

Temptation & The Truly Alternative Lifestyle

Ralph Blair

Ralph Blair is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City. He founded Evangelicals Concerned in 1976. This booklet is an expanded version of Dr. Blair's keynote address at connECtion 1992, the summer conferences of Evangelicals Concerned, at Kirkridge in the eastern Pennsylvania mountains and at Chapman University in Orange, California.

“Though vine nor fig-tree neither
Their wonted fruit shall bear;
Though all the field should wither
Nor flocks nor herds be there:
Yet God the same abiding,
His praise shall tune my voice;
For while in Him confiding
I cannot but rejoice.”
Habakkuk 3:17-18

Copyright ©1992. Ralph Blair, 311 E. 72nd St. New York, New York 10021

Oscar Wilde could not resist it. In *Lady Windemere's Fan* he couldn't resist saying “I can resist everything except temptation.” And I couldn't resist repeating it.

Temptation. What do we get out of getting into it? How do we get into getting out of it? We face it every day. Think of the temptations we've faced just in the past 24 hours, or just so far this morning, or just at this very moment.

Are we tempted to act unjustly, to be unkind, to reject God's will? (Micah 6:8)

Are we tempted to disguise our motives? To gossip? To trespass into another person's private space? Are we tempted to neglect conferees we don't find attractive? To join in as a friend is nasty about someone else behind her back? Are we tempted to behave seductively? Are we tempted to make excuses for ourselves while giving little or no benefit of the doubt to anyone else? Are we tempted to be discouragingly critical? To gloat over somebody else's troubles? To ignore those troubles? To free-load? To spend ourselves into debt on ourselves while withholding money from others who really do need some? Are we tempted to be Madonna's “material girls?” To be perfectionistic? To be lax? To condemn? To manipulate and exploit someone who finds us sexy? To exploit others by renting or viewing pornography? To engage in phone sex? To break promises? To rush unwisely and unlovingly into romantic relationships? To steal? To lash out? To hold a grudge? To procrastinate? To avoid pulling our own weight? To

withhold forgiveness? To neglect family and friends? To pout? To gripe about the food? To be ungrateful? To neglect opportunities to encourage others? To claim we have a right to do whatever we want to do with our bodies, our money, our time, our talents? Are we tempted to apply these thoughts on temptation to anyone but ourselves? To focus on a disagreement over something I've said so as not to see that most of what else I've said easily applies to us all—individually and collectively? Am I tempted to pretend I'm a stranger to all these temptations? Are you tempted to believe me? Are we tempted to think that God is not ready and willing to forgive us? Are we tempted to take God's forgiveness for granted? How seriously do we want to resist these temptations?

How selectively? How soon? What do we get out of getting into temptation? How do we get out of getting into temptation? Our presence here this weekend probably indicates that we want to resist temptation better than we do. But why not go beyond mere resistance, to a seriously heroic discipleship?

Temptation Defined

What is temptation? Temptation, as we usually think of it, is a seductive invitation to violate our conscience. And that is true; it is that. But as its Latin root reveals, temptation is also a test. Every temptation is both a seemingly attractive lure to violate conscience and an exam, a measurement, a screening process or diagnostic means for evaluating soundness of character. Indeed, one biblical scholar puts it bluntly: "Temptation is always essentially a test." (William Barclay) Every temptation is, as someone else has said, "the moment of truth." (Jan Milic Lochman) The question to be answered by the temptation/test is this: What am I made of? What's in me: the Spirit of the Living God or nothing but self?

Temptation is the test tube of our daily life. Temptation can catch us unprepared, as when we're taken by surprise by a pop-quiz. Sometimes we see it coming, as in the long anticipation of a mid-term. It's like what we do when we test the sound system by tapping on the mike: "testing 1, 2, 3" It's like having blood work done. The temptation as test reveals what's in there: whether knowledge, or sound, or infection or whatever the test tests. Even Jesus had to endure the temptation/ tests "designed ... to reveal what [was] in his heart." (Gerhardsson) When traveling we can't hope to fly unless we successfully pass through the metal detector. On our spiritual journey,—if you'll pardon the pun—we can't hope to fly unless we successfully pass through the mettle detector. A temptation can test whether you have a testimony or only testosterone.

But tests don't merely detect. Tests can strengthen. That's the purpose of the refiner's fire, a rescue drill, a dress rehearsal, a dry run, a test flight, or exercise. Said English novelist George Eliot: "No man is matriculated to the art of life till he has been well tempted." Her contemporary, economist Walter Bagehot, agreed, saying: "it is not good to be without temptations." If this is true of life in general, it's certainly true of the life of Christian discipleship. Thomas á Kempis wrote that "we cannot be holy without temptations." Martin Luther called his temptations "my

masters in divinity." He went on to say: "Such is the greatness of divine grace that we cannot appreciate it without temptations and difficulties. Had I not been tempted ... I would have become very proud of my gifts ... and would ascribe everything to my talents, not to God." No wonder David asks God for examination: "Search me O God, and know my heart! Test me, and know my thoughts! And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the honorable, everlasting way." (Ps 139:23f).

We need effective exercises of spiritual fitness for tightening and toning and burning up spiritual fat. This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the rigorous training programs of serious runners as models of Christian discipleship (I Cor 9:24). We must be fit to do what is fitting. The writer of Hebrews says we need to learn how to "run with patient perseverance the race marked out for us." (Heb 12:1) We need, Priscilla (?) says, to get rid of whatever hinders us in the running of that race, whatever may trip us up. James urges readers to see that many different kinds of tests are necessary for getting them into condition for endurance and power in order to reach the goal of maturity without deficiency (James 1 :2ff) We read in I Peter that such a crucible produces proven results that demonstrate the "praise, glory and honor of Jesus Christ" which could not be revealed without such tests. (1:7; 4:12)

So thank God for temptation! It can strengthen us and bring out our beauty. But also be on the alert. From his own experience, Jesus warned us to "Watch and pray, so that we might not enter into temptation." (Matt 26:41) We must watch out, be on the alert, because every temptation or test can break us as well as make us. Every temptation is an opportunity for God to prove us and strengthen us, conforming us into the image of Christ in God's new world that is coming. But at the same time, without God's help, every temptation can show us up for how selfish we can be, can corrupt us, confirming us in the image of Adam in the old world that is passing away.

Temptation and Fear

If we're warned to be on the alert throughout our watch in the night of temptation, is there something that we can look out for? Is there something to watch out for even before the temptation itself? Is there a harbinger to temptation, a precursor that might give us an advantage on our watch so that we might be better prepared?

What prompts us to violate our conscience, and to do it so easily, even readily, and so often? Is it the devil? Is it God? Weak will power? "Original Sin?" Is it maybe genetic? Learned? Poor parenting or what's popularly called "dysfunctional families?" Ignorance? Poverty? Habit? Addiction? Does temperament lead us into temptation? Is it naivete? Is it what John Dryden called "Thou strong seducer, Opportunity?" Is it an unrealistically high standard? Is it just plain old human nature? All of these explanations and more have been suggested—and there's some truth in some of them. But at heart, what seduces us into temptation is our mishandling of our deepest feeling: the feeling of fear, the feeling of anxiety. We are scared into sinning. So on our watch, we must monitor our feelings. Are we afraid? The feeling of fear can be our signal that

temptation is near. Forewarned we might be forearmed. And since we're so chronically afraid, it would be well for us to assume that temptation to violate conscience is never far from us.

