

# **Dying to Live: Reflections on Asceticism, Spiritual Disciplines and Everyday Life Part One: Asceticism Summarized**

Evan B. Howard, 2/8/2014

I am convinced that we have a lot to learn from the monks and nuns of the fourth century. Furthermore, I believe that the Christian Church would be more vibrant and effective if it embodied more of the spirit and practices of these early monastics. So let me clarify. What I don't mean is that I think all Christians should move to the wilderness and eat one meal a day (although I wouldn't complain if a few felt the call). But I also don't want to dismiss the lifestyles of the early monastics as "extremes," relegating early monastic literature for use in clever stories and sayings. To my mind, the error of our current culture is in not taking early monasticism serious enough, as one can see through my essays on the relevance of historic monastic life for today.<sup>1</sup>

In the present essay I want to summarize my current thinking on a topic that is central to early monasticism and has become an important topic among Christians in recent decades: asceticism, or "spiritual disciplines." I became a student and a serious explorer of spiritual disciplines in the early 1980s. I have watched the interest in different spiritual practices come and go among various circles. I have also, during this time, pursued my own academic explorations of the history and theory of Christian spirituality.

Outside of a few articles and books on particular disciplines, I have not published much on spiritual disciplines, with one exception. Chapter eight of my *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* was dedicated to the topic of "spiritual formation."<sup>2</sup> In that chapter I discussed the contexts, agents, aims, task, and means of Christian spiritual formation. I specifically addressed ascetical practices or spiritual disciplines (using these two terms as synonyms) in the final five pages of the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the essays housed at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/old-monastic-wisdom-for-new-monastic-people/>.

<sup>2</sup> Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 267-297.

chapter, using Dallas Willard's definition of spiritual disciplines as the framework for my own treatment. I spoke of the diversity of potential disciplines that can be employed for spiritual ends for communities and individuals. I mentioned the breadth of life conditions that could be within view as Christians practice asceticism. I acknowledged that for some people the cultivation of a rich enjoyment of life is a wiser practice than what we usually think of when we hear the word "asceticism." I then mentioned a few of the goals or motives of ascetical practice: spiritual maturity, modeling a counter-culture, focusing energy, a functional means of accomplishing divine mission, spiritual warfare, expressing or obeying God's values. I closed my treatment with a brief portrait of how spiritual disciplines work to facilitate God's work of reorienting and rehabilitating our experience.

A number of developments have taken place since I wrote the *Brazos Introduction*. I have, in these past few years, found a way of expressing and living out my own personal Rule of life that I feel both reflects the themes and structure of historic monastic Rules and yet is flexible enough to adapt to the realities of non-monastic existence. I have also now summarized my views on what I call the "Metaphysics of Power," expressing my own philosophy of reality and providing some groundwork for psychology, community, politics, and spiritual formation. Furthermore, due to some studies in Scripture, I feel as clear as I have ever been regarding my sense of the aim(s) of spiritual formation. I have made a little progress toward understanding and embodying a commitment to what I am calling "fasting from oppression," a commitment which addresses our relationship to culture. I have more recently (thanks to the influence of my wife) been doing some exploring in the field of "positive psychology" and have discovered a wealth of insights that are valuable in re-appropriating a practice of asceticism for today. One important development is that I have now read my way through the first 500 years of the history of Christian religious life and am ready to summarize what I see in that literature regarding ascetical practice. Finally, I have been doing a bit more spiritual direction than usual and in the course of that work have felt the tensions of people of all types trying to live the Christian life as authentically as they can. Earlier this year I made a list of a few specialized themes regarding early

monasticism that I wanted to address as I close up this section of my research; asceticism was the first theme on that list (others include gender, labor/work, identity, wildness/domestication, elitism, and salvation).

