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The Necessity of Monastic Asceticism: A Case for Retrieval in Contemporary Evangelicalism

Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care

2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–12

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DOI: 10.1177/19397909231193759

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Abstract

Within the contemporary evangelical church, there is often little discussion of asceticism despite an emphasis on spiritual disciplines and formation. This article argues that not only does the evangelical church need to embrace and adopt ascetic practices, but these should be based in monastic asceticism, based around the practices of poverty, chastity and obedience. The article first puts forward suggestions as to why the evangelical church does not embrace asceticism, in spite of it being part of its heritage, but then moves to a constructive argument, using an array of ecumenical sources, demonstrating that a monastic asceticism is a biblical asceticism and should be a fundamental feature in evangelical faith and practice.

Keywords

asceticism, evangelicalism, monasticism, spiritual formation

Introduction

Though it would be impossible to know with any certainty, I am guessing that the topic of asceticism rarely comes up in the Sunday schools, small groups and sermons of most contemporary Evangelical churches. This was not always the case, though, especially among two of Evangelicalism's forebears: the Anabaptists and Puritans. In the early

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1970s, Kenneth Davis, professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada and ordained minister in the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists in Canada, argued that an “ascetic factor, namely, the pursuit of holiness, ... emerges as the fundamental principle in the formulation and structuring of Anabaptism’s distinctive theology and in much of its related practices and institutionalization.” The “central factor in the emergence of Anabaptism,” he concludes, “is demonstrated as the ascetic concern that the church, visibly and practically, should manifest moral righteousness and holiness of conduct and life.”¹ Puritanism, in particular, was known for its emphasis on asceticism, including but not limited to bodily mortification and fasting. The “deeds of the flesh are to be mortified in their causes, from whence they spring,” writes John Owen (d. 1683).² Regarding fasts, the lesser-known Puritan Matthew Barker (d. 1698) wrote, “That fasting is a duty to be practised in the days of the New Testament, even all the time of the Bridegrooms absence. So that it is not a duty that was peculiar to the times of the *Old Testament* and the *Mosaic pædagog*y, but is to be practised in Gospel times.”³ Despite this presence of asceticism in Evangelicalism’s rearview mirror, it is not terribly fashionable to talk about asceticism. In fact, the concept itself is likely foreign to many Evangelical Christians if not the word itself.⁴

But asceticism is as old as the Church⁵ and it is not unique to Christianity.⁶ One could easily argue that asceticism, as a form of bodily discipline for “spiritual purposes” (however that phrase may be understood), is simply a part of what it means to be human.⁷ Pierre Hadot has adequately shown how even Greco-Roman philosophy was essentially a form of asceticism⁸ and questions of embodiment are often cast in the

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1. Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale, PA/Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1974), 296.
 2. John Owen, *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, Ch. 1 in William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen, D. D., Vol. VI* (London and Edinburgh; Johnstone and Hunter, 1851), 8.
 3. Matthew Barker, “A Religious Fast, Mark 2.20,” in Samuel Annesley, *A supplement to The Morning-exercise at Cripple-Gate, or; Several more cases of conscience practically resolved by sundry ministers* (London: Thomas Cockerill, 1674), 253.
 4. One exception to this is Dallas Willard’s unpublished paper for the March 1985 meeting of The Society of Christian Philosophers in San Francisco titled “Asceticism: An Essential but Neglected Element in the Christian Theory of the Moral Life.”
 5. See Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, eds., *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York/London: Routledge, 1999); Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).
 6. Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, “Asceticism,” in Mark Juergensmeyer and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Encyclopedia of Global Religion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), 65-67.
 7. For the purposes of this paper, asceticism is defined as “voluntary abstention for religious reasons from food and drink, sleep, wealth, or sexual activity. Such abstention may be periodic or permanent” (Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*, 1); or, more simply, as bodily discipline for spiritual purposes.
 8. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

terms of asceticism.⁹ In short, philosophies of and practices of asceticism are literally all around us, if we have the eyes to see them. Albeit, to repeat myself, this is probably not a common topic of teaching or sermonizing in the modern Evangelical church. Why that is the case might take us too far afield but let me make several suggestions as to why this might be the case, all of which are (likely) controversial. I am not making a concrete case for these “suggestions” as the cause for why asceticism is so infrequently addressed in Evangelicalism. But I do believe that these characteristics of Evangelicalism lend themselves to a devaluation of the importance and centrality of asceticism as part of the fabric of a proper Evangelical spiritual formation.