Like all emotions, fear is an involuntary response to a belief. In the case of fear, the belief is that we're in danger. Now notice that a belief doesn't have to be true to be believed—we believe even lies. When we believe we're in danger we cannot help feeling fearful. And it doesn't help to command a feeling to go away since a feeling is not subject to the will, it is, as we've said, involuntary. So we won't be able to get rid of fear by simply telling ourselves: Don't be afraid, stop fearing. But because fear is such an unwanted feeling, we *try* to get rid of it by any means we can come up with—even when that means violation of conscience.

The feeling of fear can range broadly. There's maladaptive apprehension in anticipated or actual disapproval—we can imagine that some people don't like us and some people don't. So we're tempted to *try* at all costs to get affirmation. We fear that it is somehow in our worst interest if some particular individual doesn't want to date us. We take it personally and thus may be tempted to bad mouth that person. We're afraid that we'll be left out. If we don't have what we want now we're afraid we'll never have it. It's now or never, we think. We're bothered by not seeing ourselves as sexy. But why should this worry us? Nobody can see self as sexy because sexiness is perceived positive differentness from one's sense of self. Not realizing this, we're tempted to grab at quick fixes of genital affirmation, trying to counter our idea that we're dangerously unattractive. Of course, it doesn't work because, no matter how many people find us sexy, we still see ourselves as unsexy. And we've now violated conscience and experience failure and guilt. We're afraid we'll miss out on what we irrationally tell ourselves everyone else is getting and thoroughly enjoying. This fear prompts greed and envy. We then grab at whatever we tell ourselves will solve this problem, no matter the cost to our character or line of credit and no matter the effect on others. We're afraid that we won't get what we rationalize to be “our fair share” in life, something that from a more sober perspective is seen to be more than a fair share. We become insatiable consumers of people and other idols. It's a grab-use-throw-away value system. We're afraid we won't get all our wants met so we're tempted to puff them into what we call “our needs” to justify our ruthless pursuit. In the process we trample our own real needs as well as those of others.

At a psychological level, we're anxious over what we take to be rejection, the idea of being left out. Relying irrationally on our own versions of ourselves and others we erroneously extrapolate from our experience of self and others to conclude that our own versions are universal, that everyone else experiences themselves as we experience them and that they all experience us as we ourselves do. Also, we erroneously think that they see our ideal self and the gap we experience between who we think we are and who we think we should be. We further mistakenly believe that our perceived shortcomings are as significant to others as they are to us. We then worry excessively about how we're coming across. We fear failure, rejection, and loss. We miss the fact that others have their own versions of everything. We magnify our own dissatisfaction with ourselves and minimize others' dissatisfaction with themselves. Since we believe that we

don't measure up, and since this belief is reinforced by our experience of both inadequacy and preoccupation with self, we're afraid we'll always be unloved and left out. We become neurotic and seek to counter our fears in even sinful ways.

There are also the irrational fears called phobias. These fears are deeply rooted and pathological. They too can lead us into temptation.

But there is another even deeper level of experience at which we become anxious. We're anxious spiritually. In Reinhold Niebuhr's words, we're "involved in the contingencies and necessities of the natural process on the one hand and ... on the other [we] stand outside of them and foresee their caprices and perils." We seek, says Niebuhr, to "transmute [our] finiteness into infinity, [our] weakness into strength, [our] dependence into independence." Existentialists call this fear *Angst* or dread. It's what Luther called *Anfechtung*: all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, pain, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the [human] spirit," (as a Luther biographer, Roland Bainton, puts it). Fear is our strongest feeling state. Spiritual fear is the deepest experience of it. In *Angst* we're telling ourselves that we're in danger—as we do in other fears—but here we're sensing that we're in danger most fundamentally. Here we sense danger in our very finitude, our ultimate weakness, our final isolation, our deepest guilt.

All of this psychological and spiritual anxiety, if left unchecked and unresolved, is the precondition for falling into the trap of temptation to sin. Anxiety is not, in itself, sinful as such. Even temptation, as such, is not sinful. It's a test. There is temptation that can precede an unloving disregard, destruction and death. That's what we usually think temptation is all about. But there is also temptation that can precede a loving regard, enrichment and growth toward maturity. How we cope with anxiety can lead us further into the hole or further into holiness.

Temptation and Deception

The architecture critic of The New York Times writes of "the art of artifice" exemplified in "the completely packaged perfect life" of Disneyland, Ralph Lauren, and, we might well add, "The 700 Club" and the so-called "A-Crowd" at Splash or Fire Island. He asks: "Is ... artifice well executed ... the only authenticity our time is capable of creating?" But is it only in "our time?" When was it not so? When since Eve and Adam has the deceptive fabrication of image not been a tempting preoccupation of self-centered, anxious human beings? Their fig leaves may not have been very stylish or even effective, but the purpose was a quick-fix cover-up.

We're tempted to pretend, to posture, to fake-it because we sense that something is wrong, something is missing. We hide behind fantasy facades, even when such deception requires violation of conscience. And it is self-deception that gives permission to violate conscience for, by definition, we do see the violation to be wrong. We lie to ourselves as we stimulate our sinful desires. We rationalize the violation before, during, and after yielding to it.

We're in serious trouble here because, as Demosthenes knew long ago: "Nothing is easier than self-deceit." Psychiatrist R. D. Laing observed that "Human beings seem to have an almost unlimited capacity to deceive themselves." Said the longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer: "We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves." We entrap ourselves in these lies, fantasizing how we need something—even someone as something—with which we might quell our fears of missing out. We day-dream about an if-only scenario, hyped from an irrelevant fragment or fetish, filling in all the blanks by ourselves, doing monologue as if it were dialogue, pretending our fiction is fact. "How wonderful it would be if only that guy with eyes-to-die-for were here in my bed with me right now!" No matter what's in the brain behind those eyeballs. No matter that they're roving eyes. No matter that we don't share basic values. No matter that our need cannot be filled with eyeballs. No matter that this guy's in another relationship. No matter that he's not attracted to me. No matter that he's straight. He has eyes-to-die-for! So die for a lie! Even the writers of soaps can be more realistic. See how seriously we can disconnect from reality? And remember that the eyes reveal only the Creator—character reveals the co-creators. Suspecting all this, we disregard it. Urging ourselves on with our unbelievably decorated fantasies, we're at increased risk of trying to turn our fiction into fact, even if that means that we'll be violating our conscience in trying to do so. And as psychologist David G. Myers warns: "The point cannot be overstated: *Every* desirable experience—passionate love, a spiritual high, the pleasure of a new possession, the exhilaration of success—is transitory." We soon adapt to the new experience and then desire something newer. We can tire even of eyes-to-die-for.

Our coveting is stimulated by exaggerated self-pity, which is itself a lie. We're really not as deprived as we tell ourselves we are. After all, we're propping up self-pity with false predictions and overstatements about who "he" or "she" is and how very much we need "him" or "her", how very much we need it right this minute, and how very much we have a "right" to it all.