My hope is to use this essay as a way of 1) summarizing what I have learned about asceticism from my studies of early monasticism and 2) offering a few reflections regarding the relevance of early monastic ascetical wisdom for Christians today. The essay, then, will be divided into these two broad parts. A more complete integration of spiritual disciplines/ascetical practice and the more general field of spiritual formation will have to wait for more general book on spiritual formation, which I hope to be write in the future. The same holds for the much needed biblical/theological reflections necessary for a fully adequate recovery of Christian asceticism. This essay serves, then, simply as a single step in the process. In Part One I will clarify some issues regarding the definition of "asceticism" and "spiritual disciplines" I left unaddressed in the *Brazos Introduction*. I will summarize what I see to be the essential features of Christian asceticism, particularly drawing upon my research of early monasticism: developing the forms, character and aims more thoroughly than I have yet. In Part Two I will explore the relevance of early asceticism for today:

My hope is that with this combination of a summary of early Christian asceticism and a few stimulating suggestions regarding the contemporary appropriation of monastic wisdom, we might be better able as Christian communities and individuals to live into the holy vibrancy I dream of as I pray for the Church.

**PART ONE: CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM SUMMARIZED** (with special attention to early monastic expressions)

### **Defining Asceticism and Spiritual Disciplines**

As I mentioned above, in the *Brazos Introduction* I employed Dallas Willard's definition of

spiritual disciplines as the framework by which I unpacked the meaning of spiritual disciplines (also calling them "ascetical practices"). Willard identifies spiritual disciplines as “*activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.*”<sup>3</sup> Though I am still largely comfortable with that definition, I find it valuable to revise Willard's definition at certain points for the purpose of facilitating our summary and appropriation of the ascetical theory and practice of early monasticism. I also think it important to clarify a few elements that are not really intrinsic to his definition but which often accompany followers of Willard.

Other influential books on spiritual disciplines--predominantly books by evangelical authors--describe spiritual disciplines much as Willard does. Richard Foster, for example, in his landmark *Celebration of Discipline* never really defines the phrase. Everywhere he refers to "the Classical Disciplines," to "Spiritual Disciplines" or simply to "the Disciplines." For the most part, the list found at the table of contents *is* his definition. He simply states that "God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us."<sup>4</sup> Adele Calhoun, in her comprehensive *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, speaks of the relationship between desires and disciplines, stating that "from its beginning, the church linked the desire for more of God to intentional practices, relationships and experiences that gave people space in their life to "keep company" with Jesus. These intentional practices, relationships and experiences we know as *spiritual disciplines*."<sup>5</sup>

Western liturgical Christians have often used other language to describe human efforts employed toward Christian maturity. Jordan Aumann (Roman Catholic), for example, speaks of the sacraments, meritorious good works, and the prayer of petition as "means of spiritual growth." He identifies examination of conscience, a plan of life, spiritual reading and other practices as "aids to

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3 Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 68.

4 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1978/1998), 7. See also Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995/2005), 9.

5 Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 17.

spiritual growth."<sup>6</sup> F. P. Harton (Anglican), in his influential *The Elements of Spiritual Life: A Study in Ascetical Theology*, following the lead of John Calvin, speaks of "repentance" and "mortification" with a treatment of the sacraments following.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the twentieth-century most Roman Catholic and later in the twentieth-century some Anglican authors understood the Christian life in terms of two primary divisions: ascetical theology, which described the wisdom that guided the less mature believer and mystical theology which treated the spiritual life of the more mature believer.<sup>8</sup> Methodists tend to speak of "means of grace," a phrase which has also been used by many non-Methodists since Wesley.

Orthodox Christians generally use the language of "asceticism." Saint Theophan the Recluse, for example, speaks of "ascetical struggles," of a zeal of a "*self-opposition and self-forcing*" which are "the two aspects of zeal born in the soul, forming as it were the beginning of asceticism. Both of these comprise the struggle of man with himself."<sup>9</sup> Bishop Kallistos Ware tells the story of a predecessor. "When asked by some children, "What is asceticism?,"" Ware relates, "the Russian priest Alexander Elchaninov (1881-1934) replied, "A system of exercises which submits the body to the spirit"; . . . "The important element in fasting," Father Alexander added, "is not the fact of *abstaining* from this or that, or of *depriving* oneself of something by way of punishment"; rather its purpose is the "refinement" of our physicality, so that we are more accessible to "the influence of higher forces" and thus approach closer to God."<sup>10</sup>

Scholars of world religions have also explored the nature of human investment in spiritual life, particularly in a number of essays and books surrounding the explorations of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity and the International Conference on Asceticism.<sup>11</sup> Two sample definitions emerging

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6 Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 4-5. See also the treatment of *ascèse, ascétisme* in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*.