First, the baby of asceticism was thrown out with the water of medieval Christianity during the Reformation. It is no secret that early Protestants sought to distance themselves from the perceived abuses of the medieval Church. A simplified version of this argument runs something like this: the earliest centuries were mostly pristine with a clear demarcation between what was orthodox and heretical and what was clean and unclean, but this spotless church was deeply corrupted during the Middle Ages with the exception of certain radical movements, such as the Waldensians. Thus, the Reformation becomes a moment of re-birthing this immaculate church of the early centuries that just survived on the medieval fringe.¹⁰ In the words of John Henry Newman, “popular religion scarcely recognizes the fact of the twelve long ages which lie between the Councils of Nicaea and Trent.”¹¹

Second, beyond particular sexual sins (e.g., homosexuality), the contemporary Evangelical church has little sense of sins connected to embodiment. To say it more bluntly, the Evangelical church may pay lip service to the sin of gluttony, for example, but in my experience, it does not call out its gluttonous members, much less encourage a form of asceticism that would address such a sin. The fifth-century monastic theologian John Cassian (d. 435) tells us that there are two kinds of sins: carnal and spiritual. “The carnal ones,” he writes, “pertain especially to the enjoyment and feelings of the flesh.” A sin like gluttony is carnal because it is connected to our embodiment in that we have to eat to stay alive. Thus, eating is not a sin but eating too much or overly fancy foods is a sin. Our bodies can be “so delighted and gratified that it sometimes even arouses peaceful minds and drags them to acquiesce in its will.”¹² Our natural need to eat becomes immoderate and leads to gluttony whereas our natural desire to procreate leads fallen humankind to lust. Cassian goes so far as to suggest that all sins are interlinked, “such that the overflow of the previous one serves as the start of the next one.” From “an excess of gluttony there inevitably springs fornication; from fornication, avarice; from

9. Mary G. Winkler and Letha B. Cole, eds., *The Good Body: Asceticism in Contemporary Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

10. For a full discussion of this false historiography see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

11. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 8.

12. John Cassian, *Conferences* 4.4; Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 184.

avarice, anger; from anger, sadness; and from sadness, acedia.”¹³ The answer to this cascading effect of sin due to embodiment is, of course, bodily asceticism wherein we cut off the first sin, which is carnal (i.e., due to our embodiment), so that we do not tend toward further sins. But, again, the Evangelical church seems content with many sins related to embodiment, thus it sees no need for asceticism.

Third, and lastly, the Evangelical church’s (over-)emphasis on decisional/punctiliar regeneration, assurance of salvation and cheap grace leave little room for traditional forms of good works. Most functional Evangelical soteriology teaches that a non-believer who hears a Gospel message and responds with a prayer asking Jesus into her heart not only gets saved but is given an assurance of salvation that cannot be undone. If this is the case then one *could* continue in sin and the consequence is not a loss of salvation but merely some sort of an eschatological judgment that might be uncomfortable but does not, really, in the long run matter all that much. Should the Christian continue in sin so that grace may abound? God forbid, but if you do God still grants you the gift of salvation and eternity in his presence. For most Evangelicals there is no loss of salvation much less a post-mortem Purgatory. And not only that, but most worship practices in Evangelical churches do not make room for the confession of sin much less an assurance of forgiveness or absolution. In such a soteriology there is simply no room for good works by way of asceticism. Rather, God is the indiscriminate dispenser of non-judgmental love and mercy despite one’s sin life or lack of holiness.¹⁴

Though this list could be longer, and perhaps even more controversial, my purpose is not to merely diagnose but to prescribe a remedy. If the Evangelical church has lost her connection to asceticism, if she has developed her doctrine to the point of pushing ascetical practices aside, then what is the solution to see its return? How can the Evangelical church be re-asceticized, if you will? The answer, I am afraid, is neither simple nor straightforward, for much depends on the Church’s theology and there is no unified Evangelical theology, despite all attempts at finding a common core of belief, a kind of evangelical “rule of faith.” Most Evangelical churches do not even bother reciting the Apostle’s or Nicene Creeds. Thus, Evangelical theology is as disparate as there are Evangelical churches, or so it seems. Nonetheless, I have been tasked with making a case for the necessity of monastic asceticism in the Evangelical church. I am going to do this in two movements: 1) I will argue that asceticism is part and parcel of the Gospel; and 2) that “monastic asceticism” is the richest expression of this Gospel-centered asceticism.