Even in the aftermath of disillusionment, there is deception in the denial that seeks to soften the disappointment and frustration and guilt when what was desired, expected and then possessed doesn't fill the desire. We'll tend to misunderstand or even intentionally distort in our self-serving explanations for why things went wrong. We'll jump into the passive voice, talking in terms of having found ourselves in bed together. And even after forgiveness by God, and ourselves and others with whom and against whom we sinned, we're left with the self-defeating memories of failure and a reinforced incest taboo—the linking of genital sex and anonymity or absence of intimacy—that will plague us into avoidance when we look in vain for novelty of sexual anonymity in familial sex with a life-mate. And the test will be harder to pass next time. Yielding has weakened character and may even push us, eventually, to the point where we're incapable of either repentance or remorse. In yielding to temptation we are not conditioned by the strengthening effect of successful resistance. "Sow a thought and you reap an act; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character, sow a character and you reap a destiny." (Charles Read) Such downward spiraling of discouragement in the wake of failure after failure is tragic and treacherous consequence. And we know this ahead of time—from sad experience—

but we push such predictable consequences out of our mind as we self-deceive yet one more time in habituated pursuit of our impossible dreamboat. We continue making exceptions to the rules so that they supposedly don't apply to us,—at least not this time, not with him, not tonight.

We covet a fantasy called happiness. And like all fantasies, this one is an expectation of unmixed bliss. The happiness lie is a self-deception. As psychiatrist Thomas Szasz puts it: “Happiness is an imaginary condition ... usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults.”

We covet another fantasy that is unbounded “self-esteem.” As such, it too is a self-deception, the seemingly “secure feeling that,” as H. L. Mencken quipped: “no one, as yet, is suspicious.” Such hyper-self-esteem is postured. It's a pretension. It's a lie called pride.

We covet the fantasy of a free ride, the lie that we can get something for nothing, what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Weight-Watchers promises desserts of “Total Indulgence. Zero Guilt.” A book club claims “No Commitment. No Kidding.” Cellular One's slogan is: “Imagine No Limits.” An ad for the Chase Manhattan Bank shows an old-fashioned sampler reading: “You can't get Something for Nothing.” The ad copy wise-cracks: “Oh, really?” It goes on to pretend to contradict what it calls “this old, worn out financial myth.” Only the self-deceived will believe that they will be getting something for nothing as they read on: “So when you're a Chase Manhattan Better Banking customer, you're the recipient of a lot of somethings,” then here comes the fine print: “as long as you keep combined average balances of \$3,000 in savings, checking, or CD accounts with us.” We covet a fantasy called sexual freedom. AIDS activist Michael Callen has said: “The belief that was handed to me was that sex was liberating and more sex was more liberating.” A recent article in *Entertainment Weekly* called “fantasy, the bedrock of the entertainment industry” and noted that “nowhere else are personal sexual attitudes so easily translated into images that influence the sexual behavior of millions,” including the 18 to 34 year olds who tune-in to MTV more than to any other network and in C. S. Lewis' words, are “fed all day long on good solid lies about sex.” Not for no reason is the MTV chairman's own personal fortune at \$3 billion dollars—\$1 billion more than the U. S. Government spent against AIDS last year.

In spite of knowing that Oscar Wilde was right when he said that “it is the faithless who know love's tragedies,” we go right ahead consuming the lies of sexual freedom. We're told we have a right to have sex with lots of different people—just don't exchange body fluids. But hear writer James Baldwin, saying almost forty years ago: “It is possible, as it were, to have one's pleasure without paying for it. But to have one's pleasure without paying for it is precisely the way to find one's self reduced to a search for pleasure which grows steadily more desperate and more grotesque. It does not take long, after all, to discover that sex is only sex, that there are few things on earth more futile or more deadening than a meaningless round of conquests. The really horrible thing about the phenomenon of present day homosexuality ... is that today's unlucky deviate can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling into an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have

either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased. When this possibility has ceased, so has the possibility of growth.”

Listen to film director Pier Paolo Pasolini: “The sexual freedom of today for most people is really only a convention, an obligation, a social duty, a social anxiety, a necessary feature of the consumer's way of life.” Sadly for Pasolini, even this insight did not prevent his own promiscuity and murder at the hands of a hustler. And sociologist Jacques Ellul is even wiser when he writes that “We wrongly think that liberty [in sex] means ... acting as we will without compulsion.” He sees this to be “illusory and always inadequate. ... Freedom for the mere sake of freedom is worth little. It is the mere freedom to go anywhere or to do anything, no matter where or what. The 'no matter' that characterizes our society is absurd,” Ellul says. “It inevitably becomes either folly or the oppression of others, who are now mere instruments of satisfaction. ... [True] Freedom manifests itself in love [as mutual care and respect] ... Without love there is no freedom.”

The Big Lie

But all of these—inordinate happiness and self-esteem, something for nothing, sexual freedom—all of these and many more self-deceptions are merely the derivative lies. They are not the big lie, the one Hitler said “The masses ... will more easily fall for ... than for a small one.” And it's the biggest of all lies that tempts the whole of humanity and each one of us. That big lie is as old as the test that Adam and Eve failed.

Remember that in tempting them, the snake told lies. “Did God say that you should deprive yourselves from eating from all of these lovely trees in the garden?” How unfair! was his point. It was a lie. “You realize, don't you, that you won't really die just by eating some of this gorgeous fruit?” That was a lie. “You know what?”, he reasoned. “If you eat this you'll feel like a god. No wonder God doesn't want you to enjoy yourselves. But listen, I know you can have it all!” That was a lie. And they fell for all of it. And when our ancient ancestors were caught in the act by their gracious grieving God, they themselves lied. The big lie is this: God isn't God; I am! “The whole effort,” as one writer says, “the object—of temptation is to induce us to substitute something else for God. To obscure God.” (R. H. Stewart) And essentially, that “something else” is self. No matter what other things are used as God-substitutes, the idols of which Calvin said “the human mind is a perpetual factory,” they are all desired in the worship and service of self. And in the lie of this self-worship and self-service, we fall into all the deadly distortions inherent in being out of touch with reality. It is this “self-alienation from our authentic being” that is sin itself. (Helmut Thielicke) No wonder we're anxious!

This big lie is the same lie Jesus heard for forty long days and nights in the lonely wilderness: If you will overrule God, if you will manipulate God, if you will worship what is not God, you can have it all and you can have it all right now. Those were lies. But Jesus did not fall for them.

Looking to his Father, he withstood the deception, he resisted the temptations, he passed the test. And that made all the difference.

Like Jesus, we experience fear and temptation. But unlike Jesus, we turn inward. We self-deceive and enter into temptation. How do we get into it? We get into temptation through pride. Pride is the port of entry. That's one reason that pride is the first of the so-called "seven deadly sins." It is violation of the very first Commandment. Pride is sheer idolatry. It's our sinful attempt to kill off God, to try to be gods ourselves. Says Thieliicke, "this wish to be free of God is [our] deepest yearning."