7 F. P. Harton, *The Elements of the Spiritual Life: A Study in Ascetical Theology* (London: SPCK, 1964), 158-220.

8 For a review of this history see Philip Sheldrake, "What is Spirituality?" originally published in his *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 32-56, and reprinted in Kenneth Collins, ed. *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2000), 21-42.

9 Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation: A Manual of Spiritual Transformation*, Seraphim Rose, trans. (Forestville, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1998), 208.

10 Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative," in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford, 1995), 10.

11 For a history of some of this research see the introduction to *Asceticism*.

from this circle must suffice. The first, from Walter Kaelber's article on asceticism in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Kaelber defines asceticism as "a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual, or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred."<sup>12</sup> The second is that of Richard Valantasis, one of the central figures in the research on asceticism in the 1990s. Valantasis views ascetical practices as "performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe."<sup>13</sup>

From the preceding one can gain a sense of the range of emphases and approaches embedded within various definitions of asceticism.

The word "asceticism" itself derives from the Greek term *askesis*, which in ancient times often referred to athletic "training" but eventually gained particular significance in the "training" of human character. Indeed, one appropriate translation of *askesis* is the term "discipline" itself. Thus Robert Gregg in his introduction to Athanasius' *Life of Antony* translates the term as "the austere and rigorous discipline undertaken by monks and hermits."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, in one sense, the terms (whether we speak of *disciplines* or *asceticism*) are synonyms. *Disciplines* has, particularly among evangelicals, pointed to a list of practices while *asceticism* has more often referred to a general way of life within which particular practices have their role. For the sake of this essay, which aims to examine the relevance of early monastic life for today, it seems best to employ the language of *asceticism*. My working definition, which I will use to structure this presentation is the following: *Christian asceticism may be defined as the act or habit of intentionally constraining one's own human experience in the context of God's active presence and aimed at serving spiritual ends.*

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12 Walter O. Kaelber, "Asceticism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, Volume 1 (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1986): 441.

13 Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (Winter 1995):775-821.

14 Robert C. Gregg, "Introduction" in *Athanasius: the Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, translated by Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 6.

A few key elements of this definition should be mentioned at the outset, although I will develop them further below. First, I see the essential feature of asceticism as a *constraint* upon experience. Others speak of a struggle or some kind of renunciation, but "constraint" seems to fit more broadly how I feel that asceticism affects human experience. Second, I see the duration of ascetical activity either in terms of a single *act* or a *habit*. Perhaps the characteristic way of viewing asceticism is comprehending it in terms of a program of habits or practices that one undertakes as part of a pursuit of Christian maturity. Yet I also wish to comprehend in my view of asceticism the place of single constraining choices made with a view toward spiritual aims. Third, I identify the object of asceticism as one's own human experience. The performer and the recipient of asceticism are the same, whether individuals or communities (asceticism and spiritual disciplines have most often been explored from the perspective of individual practice, but I want to give room to examine ascetic communities as well as individual practice). Ascetic individuals or communities may have a subsidiary aim of influencing or effecting change with regard to a wider sphere (as we shall see), but the direct object of reference in their asceticism *as asceticism* is their own experience. By "human experience" I identify the broad range of components that make up what we are as human, as I have presented elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, the mode of asceticism is predominantly *intentional*. Spiritual disciplines and ascetical perspectives are purposefully undertaken, for the most part. Practices that are compelled are not really ascetical in the proper sense. Similarly, while there are often unintended consequences of ascetical practice--and indeed, we sometimes simply step out in an intentional ascetical practice with little sense of what may come of it--the act or habit of asceticism *as asceticism* involves, to my mind, at least the intention to perform the practice. Fifth, this constraining act is performed in the midst of the broader context of *God's active presence*. Christian asceticism, as *Christian*, is never simply a matter of self-improvement

