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# TSF BULLETIN

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# SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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

## THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

**By John W. Ackerman, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Castle, Pennsylvania.**

When I was in seminary, the closest I ever got to personal help with my spiritual life was being a part of a group who would meet for Bible study. There were no courses or books offered by the faculty about prayer. In the pastorate, it has been rather tough sledding. From time to time I have read books and had groups of laypersons and clergy who would gather for discussion and a prayer group, but until five years ago I had not stumbled on to the fact that there is a fifteen-century tradition of spiritual direction or formation. Henri Nouwen mentioned that to grow spiritually you needed "the Bible, silence, and a spiritual guide." The Bible I knew. Silence I could guess about, but what was a spiritual guide? I found that the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. not only required their members to be under the spiritual direction of another member but offered a program for spiritual direction for those outside of Washington, D.C. Wonderful! I found someone who would listen — someone who had some experience helping people respond to the Spirit's leading. Then I found that most Roman Catholic priests and certainly all monks and nuns went through an extensive program of spiritual formation. Why not evangelical Protestants?

I have found that Inter-Varsity recommends a "prayer partner" for every new Christian. Some seminaries are now offering courses and sometimes a director to encourage the spiritual growth of the students. Nouwen, who was swamped with requests at Yale for his courses and private direction, emphasized to the Clinical Pastoral Educators, "Thus the spiritual life of the minister, formed and trained in the school of prayer, is the core of spiritual leadership" (*The Living Reminder*, p. 73).

Our Presbytery has started offering spiritual direction to students "under care," but what can you do if you do not have a judicatory or seminary to offer help and want more than the "blind leading the blind"?

First, intellectual knowledge is helpful. Saint Theresa, who for many years suffered under poor direction, said that a guide of souls needs a background of knowledge about spirituality as well as personal piety. Most of us are limited to the knowledge of our own experience and the few people who have shared with us intimately; but there are patterns of spirituality that can be described. Some personality types pray one way, others in an entirely different way. Preaching or teaching about prayer without knowledge about personal differences is about as responsible as a doctor saying, "Take an aspirin and go to bed" for every ailment. Kenneth Leech's book, *Soul Friend* (Harper, 1977), is a well-written history of spirituality and contains a description of what spiritual direction has meant in different portions of the church. Richard Lovelace's *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP, 1979) is an attempt at a unified field theory of spirituality that is catholic and evangelical. He says, "The relationship of believers to the Holy Spirit is the most important experience of fellowship they have, but is also the most exclusive. It requires careful cultivation until a careful recognition of the Spirit

is established as a constant attitude of the heart" (p. 215).

Second, you will probably need someone with whom to talk or write. Much can be done through the mail. The Church of the Saviour works primarily that way with a bi-monthly report. Others need a support group and others a one-to-one accountability. A seminary professor, a local pastor or an older student may be able to offer guidance. A good director will not attempt to lead you to his or her own theology or style of prayer, but instead help you to focus on where the Spirit is leading. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the director and mature souls do not need permanent direction. Most of us beginners need another person or a group just to discipline ourselves to the necessary time for quiet. A retreat can provide an opportunity for extended silence and a time for reviewing, alone or with a group, what God has been saying over a period of time. Seminary students may wish to initiate such retreats for their campus. Roman Catholics excel at a directed retreat which is a biblically oriented structure of private prayer followed by a talk with a director. The essence of good one-to-one direction, says William Connolly, are two questions: "Do you listen to the Lord when you pray? Are you telling Him how listening to Him makes you feel?"

Third, we need help in listening to others. Clinical Pastoral Training helps pastors to listen to others, but in my experience almost exclusively on a psychological dimension. "Just as verbatim reports of our conversation with patients can help us to deepen our interpersonal sensitivities, so a continuing evaluation of our spiritual life can lead us closer to God (Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, p. 71). We need to evaluate our own spiritual life, but we also need to help develop discernment in listening to others. Sharing case studies where the focus is on spiritual guidance is very helpful. Most of us need to train our hearts to hear and sensitize our hearts to pick up the movements of the Spirit in the heart of the other. Most of us need practical clinical help in overcoming our blind spots.

For many students and pastors, finding others to help you grow spiritually and to help you be a good listener to others will be very difficult. "Therefore, it is sad that most ministers have more hours of training in how to talk and be with people than how to talk and be with God. There are even seminaries that the question of how to pray is not a question to which the faculty can respond" (*Ibid.*, p. 69). God encourages us to "take heed to yourselves" (Acts 20:20), not simply for your own formation but "to feed the flock of the Lord which he has obtained with his own blood."

*TSF Bulletin* does not necessarily speak for Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship on matters dealt with in its brief articles. Although editors personally sign the IVCF basis of faith, our purpose is to provide resources for and encouragement towards biblical *thinking* and *living* rather than to formulate "final" answers.

### WHERE ARE THE TSF GROUPS?

Is there a group of students meeting on your campus to discuss Theology? Ethics? Spiritual Formation? Theological Students Fellowship would like to assist in developing a network of such groups in order to help make helpful resources (publications, conferences) conveniently available to seminary and religious studies students. Please write and let us know what is happening on your campus. Theological Students Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703.