Pride is very religious. It's religious in the sense that, as J. M. Barrie, the *Peter Pan* man, said: "One's religion is whatever he is most interested in." What we're most interested in, of course, is the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. Pride is so religious that it cancels all atheism. There are no atheists; there never have been any atheists. We're all too prone to be our own gods to be atheists. In Paul's words, we "worship and serve the creature *instead* of the Creator." (Rom 1) Furthermore, as Thieliicke warns, we're in danger of such pride even in the worship and service of the Creator. "We are actually told that our rejection of God and our desire to be free of him is present in our piety, our yearning for God and even in the cunning use of God's own words. How the tempter in the wilderness streams with God's words! Why do the prophets thunder and preach against gods and idols, against cults and fetishes, and against the god 'Nature' and the god 'Fate'? Because all these are comfortable gods; because they are gods of rest and safety; because, being visible, no effort is needed to believe in them; because they affirm what [we] want to have affirmed; they are nodding gods, and yes-sayers, and the originators of a pious intoxication which commits us to nothing, and of happy ecstasies." (Thieliicke)

Last month the Styles section of the Sunday *New York Times* ran a two-page feature on "The Arm Fetish ... Downsized and fully bared, the body part as fashion accessory ." We're told that "the muscle of the moment" must say: "chosen—not endured—travail" achieved either by pumping up or by a \$10,000 "surgical arm sculpturing ... The arm. Framed by a frayed cutoff T-shirt ... pumped up and poised ... The arm on MTV ... sinewy and outstretched." When the reporter asks: "But what is it reaching for?" the reply comes from Radu, the trainer for Calvin Klein and Cindy Crawford. What is it reaching for? "Self-determination," says Radu. We're trying to be self-secure. But as Thieliicke wisely says: "there is no greater sin than self-security." We try to empower ourselves through hypocritical self-righteousness, pretended self-confidence, narcissistic self-reliance—even through a silly arm fetish—but all of this is really only symptomatic of the anxious self-worship, the unrealistic preoccupation with self, that scares us into further sin and self-deceiving self-destruction.

We thus put ourselves into hopeless cycles of fear, flight, fight, failure, and fear all over again. Sensing our finitude, we fear. So we posture infinity. But it doesn't work. We pretend importance and achieve impotence. And so we're still anxious—maybe now even more so because what we try doesn't work. But in the process of posturing infinity we lord it over others. We try to control

them and our entire situation. It's us or them, we think. We exploit other people and situations in a futile effort to escape our finitude, our impotence. We compete and lose. We keep score and lose. Consequently, we're sucked into the vortex of an even deeper and more dreadfully deadly cycle of fear. For in attempting infinity we sense and even reinforce not only the failure but the guilt of failure and the even greater guilt of sin. So we try to cover up. We posture self-righteousness, self-assurance. We blame anything and everyone except ourselves. We saw this in the brutality against Rodney King, in the verdict, in the rioting and looting, and in the self-righteous rationalization of wrong-doing on all sides. And we see this in our own lives with each other. But it does not work. We're just as unrighteous as before—now even more so—and so we're still anxious—maybe even more so. It's Adam and Eve in rerun. In the process of posturing self-righteousness and self-sufficiency, our uneasy consciences predispose us to defense mechanisms such as projection and reaction formation. And we lord it over others. Trying to lay guilt trips on them, we exploit them even spiritually. All this is done in a futile effort to escape our own guilt feelings. Thus, we continue running amok in slippery cycles of fear, of anger, frustration and guilt, and of hopelessly selfish remedies which always leave us sinking deeper into our experience of finitude and failure and guilt which we continue to fear and in reaction to which we keep slipping into temptation to sin.

Have you ever been in conversation with people who, after going on and on about themselves, stop and say: “Well, enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do *you* think about me?” Don't we all do this, even if not so candidly as Dame Edith Sitwell, the poet? She confessed: “I have often wished I had time to cultivate modesty ... but I am too busy thinking about myself.” Oscar Wilde spoke of self-love as “a life-long romance,” but, alas, for poor Oscar, such romance is always unrequited. Self-absorption is not evidence of healthy self-esteem. As the 12th century Jewish philosopher-physician Maimonides observed: “Every ignoramus imagines that all that exists exists with a view to his individual sake; it is as if there were nothing that exists except him.” This is, of course, the essence of sin, as Paul Tillich said: “Sin is the turning towards ourselves, and making ourselves the center of our world.”

What does self-preoccupation have to do with temptation? Simply this: All yielding to temptation is rooted in self-worship. How? Didn't we say that temptation is prompted by fear? Well who wouldn't be afraid, worshipping self instead of the Creator and Lover of all the world? When one depends upon self to be god one is depending on a false god, an impotent god, a careless god, a selfish god, a stupid god, a frightened god, a loveless god. How could such self-dependence resolve anxiety? Wouldn't it rather increase anxiety? And didn't we say that self-deception is what permits us to yield to temptation? What greater self-deception could there be than to worship self, the creature, instead of God the Creator and Lover of all the world? What would you think of somebody calling herself God? Wouldn't you call her self-deceived, crazy, a liar? Yet we all claim that all the time—if not in so many words, then in effect. Each of us acts as though he or she matters more than anything or anyone else. Each of us sets up herself or himself as the final arbiter of what is true or false, right or wrong. Who would be able to quell the fear by

going around pretending to such deity, knowing somehow that it was not true at all, and yet refusing to give up the charade? Under such circumstances, wouldn't one still feel afraid? Then the only thing self-absorption and self-deceit can see its way clear to do is to yield to temptation to distracting self-aggrandizement, even if it means violation of conscience. Such yielding begins with I: I want, I need, I will, I won't, I am It begins and ends in my self. John Calvin saw clearly that such inordinate self-worship expresses itself in “despising and neglecting others, producing cruelty, covetousness, violence, deceit, and all the kindred vices, and arms us with the desire of revenge.” Samuel Johnson wrote: “He that overvalues himself will undervalue others, and he that undervalues others will oppress them.” Said Malcolm Muggeridge: “When mortal men try to live without God, they infallibly succumb to megalomania or erotomania or both—the raised fist or the raised phallus.”

Just as we've seen that self-deception is the strong excuse to get into temptation, it is also the strong excuse against resisting temptation. We are even culturally predisposed to be more suspicious of impulse control than of impulse indulgence.

However hapless the Murphy Brown illustration may have been, and however heterosexist the speaker, the widely defensive reaction to Dan Quayle's “poverty of values” speech is, itself, sufficient illustration of his point. Sadly, this poverty of values exists as well in the consumerism and nationalism that passes for much of American Christianity. Studies often fail to detect differences between the life-styles of Christians and non-Christians. A recent Roper Poll found that illegal drug use, drunk-driving, and sexual abuse actually increased after so-called born-again experiences. The Bible is still the No. 1 best seller, but a Library of Congress and Book-of-the-Month survey finds that the No. 2 book is *Atlas Shrugged*, promoting what author Ayn Rand calls “rational self-interest.”

We're used to a rights-without-responsibilities mentality. By now, it's so ingrained in much of the rhetoric with which we identify as members of minority groups that it can be a silent killer of conscience. It baptizes an anything-goes attitude in much of even the Christian gay and lesbian communities.