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Evan B. Howard, *Affirming the Touch of God: A Psychological and Philosophical Exploration of Christian Discernment* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000), 292-303; Howard, *Brazos Introduction*, 77-112; and Evan B. Howard, "The Metaphysics of Power: Reflections on the Basic Framework of Psychology, Community, Politics and Spiritual Formation," Chapter 1 (<http://spiritualityshoppe.org/the-metaphysics-of-power-reflections-on-the-basic-framework-of-psychology-community-politics-and-spiritual-formation/> accessed 12/20/13).

or cultural interaction. The Trinitarian God, present and active in history and creation, through Christ, and by the Spirit's movements are primary actors in any ascetical performance. Sixth and finally, the objective of asceticism is a *spiritual end*. As will be shown below, the motives and goals of asceticism vary. Some disciplines are directed specifically toward reconciling the divine-human relationship (as in penance). Others have in mind at least in part the re-orienting of a community's sense of relationship with dominant culture (as in the foundation of a friary rooted in voluntary simplicity). Nevertheless, whether the objective of asceticism involves the pursuit of a transformed spiritual state, the training of the body for submission to the Spirit, or the mere obedience of the Word, asceticism aims at some form of spiritual end.

With this definition of asceticism in view, we can now proceed to summarize the ascetical life of early monasticism and then (in Part Two) see what relevance it has for us today.

### **Act and Habit: The Practices of Early Monasticism**

The nuns and monks of the fourth century were known for their unique habits. They are the ones who fast, who live out in the desert or wander from town to town, who wear odd clothes. Even those who lived in the more developed late fourth- and fifth-century communities in Turkey, north-central Africa, Italy, or France could be easily identified by their distinctive habits (possessing all things in common, moderation in food, times of common prayer and silence). Monasticism was--and is--known by its practices, and these practices are ascetical practices.

On the one hand it may seem odd that early Christian monasticism should be so identified. The New Testament prescribes no strict regimen of asceticism. In fact Paul seems at times to condemn restrictions regarding marriage and eating (see, for example, 1 Timothy 4:3-4 and Colossians 2:20-22). And yet it is clear that the earliest followers of Christ practiced fasting at times. In Acts leaders of the church fast when choosing missionaries (13:2-3) and elders (14:23). Paul twice refers to his own fasting (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27). So also with marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7:1-7). Jesus assumes his followers



would fast, offer alms, and pray (see Matthew 6:1-18). It is fair to conclude that the condemnations we find in the New Testament are warnings against the *imposition* of practices rather than their of performance as such.<sup>16</sup> At times Jesus invites ascetical practice: calling the rich young ruler to renounce all his wealth (Luke 18:22), or sending out his followers into missions with sparse clothing and provisions (Matthew 10:9-10). Paul encourages his readers to "devote yourselves to prayer" (Colossians 4:2). But most importantly, the New Testament commands the results of ascetical practice, and even goes so far as to command our intentional--and even aggressive--pursuit of those results. Paul urges his readers to "put to death" the life-habits that do not correspond to Christ (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). We find in 1 Timothy the encouragement: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16); and elsewhere in the same chapter: "Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things" (1 Timothy 4:7-8). "Aim for perfection," Paul commands (2 Corinthians 13:11). While the New Testament writers do not prescribe precise ascetical means, they *do* expect that their readers will make serious effort to obtain the ends acquired by those means (in the context of God's grace). The history of early monasticism is the story of those who took those aims seriously.<sup>17</sup>

For many early nuns and monks, monasticism simply *was* asceticism. They were one and the same. The *Lives of the Desert Fathers* tell the story of Apelles who "in his former life had been a blacksmith and had abandoned his trade to turn to *ascesis*."<sup>18</sup> It was all a way of life and it was often defined simply by a list of practices that the monk or nun performed. Thus cenobitic founder Pachomius (AD 292-348) describes "the rule of monastic" life as he learned it from his mentor, as:

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<sup>16</sup> I have addressed this with reference to Colossians 2-3 in *The Brazos Introduction*, 268-270.

