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■ **Becoming Actualized Christians**

Dear Timothy and Junia,

Having an intimate relationship with Christ is at the core of being an Evangelical. To this end, I want to urge you to consider three things. They are:

Centering prayer

Contemplative Bible study

An accountability group that helps you maintain spiritual disciplines for consistent Christian living

Allow me to explain what is involved in each of these and how you might go about making them part of your life.

As I made clear in my last letter, all spiritual development begins with prayer. Most Christians think that there's not much involved in the art of praying—you just tell God what you need and want. Regrettably, most of

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us never get beyond that kind of praying. Too many of us continue to think of prayer as my son did at age seven, when he came into the living room one evening and said, “I’m going to bed! I’m going to be praying! Does anybody want anything?”

It’s all right to make your requests known to God. The Bible tells us to do that. Furthermore, the Bible tells us, “You have not because you ask not” (James 4:2). But praying should be more than simply presenting a list of nonnegotiable demands to the Almighty. Two thousand years ago, the Disciples asked Jesus what this something more might be and how they should pray. Jesus told them that when they pray, they should go into a closet, shut the door, and pray to God in secret (Matthew 6:6). I won’t tell you that you should literally go into a closet—but if you are going to pray in depth, you ought to do something like that. You should go somewhere where there are no distractions.

When I was a child at church camp, my cabin counselor told me to go out on a hillside, surrounded by nature’s beauty, and meditate upon Jesus. That never worked for me. There were too many distractions in nature. I would notice the birds and the sky and the grass. The sounds of living creatures would seduce me into listening to them, and soon the conscious awareness of God was gone.

I need solitude and darkness to concentrate upon God, so going into a closet isn’t such a bad idea for me.

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However, closing my eyes while sitting in a quiet place will usually do just as well. I try to do my praying in the morning. I get up about a half hour before I have to, and I “center down” on Jesus. As I lie alone in bed in the early-morning quiet, I wait for God to invade me, to fill my soul, and to take possession of me.

I wish I could say it always happens. To be frank, on most mornings nothing happens. Nothing of God is felt, but I keep at it because I never know when the Spirit will take hold of me. Jesus once said that the Spirit is like the wind, which “blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). He was telling us that no one can control the Holy Spirit nor conjure up its power, but if one waits patiently, there will be an answer.

I learned about this way of having a born-again experience from reading the Catholic mystics, especially *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola*. Ignatius, a founder of the Jesuit order, was once a soldier, and it was only when he spent a long time in a hospital bed recovering from a battle wound that his heart and mind focused on God. Like most Catholic mystics, he developed an intense desire to experience a “oneness” with God. Gradually, he came to feel an intense yearning for the kind of spiritual purity that he believed would enable him to experience the fullness of God’s presence within. This drove Ignatius to explore ways of praying and studying the Bible that would provide this blessing. *The Spiritual*

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Exercises has become a rich resource for Christians of all denominational persuasions who seek a deep intimacy with God.

After the Reformation, we Protestants left behind much that was troubling about the Roman Catholicism of the fifteenth century. I am convinced that we left too much behind. The methods of praying employed by the likes of Ignatius have become precious to me. With the help of some Catholic saints, my prayer life has deepened. Ignatius and other Catholic mystics such as Teresa of Avila have been of incredible help to me in developing a kind of praying in which God becomes a real and felt presence.

It's hard to describe just what happens in this centering prayer. No words are spoken, and none are heard. Mother Teresa once explained to an interviewer that when she prayed, she often said nothing to God. She just listened. When asked what God said to her as she prayed, she answered, "Nothing! God Listens!" Then she added, "If you don't understand what I am talking about, I can't explain it to you." I *do* know what she was talking about. The Psalmist described it poetically by saying, "it is the deep speaking to the deep." In another place, the Bible says that such prayers are "groanings that cannot be uttered."

When I rise after engaging in this centering kind of prayer, I sense a fullness in my soul. With that fullness comes awareness that God is a living and guiding presence within me. I feel like I will be led into encounters

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with others in which I will have opportunities to share something of what God has given me. One rather dramatic example of this took place one day as I stood on a street corner on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, where I once taught. As I was waiting for the traffic light to change, I heard the Duck Lady come up behind me. We called this homeless woman the Duck Lady because she made an incessant quacking sound wherever she went. She seemed to be omnipresent on campus, so it was no surprise when I heard her. “Quack! Quack! Quack!” There she was, standing beside me.

Then something that verged on the supernatural happened. I turned to her, and she turned to me. Our eyes met and we *connected*. With all the spiritual energy that had flowed into me during my morning prayers, I focused on her. I didn’t just look *at* her. I looked *into* her. I somehow felt empowered to reach down into the depths of her being, and I had an eerie sensation that I had touched her soul. What surprised me even more was that she was doing the same thing to me. I could feel her spiritually pouring herself into me.