The white L.A. cops who beat a black fugitive justified their actions in the name of law and order, hiding behind their status as peace officers. Following the cops' acquittal, the black looters and murderers of white bystanders justified their action in the name of protest, hiding behind their status as victims of oppression and racial injustice. When a homophobic Dan White murdered gay city official Harvey Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone he rationalized it beforehand in the name of traditional family values and afterward blamed it on eating junk food,—his infamous “Twinkie defense.” Gay leaders endorse the “rights and victims” mentality, what sociologist Amitai Etzioni calls the “rights inflation,” what Shelby Steele calls a “victim-focused identity,” that practically calls for yielding to temptation as an act of social justice. The emphasis is on liberation as license and gay power as promiscuity and pornography. In such a coddling Zeitgeist of prophylactic excuse,—what a writer for *New York*

magazine calls the “don't-blame-me-I'm-a-victim syndrome” and often reinforced by blaming so-called dysfunctional family backgrounds,—how are we even to begin to take a realistic view of responsible living and speak of courageous and serious resistance to temptation to sin? How we live responsibly will be against the grain of the so-called gay and lesbian community as well as the wider society. But that should be nothing new for serious Christians who happen to be either gay or lesbian. “And if it is new—get a clue!” as a good friend said the other day.

Resisting Temptation

God has given us brains. We need to use them as we use all God's other gifts: to God's glory—and that, of course, includes our deepest good. One way we can use our brains is to continue what we're doing right now: trying to figure out what temptation is, what we're up against in temptation, and how best to pass each temptation/test we encounter. And as we can come to the test armed ahead of time with all sorts of excuses for yielding to temptation, we can come to the test armed ahead of time with all sorts of psychological, social, logistical, and rational or cognitive tools as well as spiritual resources for resisting temptation. Calvin reminds us that “all things which make for the enriching of this present life are sacred gifts of God”—including these resources, even though my categorizing of them might seem to imply that only the spiritual resources are from God.

Psychological Resources

What are a few of the psychological tools available to us for resisting temptation? What here comes to mind right away is conscience itself. The conscience is that mental faculty by which we recognize the distinction between right and wrong. Since we psychologically experience our violation of God's Law- including violation of self and others—as violation of conscience, we need to be sensitive to the feelings of conscience in dealing with temptation. At the same time we need to be aware that conscience is a thermometer of our internalized value system. It is, as such, no better or worse than the validity of the system with which it's been programmed. It can be well-informed or misinformed. So we must assess our conscience in light of a well-informed biblical sense of what God's Law of Love truly is and not simply what either legalism or libertinism may have taught our conscience. We need to know how to read our well-informed conscience and pay serious attention to its warning signals. But remember: to disregard *even* the *poorly* informed conscience is not psychologically healthy.

Another psychological tool is our feeling of guilt and shame. Our mental ability to predict the painful feelings of guilt and shame—not simply social embarrassment—that would follow violation of conscience can act as a preventative to help us resist temptation. Even if we do violate conscience, the consequent feeling of guilt and shame can be useful in provoking us to active repentance and pro-active reform, though such will not wipe out the damage done by the violation in the first place. But “where there is yet shame,” as Dr. Johnson said, “there may in time be virtue.”

Another psychological resource is our will. It's called will *power* for good reason. When we're captivated by an involuntary attraction, for example, we cannot expect the attraction to do anything but lure us toward the attractive object and entice us to enter into temptation. If our involuntary desires propel us to violate conscience, the power we have to resist is thankfully a matter of volition, choice. The involuntary sexual feelings of attraction to somebody are powerful. They cannot be voluntarily revised because they are imprinted. They are not subject to the will. But it isn't the attraction that's sinful. It isn't even the temptation associated with the attraction that's sinful. It is what we do to indulge the attraction that can be sinful. And it is in what we do—whether in deliberate construction of if-only fantasy or in deliberate attempts to bring the fantasy to life—that the will is a powerful match for the unwilled attraction. We have the psychological ability to choose to act responsibly—even heroically—in spite of our unchosen feelings.

To do this successfully it's extremely helpful to view the tempting scenario as out-of-bounds totally. No ands, ifs, or buts. It's willed to be no viable option. It's out of the question. It's just not me. My very identity, who I am—and my very identification with Christ, whose I am—willfully rejects it. The advantage of such once-for-all decision of the will, maintained by will, is that one is not tortured by having to make repeated decisions in terms of circumstances which can always easily be rationalized through self-deception. When something is clearly willed to be no option at all, the experience of attraction becomes completely irrelevant. He's sexy. So what. One is resolved willfully to exclude the possibility of doing what one is tempted to do, no matter how attractive the person looks, no matter how lonely one feels, no matter what excuses one could dream up, no matter what. Looks and loneliness and rationalizations don't come into the deliberation. The behavior was ruled out ahead of time. In the heat of the temptation, yielding is no possibility because you've willed such yielding to be, indeed, forbidden. You don't have to start the decision-making process from scratch every time you're presented with another instance of temptation to do something that you've already made no option. That sort of thing? No way! Period. Move on, pal.

Let me clarify that what I'm saying about a once-for-all decision does not contradict the one-day-at-a-time approach. The one-day-at-a-time approach is concerned with the time one has in which to behave. We can behave only in the present. The once-for-all decision is concerned with boundaries, with what's called for, what's fitting.

How does this improve on the “Just Say 'No'” school of temptation resistance? Well, “Just Say 'No'” isn't enough. Even Nancy Reagan just couldn't say no to all those Adolfo gowns! She didn't say no, she just said “Now!” What's especially weak about “Just Say 'No'” is the very first word: just. The term minimizes what all we're up against in temptation. Once-for-all willed rejection of an option is much more powerful. But even that is no match for some of what we're up against and we'll be saying more about that in looking at spiritual resources. After all, Christ does offer us more than the self-control Epictetus offered his followers, the Stoics. But we certainly don't have to neglect helpful contributions from Epictetus.

Dante called the freedom of the will “the greatest gift which God in His bounty bestowed” on us. But hear a balancing word from Flannery O'Connor: “Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do?” she asks. Then she says: “I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will but many wills conflicting in one man.” The Apostle Paul knew that. He acknowledged that the good that he willed to do he didn't do, while the wrong that he didn't will to do, he somehow did. In the words of the rock group U2: “And I must be / An acrobat / To talk like this / And act like that.”

Keep in mind, too, that as an English poet said, “Satan o'ercomes none, but by willingness.” (Robert Herrick) It isn't only resistance to temptation that is an act of will. It is indulgence in temptation that is, as well, an act of will. Violation is volitional. “Do you really think it is weakness that yields to temptation?,” asked Wilde. “I tell you that there are terrible temptations which it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to.”

Social Resources

Social tools are available. Remember that we're all taking tests. It's with others that we sin. It's against others that we sin—whether they're present or not. Jesus taught disciples to pray: “Lead *us* not into temptation.” Our concerns about entering into temptation must be social. Help must also be social. So Luther advised, “taught by experience ... [that] When you are tempted, then eat, drink, and seek to converse with people.” Let's have lunch! Let's go out for coffee! For Luther, though, the drink was probably stronger than coffee! And we can do what Luther couldn't: we can reach out and touch encouragement by phone.