<sup>17</sup> It is fair to say that some nuns and monks of late antiquity fell prey to some of the legalistic dangers discouraged in the New Testament writings. My point in this paper is not so much to critique early monasticism as to describe it. Indeed, if we are to critique anyone, perhaps we should critique contemporary society for falling prey to the error of ignoring the New Testament commands to aggressive pursuit of godliness.

<sup>18</sup> Benedicta Ward, editor, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto XIII "Apelles" #1*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1980), 93. This volume will be abbreviated *Lives*, accompanied by chapter and section number, name of figure identified, and page number in this edition - as XIII "Apelles" 1 in *Lives*, p. 93.

spending half the night in vigils, doing manual work, fasting and devoting particular times of the day for prayer(s).<sup>19</sup> *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* summarizes the lives of the monks of Nitria (near the Nile river Delta in Egypt) by saying that "many of them ate neither bread nor fruit but only endives. Some of them never slept at night, but either sitting or standing persevered in prayer until morning."<sup>20</sup> Often practices involving physical self-denial are mentioned alongside phrases describing the pursuit of virtuous character. Thus, for example, the Bohairic Life of Pachomius describes mentor Theodore as being "advanced not only in his visible practices but also in the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which are humility and submissiveness."<sup>21</sup> Ama Syncletica, an influential desert mother, summarizes the practices of the ascetical life by proclaiming that "this is the great asceticism: to control oneself in illness and to sing hymns of thanksgiving to God."<sup>22</sup> As one can see, the range of spiritual disciplines practiced by early nuns and monks is wide. In one sense almost anything could become a spiritual discipline, depending on the context and the people involved. Nonetheless, a number of practices were recognized as important to the ascetical way. I organize these practices in terms of a number of somewhat distinct categories.

The act of leaving home, family, possessions, and career (withdrawal or *anachoresis*) was interpreted not only as that act which establishes one into the ascetical life, but also as a life-habit

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- 19 "The Bohairic Life," #10, *The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples* translated by Armand Veilleux, Volume 1 (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1980), 31. This volume will be abbreviated *Pachomius - Lives*, accompanied by section number and page number - as "Bohairic Life" 10, in *Pachomius-Lives*, 31.
- 20 XXII "The Monks of Nitria," 17, in *Lives*, p. 107. See also "Bohairic Life" 32, 35 in *Pachomius-Lives*, pp. 57,59; Lucien Regnault, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers in Fourth-Century Egypt*, translated by Étienne Poirier (Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publication, 1999), 97; and William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 286-88.
- 21 Bohairic Life 135 in *Pachomius-Lives*, p. 192. See also Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 199-200 regarding John the Small. Abba Moses summarized ascetical practice in terms of seven heads: (1) die to neighbors, not judging them; (2) die to everything else; (3) consider oneself a sinner; (4) deeds in harmony with one's prayers; (5) fasts and watchings; (6) discerning prayer to God in times of temptation or trial; (7) not thinking bad toward anyone. See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, translated by Benedicta Ward "Moses" 13ff (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Press, 1975), 141-42. This work will be abbreviated *Sayings*, accompanied by Name, section number, and page number in this edition - as "Moses" 13ff in *Sayings*, p. 141-42. Similarly Basil of Caesarea addresses both "physical" restrictions and virtues in the contents of his influential Rule. See *The Ascetikon of St. Basil the Great*, translated by Anna M. Silvas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 22 Cited in Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2001), 49. See also Elizabeth A Castelli, "Pseudo-Athanasius: The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, edited by Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1990), 265-311 and especially 280 and 304-05.

