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# BULLETIN

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# SPIRITUAL FORMATION

*(Probing questions, suggestions and encouragement in areas of personal and spiritual growth)*

## FAITHFULLY OUT OF CONTROL

**By Gregory A. Youngchild, Director of the West Haven Emergency Assistance Task Force, New Haven, Connecticut.**

If I remember correctly, the little tract had two little diagrams sketched on it, each showing a throne representing my life. In one diagram, my ego sat atop the throne; in another, Christ reigned from the seat of authority. The question posed to me, it seems, was something like "who's in control?" or "which would you rather have in control?" I don't recall the image or words exactly after ten years, but I do vividly still have the general after-image of those diagrams in mind and can still feel the challenge it made to have me restore my ego to its proper place of servitude to Christ-upon-the-throne.

I remember, too, how eagerly I wanted things to follow the right diagram . . . and how disheartened I was to discover how easily and often things followed the wrong diagram. From simple truths we sometimes can draw simplistic conclusions. I thought that giving my life to Christ "once for all" meant never having to do it again . . . only to discover that it meant having ever to do it again, "seventy times seven." Thomas Merton, a monk of Gethsemani, once wrote: "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!"

The struggle goes on. I desire Christ to have the throne, and I bump him off the bench every chance I get. I repent, begin again in earnest servitude with great resolution to remain obedient, and soon enough discover I've edged back onto the chair's seat, wriggling my ego back into an evermore secure position of control. "Seventy times seven."

At moments I feel discouraged that so many of my intentions turn into paving bricks for the road to infernal darkness. Even the life in Christ at times seems like "a striving after wind." There is no solace in hearing Paul, among many saints echoing the lament through the ages, say: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

At other moments I feel regretful that so often I fall short of the mark. I feel wearied by my failures and more so by my frailty. But somehow the grace seems to be there to pick myself up again and begin once more: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

There is a difference between these two reactions to my shortcomings. In one instance my realization makes me discouraged, depressed and dejected. I feel unloved and unloveable, I feel es-

tranged from God and overwhelmed by my inadequacies and faults. On another occasion, my realization—even though it is disheartening—leads me to try again. I feel less caught in illusions about my abilities to be perfect, and I also feel more hopeful about learning from my faults; indeed, I can even smile and say, "there I go again."

The difference is an old observation, the distinction between my ego's awareness of my sin and an awareness received by my spirit. One is called guilt and the other is conviction. Guilt debilitates, whereas conviction liberates; guilt enervates, whereas conviction enables conversion, the turning of my heart and self back toward the Lord. To compare, subsequent to my experience, the state of my deepest feelings with the "fruit" spoken of by Paul in Gal. 5:22-23, is to practice discernment of spirits. It is to discover whether my feelings are "of God" as John says (1 Jn. 4:1) and characterized by the Spirit who sets the captives free, or from my own "'ought'-encrusted" and guilt-ridden conscience that knows all too well the spirit of slavery.

The curious thing about guilt, however, is that contrary to what we might imagine it is another way of our remaining in control. It is another ploy of our ego to take charge and occupy our life's throne.

The objective of the ego is control, maintaining self-dominance. Often its tactics are oriented toward reinforcing our self image as one who is "on top of things," who is successful and competent and self-sufficient. But just as often it usurps what is the rightful power of the One who holds the throne, namely, the power of judgment, and asserts its authority by condemnation. And in this capacity our ego shows its real difference from the power of the Spirit who convicts. Our ego knows only law, not gospel; it knows only damnation, not salvation; it knows only a perverse justice, not divine mercy. To recognize the spiritual qualities of gospel, salvation and divine mercy is to acknowledge another, higher power and authority . . . and this our ego cannot do of its own, precisely because of its self-orientation and inherent desire to be in control. Thus, when it cannot assert control by appeal to vanity, it resorts to control by appeal to pride.

And the even more curious thing is that the pride to which our ego appeals is usually labeled "humility." For the Christian striving to live according to the gospel call, this is particularly seductive and seditious. Our eagerness to "do the right thing" leaves us especially vulnerable to the ego's shaming of us for failure to follow the laws it proffers as "the way to salvation." In our weakness and fear, we want to be told rules and regulations. Never mind that what God calls "clean" our ego calls "unclean;" never mind that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free, as Paul writes, because our ego would rather have us submit to more yokes of bondage. It is too frightening to live without a letter of the law; there is too much ambiguity and potential for error to follow that way of freedom. We would rather submit to a rulebook order. And our ego fully encourages us, because it seems like a means of sacrificing our own will and humbly submitting to the Lord's will. Hence our ego can so easily punish us with guilty feelings for our lack of humility, for our stubborn refusal to bend to the letter of its laws.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that it has nothing to do with the gospel call to a life of faith. When we walk by faith

### IS ANYTHING HAPPENING ON YOUR CAMPUS?

If there are seminary or religion students on your campus meeting for fellowship, discussion or service, we would like to hear about it. TSF can make available to such groups its resources. Also, by mentioning what is happening on various campuses in the "Academe" section of *TSF Bulletin*, we may be able to suggest ideas and encouragement to students at other schools. Please write Theological Students Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703.