13. John Cassian, *Conferences* 10.1; Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 189.

14. Among Evangelical theologians there are differing ways of understanding “holiness” that exacerbate the tensions between one’s sin life in relationship to God’s universal call to holiness, as discussed below. See, for example, Bernie A. Van de Walle, *Rethinking Holiness: A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

The Gospel and Asceticism

The Gospel is all-encompassing in that it includes all truth, touches all areas of life and is summed up fully in the person of Jesus Christ: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1: 14, 16). There is nothing untouched by the good news of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not merely the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, much less something that can be summarized in four spiritual laws; rather, it is the work of the Holy Trinity in the life of creation through the incarnate Son of God and all that flows from this gift of God’s self.¹⁵ Thus, with Gerard Manley Hopkins we conclude that the “world is charged with the grandeur of God”¹⁶ by way of the Gospel.

An evangelical articulation of this Gospel fullness is given by the seventeenth-century theologian Henry Scougal (d. 1678) who speaks of three misunderstandings of the Gospel, or “true religion” in his parlance. First, those that think the Gospel is “in the understanding” so that they have “orthodox notions and opinions” that leads them to join “themselves to one of those many sects whereinto Christendom is most happily divided.” Perhaps we would say that in this view the Gospel is right thinking by a member of the right denomination. Second, those that place the Gospel “in the outward man [*sic*], in a constant course of external duties and a model of performances.” Here the Gospel is not so much good news as good works, or, in today’s parlance, social justice. Third, some think that the Gospel is “in the affections, in rapturous heats and ecstatic devotion” that leads them to “assume a great confidence of their salvation.”¹⁷ In this understanding the Gospel is reduced to one’s feelings, usually the result of the emotionalism that comes by way of contemporary Christian music, for example. Scougal, however, thinks that all of these understandings come up short. For him, the Gospel (i.e., “true religion”) is a “union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle’s phrase, *it is Christ formed within us*. Briefly,” he continues, “I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed than by calling it *a divine life*.”¹⁸ The Gospel and a Gospel-shaped life are summed up in the divine life. Just as God “fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23), so too the Gospel is all-encompassing.

Therefore, because the Gospel is all-inclusive there is nothing outside its purview, including a life of asceticism, which appears to have been taken for granted by biblical authors, such as the Apostle Paul. When he stood before Felix, the governor of Judea, Paul assured him that “I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down

15. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything (Second Edition)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 113-130.

16. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” in Catherine Phillips, ed., *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 114.

17. Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, ed. Winthrop S. Hudson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), 29.

18. Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, 30; italics in the original.

by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” Paul swore to Felix that he too believed what the Jews believed and was not attempting to stir up a crowd. In fact, he was striving to do the exact opposite, confessing, “I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man [*sic*]” (Acts. 24:14-16). The phrase “take pains” is the Greek word ἄσκῶ, from ἄσκέω, which means to exercise or to practice.¹⁹ Thus, Paul uses ascetical practices to have a “clear conscience” (συνείδησις) before God and man. Further, Paul, like the philosophical tradition before him,²⁰ connects ἄσκέω to bodily exercise and training: “Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives’ tales. Train [γυμναζε] yourself in godliness, for, while physical training [σωματικὴ γυμνασία] is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7-8). Or, “For this is the will of God... that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor” (1 Thess. 4:3-4). Notice that this training is for a particular end, holiness.

Simply put, the *telos* of Paul’s asceticism is right relationship to God. For asceticism is not just practiced for the sake of being ascetical but for a particular end. All actions by all rational beings are directed toward a *telos*, a particular end. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) illustrates this well when he concludes that “all human actions,” proceeding “from a deliberate will,” “must be for an end.”²¹ That is, “Every agent, of necessity, acts for an end” for “an agent does not move except out of intention for an end.”²² Moreover, there is only one last end that causes all movement for “if there were no last end, nothing would be desired.” A human person, then, does all that she does for the sake of this last end, and in Christian history that last end is often construed as “knowledge of God”²³ even if the terminology varies between Christian traditions (e.g., divine life, happiness, beatitude, union with God, etc.).