which in itself was maintained for spiritual ends. Abba Moses of fourth-century Egypt summarizes the way of salvation to a seeker by telling him to "sit in your cell and let your cell teach you."<sup>23</sup> Withdrawal constrains our need for stimulation and for company. Little-known Amma Matrona warns that "many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time be longing for company."<sup>24</sup> Withdrawal also purifies the devout Christian from distractions. Thus the Greek bishop Basil (329-379) encourages his followers that "we practice successfully the art of being well-pleasing to God according to Christ's gospel, by retirement from the cares of the world and complete estrangement from distractions."<sup>25</sup> For some, withdrawal was also a means of avoiding the honor (and responsibilities) of ecclesiastical appointment. Thus Theodoret writes of Syrian monk Julian Saba (d. 367) that "to escape being honored--for he became conspicuous to all and drew to himself through fame the lovers of the good--he finally set out for Mount Sinai with a few of those closer to him."<sup>26</sup>

Ascetical withdrawal was understood not only as an act of personal isolation, but also an intentional separation of oneself from society or particular aspects of society (family, military service, career, etc.). And as with simple geographic withdrawal, separation from culture (from "the world") was not simply a single act performed in the establishment of oneself in the monastic life, but was an attitude and condition maintained in the heart of the monk or nun. Leaving family, career, and society meant abandoning the frameworks of meaning common to that age. The commitment to chastity, for

23 "Moses," 6, in *Sayings*, p. 139.

24 Swan, *Desert Mothers*, 35. See also 58.

25 Basil, *The Long Rules*, Question 5. Basil's *Long Rules* or *Longer Responses* are found in Sivas, ed. *The Ascetikon* and in St. Basil, *Ascetical Works*, translated by M. Monica Wagner, The Fathers of the Church, volume 9 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962). I will refer to these by question number (for example, Basil, *LR*, Q.6.). See also Augustine Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Press, 2000), 107-114.

26 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, II.13 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1985), p. 29. Henceforth I will refer to this work simply by section (for example, Theodoret, *History*, II.13). This theme of withdrawal from ecclesiastical positions is common both in Theodoret and in the stories of the monks of Syria more generally. For more on early monastic withdrawal see Evan B. Howard, "Getting Away to It All: The Place of Withdrawal in Fourth Century Monasticism and Postmodern Christianity," at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/getting-away-to-it-all-the-place-of-withdrawal-in-fourth-century-monasticism-and-postmodern-christianity/>, accessed 12/30/13.

example, involved not only resistance to sexual urges. It was also (and certainly for some even more) a constant renunciation of the desire for family, children, and legacy. Thus Basil urges:

Whoever, therefore, would be truly a follower of God must sever the bonds of attachment to this life, and this is done through complete separation from and forgetfulness of old habits.

Unless we wrest ourselves from both fleshly ties and worldly society, being transported, as it were, to another world in our manner of living, . . . it is impossible for us to achieve our goal of pleasing God, inasmuch as the Lord said specifically: 'So likewise every one of you that doth not renounce all that he possesseth cannot be my disciple.'<sup>27</sup>

It is for this reason that the temptations involved in visits to one's family were so strong. The Rule of Macarius, a fifth-century French community monastic Rule, exhorts its members to "let no worldly friendship allure you, but let all your happiness reside in your cell. Regard your cell as paradise; trust in your spiritual brothers as your eternal family."<sup>28</sup> The commitment to lead an ascetic way of life was a transformation of identity. The security of family, the hopes for care in old age, the will to "accomplish something" were all renounced again and again as the longing for "home" haunted especially the novices.<sup>29</sup> The difference between a life "in the world" and the monastic/ascetic life is fundamental, in spite of the varieties of expressions lived out by early monastics. I find this issue of identity to be critical both in the interpretation of early monasticism and in the recovery of monasticism today and hope to write more on it in the future.<sup>30</sup> My point here is simply to argue that separation from life in the

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27 Basil, *LR Q5*.