She stopped her quacking. I had never heard of her doing that—but in that moment, she stopped. Then she lifted her eyes and looked around at the sky and the trees and the people nearby, and she said, “It’s wonderful! It really is wonderful, isn’t it? It’s really wonderful!”

Before I could answer, the traffic light changed, and several people rushed by us. As one of them brushed past

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the Duck Lady, I watched her head jerk ever so slightly. Then she fell back into her schizophrenic state. As she wandered across the street and disappeared into a crowd, I once again heard the quacking sound. Standing motionless on that street corner, I wondered to myself what might have happened if I could have held on to her just a little longer—perhaps just a minute or two more. Then, maybe, the deliverance would not have been temporary. Just maybe, something more might have happened.

Maybe you're thinking, "He's a sociologist. Doesn't he realize that what she really needs is a psychotherapist or a psychiatrist?" The answer is "Yes!" But when the psychotherapists and psychiatrists have done all that they can to no avail, I believe that there is still "a balm in Gilead" that can heal the troubled soul. That balm becomes available to me when, in prayer, the Holy Spirit saturates my soul. In centering prayer, something happens to me that is strange and blessed. I feel the Spirit expanding within me "like a fountain of living water," as Jesus said, and I begin to experience a transforming presence and a sense of empowerment from God.

The second essential discipline that I believe will give depth to your spirituality is what is called "contemplative Bible reading."

There are many different ways to read the Bible. It can be read as a theological textbook from which doctrine can be extracted. It can be read as a history book

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that provides a glimpse into what went on in the lives of the strange and wonderful characters who created Israel and, later, the church. It even can be read as literature, marked by poetry and brilliant narratives. (In fact, it's often studied this way in university classes.) But in contemplative Bible reading, Scripture is read like a love letter.

Should you get a love letter, you'll read that letter over and over again. The literal meaning of the words will become secondary to what you read between the lines under the influence of your imagination. It will be as though the person you love is right there with you; you will feel a loving presence and an indescribable connectedness with that person. Each time you read it, you will likely find new meaning and feel new emotions. That is the way it is with contemplative Bible reading. Needless to say, you can't read the Bible that way unless you are already in love with Jesus. That's why I told you to start with centering prayer, because in centering prayer, you fall ever deeper in love with Jesus and you increasingly feel Jesus loving you back. The presence of his love within is what prepares you for contemplative Bible reading. Without his Spirit, the Bible is just a fascinating book; but with his Spirit vibrating within your soul, it can become a living love letter addressed especially to you.

Some people are committed to reading the Bible from beginning to end and cover to cover. I have a friend who proudly tells me that he does that every year because he wants to reacquaint himself with its contents. I

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have never read the Bible that way. To be honest, I don't think I could. Those genealogies in the Bible get me down. There's a place for scholarly Bible study and even for reading the Bible from cover to cover. It's important to know the contents of the Scriptures. But it is even more important to let the Spirit speak to you through Scripture and mystically teach your heart what reason alone can never know.

I'm quite selective in what I read. Every day, I read a few verses from one of the Gospels, and then I meditate on what I have read, letting God's Spirit teach me things in the sacred moments that follow. Sometimes I'll read the same few verses over and over, waiting for the Holy Spirit to make the words into sacramental food to feed my hungry soul.

Sometimes in the evening I pray one of the Psalms. That's right! I said *pray* the Psalms! That's another way of doing contemplative Bible reading. I learned that from some monks in the Benedictine order. They showed me that the Psalms can give expression to almost every emotion arising in the human heart and mind. The Psalms enable me to externalize my feelings—and sometimes they are ugly feelings. When I give voice to them as I pray the Psalms, God can deal with them and heal my sin-sick soul.

I don't confine myself to the Gospels and the Psalms. At least once a week, I spend time contemplatively reading from the Epistles. Also, I make sure to give some

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attention every week to passages in the Hebrew Scriptures such as the powerful writings of the Prophets. But I have to admit that when all is said and done, it's the Gospels that do the most for me. The Gospels help me to get a sense of what it must have been like to walk and talk with Jesus back there in ancient Israel. After reading the Gospels, I read the rest of the Bible through a grid created by Jesus's teachings. I understand whatever else I read in the Scriptures through its relationship to him.

Whatever you do, don't rush through your Bible reading. Let the words roll around in your heart and mind. Allow time for God to say something meant especially for you—something that will bless you, lead you, inspire you, change you.

If you are going to develop spiritual depth, you must be part of a support group that will nurture you spiritually and hold you accountable as you try to live a life marked by Christian integrity. It is easy to become lax in your spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible reading. It is easy to be lulled into a lifestyle wherein you forget to do those things that are essential to staying alive spiritually.