Further, this *telos* is the same end for all Christians; that is, there are not differing *teloi* for married men and women, for the widowed and for a monastic. No, in the words of Vatican II, all Christians “are called to this union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and toward whom our whole life strains.”²⁴ This universal call to holiness applies to all regardless of one’s vocation or state of life. It is true that the worst of the Christian spiritual tradition advocated that some forms of life were better than others. For example, the anonymous third-century

19. Hermigild Dressler, *The Usage of Ἀσκέω and its Cognates in Greek Documents to 100 A. D.* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1947), 71-73.

20. Dressler, *The Usage of Ἀσκέω*, 36.

21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II.1.1; Peter Kreeft, ed., *A Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 350.

22. Thomas Aquinas, *Theologica* I-II.1.2; Kreeft, ed., *A Summa of the Summa*, 351.

23. Thomas Aquinas, *Theologica* I-II.3.4; Kreeft, 378. See also Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 22.30: “God will be the end of our desires” (Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1179).

24. *Lumen Gentium* 1.3.

sermon *The Hundredfold, Sixtyfold and Thirtyfold Reward*, interpreting Matt. 13:3-9, said that the hundredfold reward went to martyrs, the sixtyfold to virginal ascetics and the thirtyfold to “married persons who had renounced sex upon receiving baptism.”²⁵ There was no reward, it appears, for the sexually active married believer. But this kind of thinking was soundly rejected by the majority of the Christian tradition, even if it was never wholly silenced.

So, to sum up, because of the all-encompassing nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, all areas of life are affected. This includes the discipline of asceticism. And since all Christians are called by God to knowledge of him and holiness of life, all believers must live out the Gospel and practice asceticism. In the words of the great Benedictine monastic theologian Anselm Stolz, “Today, as yesterday, you can meet ascetics and saints in all walks of life, in every social class, in the most varied states of life, in married life, in the cloister and in solitude.”²⁶ Thus, we need to consider what that looks like, and it is the Christian monastic tradition that provides us with a robust vision of godly asceticism.

Monastic Asceticism

Because asceticism qua asceticism is not uniquely Christian, it is necessary for the Church to intentionally adopt the practice(s) of *Christian* asceticism and that means *monastic* asceticism. As I have argued elsewhere, all Christians are monks and since all Christians are monks (of a certain sort), all Christian asceticism is monastic asceticism.²⁷ To be a monk (μόνος) means to be single-mindedly focused on God, something that all Christians are called to: “secure your undivided [ἀπερισπάστως = attentive = single-minded] devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor. 7: 35). Some men and women will be called to be monks of the traditional sort (e.g., a Benedictine or Cistercian), living in community with other traditional monastics following the vows of obedience, stability and fidelity to the monastic life. Other Christians will not be called to live in a traditional monastery but they are still called to live in the world single-mindedly, as a monk, in obedience to their baptismal vows and the commandments of God. Thus, not all Christians will be engaged in all the same ascetic practices at the same time. It is true that the way in which we all work out our asceticism will be conditional on our state of life, time, location, spiritual condition, etc. The life of grace by way of asceticism “is exteriorized in the various states [of life], [it] is so rich and inexhaustible that it cannot be limited to a single formula.”²⁸ A robust theology of asceticism will not neglect any of

25. David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 114.

26. Anselm Stolz, *Christian Asceticism*, trans. Giles Conacher (Waterloo, ON: Arouca Press, 2021), 1.

27. Greg Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers: The Monastic Foundation of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

28. Stolz, *Christian Asceticism*, 1.

its potential forms but will strive “to bring out their common source, the very principle of the religious life when these different aspects spring.”²⁹

Borrowing again from Stolz, I propose three theological foundations of asceticism.³⁰ First, Christians have been called to holiness (“be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy,’” 1 Pet. 1:15-16), to perfection (“be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” Matt. 5:48) so we must separate ourselves from the world as much as possible (“they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world,” John 17:14). Second, we must do battle with the devil and that is best done from an ascetic footing, just as Jesus modeled for his followers when he withdrew to the desert after his baptism (cf. Matt. 4:1-11). Third, by sinning humanity lost Paradise, thus the Christian life of asceticism is an effort to regain some semblance of it on this side of the eschaton. I doubt if the first point is controversial so I will take up the second and third points.