28 "Rule of Macarius" chapter 6 in *Early Monastic Rules: The Rules of the Fathers and the Regula Orientalis*, translated by Carmela Vircillo Franklin, Ivan Havener, and J. Alcuin Francis (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 43. Henceforth I will refer to the Rules contained in this volume by Rule and chapter (for example *Early Monastic Rules*, "Rule of Macarius," ch. 6). On the tensions involved in family visits to early monasteries see also, for example, the story of Abba Zanos and his temptations to return home in "Draguet Fragment II," #4-10, *Pachomian Koinonia Volume Two: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules*, translated by Armand Veilleux (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 116-119. Texts within this volume will be referenced by document and section (for example, *Pachomian Koinonia II*, "Draguet Fragment II," 4-10).

29 William Harmless, drawing from the studies of Nicholas Molinier, outlines a common framework of entry in early monasticism: "one begins the journey through conversion and renunciation (family, marriage, wealth); then one enters, through disciplined asceticism and discipleship, into an ever deepening purgation of habit and affect and opens oneself to a life of contemplation; and this in turn leads one to a life of selfless charity." *Desert Christians*, 286.

30 For a few initial thoughts on this topic see my "What is Monasticism: A Few Reflections?" at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/what-is-monasticism-a-few-reflections/>, accessed 12/31/13.

world was not simply a single act of commitment but was also seen by early nuns and monks as an ongoing ascetical practice.

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned ascetical practices of the early monks were those identified with some form of abstinence. Abstinence from food (fasting), sleep (vigils), sexual activity (chastity or continence) and conversation (silence) were all significant disciplines of the early nuns and monks and it is impossible in this essay to summarize early monastic teaching on all of these practices. I will simply offer a brief survey of early monastic fasting as an example of the kinds of and approaches to abstinence common in early monasticism. Some monks in Palestine chose to eat from the fields like wild animals.<sup>31</sup> The preferred approach to fasting among the nuns and monks of the Egyptian desert, however, was to restrict oneself to certain meals. Historian Lucien Regnault writes,

The most common practice was to abstain from food completely every second day. This was the habit with Sisoës, Megethius and no doubt many others. In addition, it was often a penance imposed on a brother who had sinned grievously. In any case, little by little, experience showed the Fathers that it was better to eat a bit each day than a lot every two days. This was the advice given by Agathon and Poemen. In his youth the latter would often pass two, three, four days or the whole week without eating, but later found it better to eat a little each day. This he called 'The Royal Path of the Fathers.'<sup>32</sup>

The famed Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was noted for his moderation. His biographer recounted that "his table was frugal and sparing, though indeed with the herbs and lentils he also had meats at times for the sake of his guests or for some of the weaker brethren; but he always had wine because he knew and taught, as the Apostle says, that "every creature of God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified through the Word of God and prayer."<sup>33</sup> French monk

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31 Cyril of Scythopolis, *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine* translated by R. M. Price #99,19 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 108 (note fn 18 on p. 211). Henceforth I will refer to this work by section and line number (for example, Scythopolis, *Monks of Palestine*, 99,19).

32 Regnault, *Day-to-Day*, 64. See also, for example, *Sayings*, "Poemen" 31, p. 171.

33 Possidius, *The Life of Saint Augustine*, translated by Herbert T. Weiskotten (Merchantville, New Jersey, 2008), chapter XXII, p. 31. Note here the reference to 1 Timothy 4:4-5). Henceforth I will refer to this work simply by chapter number

and theologian John Cassian identified three types of gluttony: eating in anticipation of the appointed time for food, eating excessive amounts of food, and over-attention to rare or delicate dishes; three types of fasting corresponded to these.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Basil summarizes the early monastic approach to abstinence best when he recommends: "in summary, then: abstinence from all that those who live according to passion crave to enjoy, this is the abstinence necessary for those training themselves to piety."<sup>35</sup>