Community is crucial for resisting temptation. And it's such a pleasant way to do it! If, as we've said, we're lured into temptation by fears of loneliness and isolation and a sense that we're missing out, and if, as we've said, we permit ourselves to enter into temptation by self-deception, we need the fellowship of intelligent and loving friends and allies with whom we can meet interpersonal needs as well as help each other with reality checks so we won't be so easily caught up by our own irrationality, fantasy, and rationalization. Surrounded by what the writer of Hebrews called a “cloud of witnesses”—fellow faithers showing us it's possible to lead faithful lives—we meet with interpersonal encouragement for resisting sin. Said one commentator: “Solitary Christians are apt to be weak Christians, for in this sphere as in all others 'union is strength.’” (W. H. Griffith Thomas) Another said: “We are made ... to need, not things, but living beings. 'My soul thirsteth'—for what? An abstraction, a possession, riches, a thing? No! ... hearts want hearts.” (Alexander Maclaren)

Logistical Resources

We have what might be called logistical tools. Maybe there's a better word for these, but what I mean is that we can guard ourselves by avoiding certain situations in which we can expect the lure of temptation to be especially strong—what 12-step folk call “people, places and things.”

You won't yield to the temptation to buy stuff if you leave home *without* your credit card. You won't yield to the temptation to eat a whole pint of ice cream if there's no ice cream in your freezer. You won't yield to temptation to break confidentiality if your policy is to say *nothing* about anyone in your therapy group with anyone not in your group.

Planning ahead with honest and good judgment, we can eliminate many tests that we know would be too difficult. Or, planning ahead with self-deception, we can maneuver ourselves into the middle of tests that are way beyond us. "I just want to check out the new club." "I need to go out dancing—it's cathartic." "Let me just give you a back rub, it'll make you feel good." "I think I'll pack condoms for my trip, just in case." We fail these tests at great cost. And nothing—no matter how it's rationalized—is worth the price of such willed transgression. To willingly make room for the inevitable yielding to temptation by what Dr. Johnson called a "studied and premeditated wickedness" is already to enter into it with an arrogant pride and loveless disregard. And, of course, just as we can exclude dangerous "people, places and things" we can include those that have the opposite influence on us.

Rational or Cognitive Resources

What are some rational or cognitive tools? Back at the turn of the 18th century, a Bible teacher said: "Many a dangerous Temptation comes to us in gay fine Colours that are but Skin-deep." (Matthew Henry) Rational insight allows us to see beyond such surface appearances to the fuller picture.

We've already alluded to some of these resources of insight when we spoke of the differences between our own versions of self and others and others' versions of themselves and us. It's helpful to remember that our versions are never the same as others', no matter our experiential knowledge. We must rely on our cognitive knowledge, not on our experiential knowledge. And cognitively, we know that our sense of self is inside our own brains. It's the product of years of experience being us from the inside. Their sense of self is inside their brains, the product of years of experience being them from the inside. We can't rummage around in their brains to find them and they can't rummage around in ours to find us. Even if we tell them what we think of ourselves they still have to process all of what they hear through their own brains through their own versions of us. So relax, your supposedly unacceptable self is tucked away and safely out of the reach of those of us you want to hide it from.

And we ourselves should not be so sure of even our own versions of our selves. "There is a great deal of unmapped country within us." (George Eliot) We must not be so sure of where we've been in "the unvisitable past." (Henry James) And we don't know where we haven't been on all those fantasy roads not taken, nor where we would be had we taken those roads that don't exist. Nor do we know where we will be one day, or who we will be.

This is all useful in resisting temptation because so much of the yielding to temptation is associated with efforts on our part to conceal who we think we are, what we think we look like, sound like, and so forth and to impress others with a postured persona. In that effort we can lie, flatter, seduce, abuse, gossip, overspend and commit all sorts of other violations of conscience. It's helpful also to hear this little reality check: someone has said that "We would worry less about what others think of us if we realized how seldom they do." Lest that be depressing, remember that just as you yourself have positive thoughts about people who never know they're being thought about so positively—you don't tell them and they don't assume—others think such thoughts of you and they don't tell you either. Maybe they're even afraid to tell you, thinking that you're not all that concerned with what they think or feel. At any rate, what someone thinks of us—whether they like us or not, whether they find us sexy or not, witty or not, stupid or not,—is the story of them, not us. In every case of evaluation an evaluator is needed. The evaluation is always the story of the evaluator and not the story of the evaluated. The evaluator brings to the evaluated her own agendas, expectations, values, tastes, sense of self, etc. You know that you yourself enjoy some people and some things that others do not and that you can't stand some things or people that others flock to.

Another idea that needs to be challenged by rational thinking in order to facilitate heroic resistance to temptation is what we commonly tell ourselves about our so-called needs. Contrary to popular notions about needs, did you know that the behavioral science of need theory is an arbitrary and conflicting hodge podge? What are needs as over against desires or wants or wishes is ill-defined. Need theorists disagree among themselves. So we need not be so cocksure that everything we merely wish for is really a basic need. But when we're afraid we're missing out on needing it to go a certain way, as we've noted, we are in the anxiety and anger that precedes our entering into temptation.

When we think we need it to be otherwise, thinking we need something specific, it is because we're misleading ourselves with the fantasy that we know how it would be if the thing would be experienced. We fool ourselves with a fantasy, which by definition is always an unmixed bag. All our disappointments and all our pleasant surprises are testimonies to this fact. Remember that person you were so sure you couldn't live without and then you found out the hard way you couldn't live with? Remember the job you just had to get into, only to come to the day when it was the job you just had to get out of? We cause ourselves grief over the silly idea that if we were to possess the thing it would be as we imagine: unmixed. But anything actually possessed is a mixed bag, that's the very nature of reality. And, as we've said, we'd adapt, we'd get used to it. Unless we understand this, we're apt to fuel our desires of possessing the unmixed thing of our fantasy. Then we're apt to violate conscience in efforts to possess it. Having a more rational perspective on the predictable outcome could temper the likelihood of our violating conscience. The more irrationally we believe we need the thing, the more irrationally we'll go after it, rationalizing all means to get what we want. The tensions we build up through irrational beliefs about needs can be dispelled by changing our minds about the needs and having a more realistic

outlook. A more realistic outlook won't be unreasonably tempting and unreasonably pursued. We'll then be freed up to go about the meeting of needs that we do have—needs for friendship, meaning, intimacy, service, to name a few—in constructive and responsible ways. The more reasonably we understand our desires and needs, the less we let irrational fantasies drive our desires, the less enslaved we'll be to what desires we have. Paul warned repeatedly of desires that take over and run our lives (Eph 2:3; II Tim 3:16; Tit 3:3). The very core of our personality, Paul cautions, can come under the control of desires that get out of hand. (Rom 1:24)

Having now looked into some of the psychological, social, logistical and rational or cognitive ways to resist yielding to temptation, we can disagree with Oscar Wilde who quipped: “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.” This is a still popular notion, often expressed by the idea that you just need to “get it out of your system” by doing it. Do you see why it may *seem* to work? One result of yielding to temptation is the explosion of the fantasy of that to which the temptation had enticed. As a result, one could be done with that particular temptation now that the thing that was sought was found to be something less than what self-deception had led one to believe originally. Unfortunately the yielding has strengthened a habit of yielding, making it easier to yield again when another fantasy and self-deception will again lead one to expect something more than what one will find after entering into temptation in another instance. Meanwhile there is an accumulated drag on the soul as it's battered again and again in the violation of conscience.

