love of self--and by extension all creatures--for the sake of God. Where the mystics speak of the state of union, Bernard translates it into experiential terms: our love of God for God's own sake brings us eventually to a love that--for the love of God--teaches us to love others and widens our heart to embrace ourselves and all humanity. Duty disappears from our attempts to be loving, and we discover that our love of God has made us unable not to love others. This pinnacle of loving is reached, says Bernard, only sporadically and then only briefly, so habituated are we to lesser levels of love. Yet the promise is there, as Christ has declared, that we can become one as he and the Father are one.

"For everything there is a season..." Those who have devoted their lives to the love of God and who have written of their journey through prayer into Christ, have told us that indeed there are seasons through which to pass; a time to speak and a time to be silent, a time for feelings and a time when feelings are absent, a time for consoling light and a time for faith in darkness. This is not a pelagian task superimposed on faith, but an observation about what does in fact happen in the course of the spiritual life. Just as each person's relationship to God is unique and the path to be walked ours alone, so the character of the seasons of prayer are different for different pray-ers. Yet there are nonetheless seasons. And though the changes are surprising and often disconcerting, the grace to persevere is ever-present, and the single constant--God's abiding love for us--provides the needed source of stability and assurance to carry us on our journey.

When one undergoes a shift from enthusiasm to subtlety in prayer and feels disoriented and confused about what is happening spiritually, I often urge them to use Merton's prayer when their own soul seems unable to find words.

"I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."  
--Thomas Merton

[Greg welcomes correspondence with TSF members concerning spiritual formation. His address is 139 Thimble Islands Rd., Stony Creek CT 06405. In a future issue, he will respond to issues raised in your letters.]

#### NOTES TO SUBSCRIBERS:

1. If your subscription arrived in our office after September 1, you may have missed getting on the computer. If you did not get the October *Bulletin* and *Themelios*, please let us know.
2. A reminder of the new rates for TSF subscribers: Rates will be now be \$10/year with a student rate of \$8/year. If *Themelios* is ordered separately, it will be \$4.50/year and the *Bulletin* will cost \$6.50/year if subscribed to separately. However, student groups who order 10 or more copies to be sent to one address, there will be a discount price of \$7/year.