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and not by rules, we have to relinquish our control. The walk by faith is guided by the Spirit, and our ego and the Spirit cannot both be in control as guides at the same time. "The Spirit blows where it wills," says Jesus (Jn. 3:8), and only those whose ego is out of control are free to be led wherever the Spirit may direct. Only those who have been freed from the bondage to law are able to enjoy the liberty of the children of freedom.

Having said that, it is also true that to a limited extent it is helpful for us to resist being out of control. This is so not merely for ego-preserving reasons but because of how easily the ego—defeated in its attempts to control through vanity and pride—reasserts its bid for dominance through self-righteousness. Without the restraints of law, the ego becomes inflated and believes itself to have gone beyond accountability. The excesses so abundant and obvious in the early Corinthian community, practiced so competently by the "spiritually mature," serve as a useful caution to anyone thinking he or she is so perfected as to be above correction and past the need for relearning old lessons.

But, in the case of the ardent Christian, this is perhaps less a real threat than is often supposed; more often it becomes the convenient social or personal rationale for evading the risk of

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under the law is, in all honesty,  
the attempt to barter love from God.**

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daring to become free, faithfully out of control. The thorns of scrupulosity that seem invariably to grow with the rose of a generous heart are stinging enough to keep pricking one's conscience to be alert for complacency.

The larger problem is the seeming incorrigibility of our ego and its natural resistance to losing its dominance. Are there any tactics of faith whereby we can wage this spiritual warfare and emerge victorious? Let me briefly sketch two.

In the first place it is crucial for us not to view the struggle against the ego as something foreign to the Christian life, but to identify it with the way Jesus has invited us to walk with him. There is a very persistent and pernicious assumption embedded in our thinking about the spiritual life that in fact is quite contrary to the truth of the Spirit. It runs something like this: *If only* I can do one more thing, master one more technique, learn one more discipline, read one more good book, turn just one more corner, pass one more milestone in my journey, *then* everything will be better, *then* everything will come easily, *then* it will be all downhill toward home from there. It is the same assumption behind my initial thinking which I mentioned at the outset—that it is possible to do something "once for all" and thereby be done with it for life. If pressed, we would intellectually disown that assumption in a minute. But day by day we live at a feeling and doing level as if it were true.

Ridding ourselves of this assumption is done by seeing that it is precisely in this struggle that we are "working out our salvation with fear and trembling," as Paul says of the spiritual life. Holiness of life is not a point to achieve but a process to be entered into, a taking up of the cross of this very self-struggle and this very warfare on the battlefield of the psyche, and a wrapping

ourselves upon it in an embrace of sacrifice. It is not in spite of this struggle that we are being perfected and recreated. It is exactly in the midst of it. For this we came; for this we said "yes, take control of my life"; for this dying now we have already become victors in Christ Jesus. "Not as the world gives peace do I give you mine," said Jesus, where peace was thought of as an absence of all conflict. He did not pray that we should be taken out of the world of conflict, but that we should be kept from the evil one who would deny that we could find our Lord precisely in that conflict.

Secondly—and this is so intimately bound up with the first—we must confess that at heart our ego is a fearful thing. We are filled with fears, the most central one of which is our fear that we are unloved and unloveable. Why else do we need to assert our ego-self if not to protest against this fear and to assert in the face of it that we are powerful, unique, praiseworthy, and at bottom love-worthy? What else, really, are we trying to prove if not our worthiness to receive attention, appreciation, even adoration—in the end, love—by the constant thrusting of ourselves onto the throne of our life? We desperately want to be loved, to be known as loveable, and most of our ego-antics are directed toward trying to win that from others . . . and, most of all, from God.

When we can see this truth for what it is, without allowing our prideful ego to reassert itself by judging us for being that way, then we recognize that behind our penchant for living under the law is, in all honesty, the attempt to barter love from God. If we do this, God will do that; if we don't do this, God won't do that. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," a little acceptance for a little acceptance, a little obedience for a little love and forgiveness. *Quid pro quo*, as the old phrase goes. An "earning our salvation with fear and trembling."

Our freedom from this kind of tyranny of legalism lies in the deep internalization of a single truth: *Absolutely nothing we can do or fail to do will either increase or decrease God's love for us.*

God's love for us is itself absolute, uncompromising, unconditional. We can do nothing to change that fact. All we can do is accept it or reject it, and that is our free choice: "R.S.V.P., it is up to you," is engraved indelibly upon that invitation of love. Rail against it if we will, and so reveal how suspicious we really are of gifts that are not in some rationalizable way capable of being seen as rewards for our efforts. It will not change this fact into fiction; it will only underscore our ego-commitment to the barter system. To accept the fact, however, is to choose to be faithfully out of control, and as we hold onto it in faith, our ego slides out of the throne once again.

The struggle for control will go on. And on. And on. It is not that we have to put Christ there, and it is not Christ with whom we are wrestling. We wrestle with ourselves; the "new person" in Christ is at war with the "old person" in Adam, and we must *will* the one to have ascendancy over the other. Only gradually in fact can we transfer our deepest identity from the Adamic self to the Christian one because only gradually will our ego-self be defeated by our faith—and that will not come about without real struggle and sacrifice. Going out of control is not as easy as it sounds! But faith makes all things possible, especially a faith toward the struggle itself and faith in the One who has already made us victorious through the free gift of love, "seventy times seven." And so far as we are faithfully out of control, we will know what true freedom from the law is and what perfect liberty as children of God is all about.

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