Don't forget that we Evangelicals believe that there are demonic forces at work in the world that seek to hinder your growth into Christian maturity. A support group provides a strong countervailing influence against those forces and tendencies by regularly checking up on you. I believe that being part of a support group is ab-

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solutely essential. In fact, if you don't have an accountability group, I don't think you have much of a chance over the long haul of living a consistent Christian life.

"Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," Jesus said (Matthew 18:20). I take Jesus at his word. I believe that something mystical can happen in the context of a support group. As members of a support group interact with one another—sharing what is going on in their lives, talking about their respective spiritual experiences, praying together, deepening their friendship, and asking probing questions of one another—a special awareness of Christ's presence can emerge.

While it is always fun to be with the three other men in my support group, sometimes we receive a kind of special blessing from our little gatherings. Meeting in the back room of Joe's Place, a little coffee shop in Wayne, Pennsylvania (our own version of Cheers), we make a lot of noise as we joke with one another, but there are times when our voices become hushed and our conversations are pervaded by deep feelings and spiritual inklings. I am reluctant to use the word *blessing* for what we experience at such times because I have an aversion to the kind of "God talk" that people sometimes use to show off their religiosity. But I don't know any other word to describe what God gives to us at such times. On some occasions when I've been troubled, what I experience with my friends has helped me to find peace. My

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support group has lifted me up emotionally from depression, and has encouraged me to be confident in the face of difficult challenges. This small circle of friends has given me wise counsel when I've needed to make my way through complex situations.

Decisionmaking can be very difficult for me, especially when the decision might shape my life's course. Often, I become very confused over whether a given decision is God's will or nothing more than an egoistic desire. That is when my support group can be of enormous help.

One time, a Christian college considered me for its presidency. My friends didn't say much as the search committee gave me serious consideration. I suppose that they assumed that the search committee soon would realize that I just wasn't cut out for such a job. But when I made the final cut, the friends in my support group decided that it was time to act. They sat me down and let me know that a college presidency just wasn't for me. They pointed out that my personality and style caused me to shoot from the hip on controversial issues, and that a college president could not do that sort of thing. They let me know that if I took on the presidency of that college, I'd have to change—and then I wouldn't be me anymore—or, if I continued to operate in my usual style, I'd end up destroying the college. I capitulated to their judgment and turned down the opportunity. I thank God that my friends saved me from what could have

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been a disaster. In retrospect, I realize that I was being seduced by the promise of prestige rather than considering how God could best use me.

My support group also has served to check up on me, to make sure I'm living a consistent Christian life. Once, when I was out in California, I got a telephone call in my motel room at 5:00 a.m. The voice at the other end of the line asked, "Are you alone?"

I answered, "It's five in the morning, of course I'm alone."

"Just checking," my friend answered. He hung up.

If you're thinking, "How horrible that you need to be checked up on from time to time," I ask you to consider the possibility that Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker might not have gotten so messed up if some good brothers in Christ had been holding them accountable.

Forming a support group isn't always easy. You'll probably need to take the initiative to get things started. You'll have to ask a good friend if he or she has considered forming such an intimate support group. You may well be surprised to hear that this person has long hungered for such a support group. In our alienated world, many people crave the intimacy a support group can provide.

Make sure that you really like any person you ask to join your support group. Only invite a person you'd enjoy dining or traveling with. Also, your support group must be made up of people who are of the same sex—

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don't forget that you will be sharing the most the intimate details of your lives with one another.

Don't devote the time you spend together to Bible study. You can do that on your own. It's good to share with one another what your individual sessions of Bible study and prayer are teaching you and how they are changing you, but if you make your support group all about Bible study, I assure you that your get-togethers will soon become more of a burden than a joy. When you're with these special friends, you should be making sure that each of you is keeping up daily disciplines of Bible study and prayer, rather than making these gatherings the times to get into these spiritual exercises.

Jesus had a support group. You can name them, can't you? They were Peter, James, and John. Whenever Jesus was about to enter into some unusual spiritual experience or ordeal—for instance, his encounter with Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration—he wanted his support group with him. The presence of these special friends was a source of encouragement and strength for him. That can help us understand why he was so sad in the Garden of Gethsemane when, in the face of the horrendous trial that lay before him on Calvary, they fell asleep. You can imagine the pathos in his voice as he woke them and asked, “Could you not tarry with me for one hour?” It's as if he were saying, “Guys, just when I needed your emotional and spiritual support the most, you fell asleep on me!” If Jesus reached out for strength

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and encouragement from his support group, how could any of us think we can live the life and endure the ordeals we face without a support group of our own?

I have not offered these suggestions about prayer, Bible reading, and support groups because I think they are merely good ways of staying faithful in your commitment to Christ. They are absolutely essential. Without them, you will not be able to grow spiritually into the kind of people God wants you to be. It will be only a matter of time before you drift into spiritual deadness and conformity with the many destructive values that permeate the dominant culture. In Scripture we are told, "Be not conformed to the world." These guidelines are essential to preserving your integrity as Christians.

Sincerely,
Tony