Directly after his baptism Jesus was sent into the desert to fight Satan: “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 3:16-4:1). It was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness (ἔρημον) but it was Jesus who girded himself for battle by fasting for forty days and nights. But it is not just Jesus’ own asceticism that provides us with inspiration but the three satanic temptations form the basis of the whole Christian ascetical system that can be summed up in the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. Jesus’ resistance to Satan is threefold, and each gives birth to an evangelical-ascetical counsel. First, he resists the temptation to make food for himself, establishing a model for poverty that prioritizes the spiritual over the material: “command these stones to become loaves of bread,” Satan says, and Jesus responds, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone’” (Matt. 4:3-4). This poverty, this need *not* to have makes it possible to appreciate all that we have as gifts from God. This is not a poverty of deprivation but a poverty of use. Historic ascetical poverty was never a complete lack but, rather, a wise, godly and prudent use of resources. Ascetical poverty provides for our own needs while looking out for the needs of others.

Second, Jesus resists the temptation to covet more power than that granted by God. For example, Satan’s words, “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down” (Matt. 4:6), are a temptation to exercise dominion over space for throwing oneself down from the temple and living so as to overcome earth’s gravity and rule the heavens and the spirits. As Eastern Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov explains, this is a desire to want to be a “micro-god.”³¹ This leads to a desire to use magic powers to hypnotize, charm and dominate, violating the mystery of nature, profaning “the sacredness of the cosmos, the

29. Stolz, *Christian Asceticism*, 2.

30. Stolz, *Christian Asceticism*, 7.

31. Paul Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 147.

creation of God.”³² Chastity, on the other hand, is not merely a physiological virtue “but expresses the entire and chaste structure of the human spirit. It constitutes the charism of the sacrament of marriage. In a wider sense, it inspires the meaning of the sacredness of every particle of God’s creation, inviolable in its expectation of salvation that is to come from one who is chaste.” Chastity, then, is the opposite of the power of magic “and signifies the return to the true ‘supernaturally natural power’ of paradise.”³³ In the words of Evdokimov, “‘To throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple’ means to alienate himself and to render himself useless. To this temptation and to the *concupiscence* that inclines a man [*sic*] to seize the power that Christ possesses, even over the angels, the response is chastity.”³⁴

Third, Jesus’ response to Satan’s invitation to “fall down and worship me” establishes a model for ascetical obedience. Humans are by nature liturgical beings (*homo liturgicus*) in that it is in our nature to perceive the “invisible attributes” of God and “honor him as God” (Rom. 1:20-21). We are exercising our obedience to God by freely fulfilling the law of Christ in which we subject ourselves to the all-powerful, all-knowing God. Further, as the Gospel makes demands on us by way of “You shall” statements (e.g., the Beatitudes and the Great Commandment), we submit to God in order to live a holy life. Obedience to God as an ascetical practice is part and parcel of the Gospel itself. Obedience to God and his rightfully ordained ministers is natural and it is good and right to be obedient.

From this we see that Jesus not only modeled an ascetical life in response to temptation but in the process he established a pattern for us to follow. We are going to do battle with Satan for he is our adversary who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). It is not an *if* but a *when*. Thus, we need to be ascetically engaged in response, practicing poverty, chastity and obedience in our daily lives. These historically monastic vows become the basis of all Christian asceticism, showing that monastic asceticism is not just for traditional monks and nuns but for all of us for the “ascetic life is not something apart, superimposed on to ordinary Christian life, but truly it is that same Christian life taken to its perfection, crowning its logical conclusion.”³⁵

Of course, perfection is not something that we talk about often despite its rootedness in the Gospel itself: “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48); and, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor” (Matt. 19:21). Perfection does not mean sinlessness, of course, but it must mean something. Given that humanity lost Paradise through sin, it seems right that Gospel perfection is rooted in regaining Paradise. That is, the prelapsarian condition of Adam and Eve is perfection as they had not sinned but instead enjoyed communion with God (Gen. 2-3). What monastic asceticism does is restore us to this Paradisaical communion with God as poverty, chastity and obedience restores us to our primitive state of *apatheia* and purity of heart, or at least some semblance of it.

32. Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life*, 148.

33. Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life*, 148.

34. Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life*, 151; italics in the original.

35. Stolz, *Christian Asceticism*, 71.

One theological account, for illustration sake, of how this works is provided by Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), himself a monk. According to Gregory, the creation of human nature is in a twofold sense: one made like to God, and one divided according to the distinction between male and female. Thus, Gregory writes,

Holy Scripture conveys to us a great and lofty doctrine; and the doctrine is this. While two [elements]—the divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational and animal life—are separated from each other as extremes, the human is the span. For there is to be beheld in the human compound a share of each of those mentioned—of the divine, the rational and intelligent, which does not admit the difference of male and female; of the irrational, the bodily formation and construction, divided into male and female—for each of them is certainly in all that partakes of human life. But the intellectual takes precedence, as we have learnt from one who gives in detail an ordered account of the origin of the human being, participation and kinship with the irrational is concomitant to being human.³⁶

Parsing this out: 1) humans have a divine and incorporeal nature (soul/spirit); and 2) humans have an irrational form and structure (body) that is divided into male and female. The incorporeal nature precedes the irrational form, and the irrational form is for reproduction since God said, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:22, 28). Further, we must bear in mind that in his own nature, God is all that which our minds can conceive as good. In fact, he transcends all good that we can conceive or comprehend. He creates humans for no reason other than that he is good and because he is good he can only create humans in a perfect way (i.e., in his own image): “the perfect form of goodness is in this, both in leading the human being out of non-being into genesis, and in his being made lacking no good gift.” It works like this: “if the divine is the plenitude of good gifts, and this is the image of that, then the image has its likeness to the archetype in being filled with every good.”³⁷ Gregory concludes, “Thus there is in us a form of every beauty, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that can be conceived. Of all these one is to be free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural domination, but to have self-determining deliberation regarding what we resolve. For virtue is something free and voluntary; what is constrained and forced cannot be virtue.”³⁸ In short, being in the image of God means that we have free will, which means that humans can choose to sin against God, losing their Edenic perfection.

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were not in bondage to any natural power, their wills were free to choose *the Good*. But since they were embodied and could sin against God they would only maintain this godly disposition if they practiced proper asceticism. Satan’s

36. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* 16.9; John Behr, ed. and trans., *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 225-227.

37. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* 16.10; Behr, ed. and trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 227.

38. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* 16.11; Behr, ed. and trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 227-229.

temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden is very much like his temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Satan appeals to their rational *and* appetitive natures:

the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of [the fruit of the tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:4-6)

Adam and Eve's proper response, like Jesus, should have been ascetical; that is, they should have exercised proper poverty, chastity and obedience. Poverty in that they should have been content with the goods that God gave them, not eager to gain something that they did not have. Chastity in that they should have been content not to have some sort of power (being like God) that was not part of their nature. And obedient to the commandment of God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To maintain their innocence and to enjoy ongoing communion with God, Adam and Eve needed to live ascetically, something that Jesus did in the wilderness, recapitulating this moment in Paradise. And we, the descendants of Adam and Eve can, in fact, regain Paradise through our own asceticism, in imitation of Jesus. Full communion with God awaits the eschaton but we can have a semblance of it now if we live ascetic lives.

Conclusion

The sixteenth-century reformers by and large saw no need for the institution of monasticism but when they jettisoned monasticism, they also compromised the place of asceticism in the life of the Church, in the life of each believer.³⁹ It is true that ascetical practices still remained, especially among the Puritans, for example, but the *telos* of asceticism was lost and, in time, most Protestant expressions of the faith lost the good of asceticism. An ascetical life became an option and was often looked at askance by many Christians. We now know that this loss is regrettable and monastic asceticism is simply a natural result of being human, of being a human in relationship to God. It is time to live ascetical lives; in fact, it is necessary that we do so.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

39. It is true that the Protestant reformers did *not* wholly reject monasticism but, in the end, their views in favor of a reformed monasticism did not carry the day and monasticism was only reintroduced into the Protestant traditions in the mid-eighteenth (Anglicanism) and nineteenth (Lutheranism and the Reformed churches) centuries. See Greg Peters, *Reforming the Monastery: Protestant Theologies of the Religious Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Publications, 2014).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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