Spiritual Resources

Now in turning to spiritual resources, we come to the strongest help for dealing with temptation. If it is true, as we've been saying, that we're scared into sinning, that it is our poor response to fear that leads us into temptation, then Berdyaev was right in saying that “victory over fear is the first spiritual duty.” But how can we tackle duty, constricted as we are by fear?

This duty is not a task to be performed. It is simply an honest recognition of reality. Our spiritual duty is this: *Get real!* The moral question “What shall I do?” raises the prior question “What is going on?” (H. Richard Niebuhr) And it is God's grace that is going on. “Grace binds you with far stronger cords than the cords of duty or obligation can bind you.” (E. Stanley Jones) Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that “The major problems of living cannot be solved without salvation by grace.” All imperatives about resisting the temptation to be gods of self-importance and self-indulgence rest in the indicative of God's grace. Behind all egos—created, fallen and redeemed—stands the One who calls himself I AM. This is real!

On February 19, 1533 Luther sat at table with his Wittenberg students and confessed: "My temptation is this, that I think I don't have a gracious God who comforts us by saying 'I am your God' [Ps 50:7]. I know his promise, and yet should some thought that isn't worth a fart nevertheless overwhelm me, I have the advantage (that our Lord God gives me) of taking hold of his Word once again. God be praised, I grasp the First Commandment which declares, 'I am your

God [Ex 20:2] 'I'm not going to devour you. I'm not going to poison you.' ... above all righteousness and above all sin stands the declaration, 'I am the Lord your God.'" When Luther's barber Peter asked him for a model prayer, Luther wrote: "Eternal God, you do love me and ask that with all my heart I rely on you in all things. It is your earnest desire to be my God ... My heart shall neither build on nor rely on anything else, whether it be property, honor, wisdom, power, purity, or any other creature. Amen."

In 1563, 29-year-old Zacharias Ursinus wrote the warmly personal Heidelberg Catechism that has been used ever since in Reformed churches around the world. First Question: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" Answer: "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live to him."

In these summaries of God's tender Parental love, what more do we need to quiet anxiety that prompts us to be our own gods and yield to temptation? We're not in ultimate danger! We are not left out! We are not alone! We do belong! And we belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to our faithful Savior who loves us with his own body and soul, in his life and in his death. Does his love not matter? Of course it matters. No wonder John wrote that "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (I John 4: 18) This Love can quell the anxiety that leads us into temptation.

God did not say only "Do not fear." God said "Do not fear for I am with you." (Isa 41:10) The angels at Bethlehem did not say only "Do not fear." They said "Do not fear because we bring you good news of great joy. Your Savior is born." When Jesus urged his disciples not to worry he gave them not simply a command but also a reason: "Don't worry because your heavenly Father knows and cares what your needs are."(Luke 12) When Paul urged us not to be anxious about anything he reminded us of our relationship to the powerful and loving God. (Phil 4:6) The writer of I Peter (5:7) didn't just say "cast all your anxiety away" but "cast all your anxiety on God because God does love you."

Paul writes: "Consider what God has done: Even before creating the world he chose us in Christ, to become his holy and blameless children living within his constant care." (Eph 1:4) This meets even a child psychiatrist's prescription for what we need for a healthy self-esteem: "a constant and loving caregiver ... a fundamental sense of safety and security." (Stanley Greenspan) Said Freud: "How bold one gets when one is sure of being loved!" "Faith in God's unqualified mercy imparts the courage dauntlessly to face even the truth about oneself." (Adams and Bense)

Then I am not what it seems even to me that I am: the very center of the universe and yet lost in the stars? No. I am dearly loved by my Maker who made the universe and all the stars as an

afterthought. Was it not then God's "grace [all these years] that taught my heart to fear / And grace my fears relieved?" (John Newton)

Spiritual resource is available in prayer in the double presence of God and temptation. It was out of his own temptation experience, as one of us in the lonely wilderness of isolation, that Jesus urged: "Watch and *pray* that you may not enter into temptation, for the Spirit is ready and willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mk 14:38) We read in II Peter (2:9) that "The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation." We read in Hebrews (2: 18) that "since [Jesus] himself has passed through the test of suffering, he is able to help those who are meeting their test now." Jesus knows what we're up against. So why shouldn't we, in grateful response to his offer of help, turn to him and accept the help we need? And that's what we do when we pray. We're asking for help from the one who knows how to pass the test. He's done it. His is the "ready and willing *spirit*"—an expression Jesus borrowed from David (Ps 51: 12)—the spirit who is available in the testing time precisely because we are weak. (Mk 14:38)

It is in the Lord's presence that we face temptation. In Jesus' last words to his disciples he promised to be with them always, right on through to the end. (Matt 28:20) He is still present; Jesus is here. He is present today through the scripture to which he himself repeatedly turned in time of temptation to say: "but it is written, ... it is written, ... it is written." Remember the Psalm (119:11) and the childrens' hymn: "Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee"—not "that I might win at Bible Quiz!" He is present today in the water of baptism and in the bread and wine of communion. He is present today in his Holy Spirit. He is present today in the least among us—even in those against whom we're tempted to sin. And he is present today in ourselves—in Paul's words—"Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col 1:27) Paul urged the Philippians to have no anxiety because the Lord is at hand. (Phil 4:5) Paul is "not referring (not primarily, at any rate) to the approach of the Second Advent but to the risen Lord's personal nearness to his people. Their realisation of his nearness should fill their hearts with peace and joy, even (or indeed especially) in the most trying circumstances of life." (F. F. Bruce) Christ was so near to him that Paul said even this: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20) "This new life in Christ is nothing less than the risen Christ living his life in the believer." (F. F. Bruce) Paul goes on to say: "It is God who is at work within you, giving you the will and the power to achieve his purpose." (Phil 2:13) No wonder Fenelon wrote: "To realize God's presence is the one sovereign remedy against temptation!"

When tempted, awareness of God's presence is vital because, as Paul said, "we're not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness." (Eph 6:12) Whatever we do with Paul's picture, let's not miss his point. As one scholar notes, this world "is characterized by the Fall and sin [and] we are [therefore] not dealing only with flesh and blood, with natural weakness, but with principalities and powers, with a revolt against God, with the concentrated force of evil that our good intentions cannot match." (Lochman) The New Testament "pays more

attention to [Satanic testing] than to [any other]" as a biblical scholar says: "this [is] the deepest layer of the whole problem." (Lochman) He goes on: "When Peter writes: 'Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (I Pet 5:8), this is more than poetic, mythological hyperbole. In its own way it is a realistic reference to the seriousness of the situation which strips away all illusions." We're up against evil itself.

When Luther was at his earthy best he would insult the Devil, urging his students to "resist the Devil ... with a fart." But Luther was not joking when he penned the powerful words of his greatest hymn: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing / were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing / Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he; Lord Sabaoth his name/, from age to age the same, *and he must win the battle.*"

What Kazantsakis called "The Last Temptation of Christ" and what a biblical scholar called "The essential temptation with which Satan confronted Jesus was finally the temptation to avoid the cross, to try to reach his goal by broader and more pleasant paths." (Lochman) Since "The cross" as Barth reminds us, "is the most concrete form of the fellowship between Christ and the Christian," among the many spiritual resources available to us is this ironic spiritual insight that characterizes *the truly alternative lifestyle* of the follower of Jesus: cross bearing and self-denial. "The self is shattered whenever it is confronted by the power and holiness of God and becomes genuinely conscious of the real source and centre of all life." (Reinhold Niebuhr) Not only the self is shattered, but all of self's idols too. When we see reality more clearly, it is full of what we did not expect and the opposite of the way we try to secure ourselves through yielding to temptation. Biblically speaking, it is in dying that we live, in self-denial that we are fulfilled, when we try to save our selves we get lost, it's in losing our selves that we are found.

How does this work? Well let's not try to understand more than we can. But we can understand more than we do.

When we speak of self-denial, let's make sure we know who we're speaking about. Who is it that we're called to deny? Remember that the self with which we get self-deceivingly entrapped in self-defeating self-obsession is not the real self, the true you and the true me known truly only to God—known and deeply loved. It is *your* you and *its* agenda, *my* me and *its* agenda, trying to believe in itself, trying to save itself, that we're to deny. It's this frightened little demigod of a me that's always rushing into temptation to secure itself against itself. So we're called to a self-denial that would prevent our self-deceiving, self-defeating and aggravating self-aggrandizement. Self-denial frees us to be disinterested in this demigod of a me. Even in a secular frame, it's been observed that what are termed self-actualizers have an air of detachment and are problem-centered rather than self-centered. Disinterest permits perspective. It can afford to admit the unintended effects of our self-aggrandizing schemes that lead us into temptation. Disinterest permits an objectivity, a detachment freedom that is otherwise unavailable. Disinterest is freedom from selfish bias and freedom for self-giving love. But it is not uninterest or indifference. When Charlie Brown's plans to play ball are threatened by impending rain, Sally

says: "What do I care? That's my new philosophy to carry me through life ... 'What Do I Care?'" A peeved Charlie Brown yells at her: "It may carry you right out the back door!" Uninterest is unconcerned with what's really going on. Indifference says that it doesn't matter what's really going on. It says there's no significance. It's apathetic. It says that what's going on is neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong. But what's really going on in our lives, beyond temptation, beyond the yielding to temptation with all its unintended effects, what's really going on behind all that we see of ourselves? It's the grace of God. God loves us as we really are, not as we myopically see our self-centered selves to be. God doesn't want us to deny who we really are. God calls us to deny the self that is a lie, the self that leads us into temptation to sin that is killing us at our very core. God calls us to deny the self that killed the Son God gave to save us from these selves. God calls us to life "out beyond [our selves] ... to an inexplicable, inscrutable, and loving generosity that redefines all our modes of reasonableness." (Walter Brueggemann)

We can be sucked dry by a self-absorbing self-obsession or we can be taken up into Christ. The self to be denied is the self that's passing away. The self to be affirmed is the self that is being conformed into the very image of Christ in the community of Christ's Body. C. S. Lewis, as usual, has put it beautifully. He said: "The more we get what we call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. There is so much of Him that millions and millions of 'little Christs,' all different, will still be too few to express him fully. He made them all. He invented all the different men that you and I were intended to be. In that sense our real selves are all waiting for us in Him. It is no good trying to 'be myself' without him."

The way of Christ is the way of the cross. Jesus said that if we wanted to follow him it would be by denying self and taking up our cross. But as Bonhoeffer explains, "Self denial is never just a series of isolated acts of mortification or asceticism To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ. Bonhoeffer quotes Peter, denying his Lord, and says this is exactly what we need to say to self: "I know not this man." This self-denial is the gracious preamble for taking up the cross to follow Christ. Otherwise, as Bonhoeffer says, cross-bearing is unbearable. Self-denial facilitates cross-bearing because when I deny the pseudo-significance of my irrationally self-interested self—when my orientation is focused away from self-preoccupation—I'm free to endure what would otherwise be unendurably personal. Self-denial is a wonderful antidote for personalizing.

But of course, cross-bearing is no picnic. There is suffering. The biblical vocabulary of self-denial and cross-bearing dare not be sugarcoated. That language is meaningless if it does not refer to real suffering. But don't we realize that our choice is not between suffering and not suffering? Our choice is between suffering for self-indulgence or suffering for Christ, between useless suffering and useful suffering, between suffering for unfaithfulness or suffering for faithfulness, between suffering with faith or suffering without faith. One is ugly futility and self-defeating while the other is what Paul called "living sacrifices" of bodily life, what Whittier called "the awful beauty of self-sacrifice," what C. S. Lewis called "ecstatic self-surrender." Suffering can result from lust or from love as an act of will. Suffering can come from pride or from patience. Carl Jung observed: "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."

Andre Gide reflects a biblical view in saying that “without sacrifice there is no resurrection. Nothing grows and blooms except by giving. All you try to save in yourself wastes and perishes.” As Niebuhr puts it: “God is revealed as loving will; and His will is active in creation, judgment, and redemption. The highest self-realization for the self is therefore not the destruction of its particularity but the subjection of its particular will to the universal will” of God.

Conclusion

Thus, my best self-interest is Christ's best self-interest in me and all my sisters and brothers. His will in my life, not my independent will but my dependent will in Christ is really living. This isn't just discipleship rhetoric; this is real. This is reality as deep as we can go—worthy of our full confidence. My center is not my self but my God. I'm a satellite of the Son of God. And so my center is safe, no matter how bruised and beaten I may be short of that center. I'm safe in the final analysis, no matter how difficult the present I'm safe in my deepest self-interest. I am loved by I AM. I don't need, therefore, to short-cut to love by fearfully yielding to temptation.

If we trust the God of all providence with the welfare of our eternal souls—and we say we do—can we not trust God with the welfare of our genitals and intimacy or anything else for which we yield to temptation? If the God of all providence is concerned with every sparrow's fall, every strand of hair, and every cup of water given to even the least among us, is God not also concerned with our deepest welfare and the deepest welfare of everyone we're tempted to manipulate and abuse?

Listen to the warmly pastoral words on God's providence as we find them in the Heidelberg Catechism: “By providence I understand the almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”

Like a little child mirroring the gleam in a mother's eyes as she looks down in love, may we internalize God's love for us and thus dispel the fear that sends us slinking into temptation. For when fear fails to faith the Love Who casts out fear, we do yield to temptation. Self-deceit acts out the lie—anxiously yielding to temptation and missing out on God's very best for us. Self-denial lives out the truth—heroically resisting temptation and soaring by God's grace alone, in hope of the One who is able “to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine” in our wildest fantasies. (Eph 3:20)