A different kind of abstaining was the avoidance of judgments against others, pet personal ideas and other less tangible--often interpersonal--attitudes and preferences.<sup>36</sup> A classic story is told about Abba Moses:

When a brother fell into a certain fault at Skete, they sent for him to join the community [in judgment against the brother]. He declined, but they sent for him again, and he rose, taking along a basket full of holes that he had filled with sand, and came, carrying it. They heard about it and came out to meet him, and inquired what he was doing. He said, "My faults are flowing out behind me but I do not see them. And yet I have come to pass judgment on another's transgressions." When they heard this, they yielded to the brother and let him go."<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, historian William Harmless recounts a number of stories and encouragements regarding the non-judgmentalism of Abba Poemen.<sup>38</sup> My favorite story regarding the abstinence from pet ideas and influence is about monk-theologian Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), who had been a recognized scholar at Constantinople but at the time of our story had recently moved to the monastic settlements in lower

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(for example, Possidius, *Augustine*, XXII).

34 See John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes*, Book V, #23 (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), p. 84. Henceforth I will refer to this work by Book and chapter number (for example, Cassian, *Institutes*, V.23).

35 Basil, *LR*, Q16. See also Q 19.

36 I briefly treated this theme in my essay on "The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monastic and Related Expressions" (available at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/evangelical-vision-eremital-tradition-part-i-the-pursuit-of-true-religion-in-fourth-century-monastic-and-related-expressions/> accessed 2/20/14). I demonstrated there an important principle of fourth-century monasticism's approach to true religion: namely that "we are both wise and Christ-like when we refrain from judging others about their practice or failure and when we extend grace (even sacrificial grace) in our dealings with them."

37 Kathleen O'Brien Wicker, translator, "Ethiopian Moses (Collected Sources)" in Wimbush, ed. *Ascetic Behavior*, 347.

38 In *Desert Christians*, 206-07.

Egypt. "One day at the Cells, there was an assembly about some matter or other and Abba Evagrius held forth. Then the priest said to him, 'Abba, we know that if you were living in your own country you would probably be a bishop and a great leader; but at present you sit here as a stranger.' He was filled with compunction, but was not at all upset and bending his head he replied, 'I have spoken once and will not answer, twice but I will proceed no further.' (Job 40:5)."<sup>39</sup>

I see perseverance as another category of early monastic spiritual discipline. Early monks and nuns persevered through physical suffering. They persevered through the wearing of rough clothing. They saw the endurance of particular sufferings as an ascetical means of purification. The early monastic historian Palladius (363-431), for example, recounts the following story of Abba Macarius of Alexandria:

"As he sat early in the morning in his cell, a mosquito settled on his foot and stung him. And feeling the pain he squashed it with his hand after it was full of blood. So, accusing himself for having taken vengeance, he condemned himself to sit naked for six months in the marsh of Skete, which is in the great desert. The mosquitos there are like wasps, and even pierce the hides of wild boars. So then he was bitten all over and developed so many swellings that some thought he had elephantiasis. Returning to his cell after six months, he was recognized by his voice that it was Macarius himself."<sup>40</sup>

Maintaining a cheerful, trustful disposition through illness and other similar hardships was also regarded as part of the ascetical life. Historian Elizabeth A. Castelli describes Amma Syncletica as "a woman who dedicated herself early on to a life of fasting, voluntary poverty, and mortifications of the flesh, . . . and whose extended illness and eventual death became a special form of ascetic practice--the endurance of illness."<sup>41</sup> The discipline of perseverance also included the cheerful endurance of criticism

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39 *Sayings*, "Evagrius," 7, p. 64.

40 Palladius, *The Lausiatic History* XVIII.4 (New York: Paulist Press, 1964), 59 and (Willits, CA: Eastern Orthodox Books, n.d.), 52. I will refer to the *Lausiatic History* by section and sub-section (for example, Palladius, *Lausiatic History* XVIII.4).

41 Elizabeth Castelli, "Pseudo-Athanasius: The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica," in *Ascetic Behavior*, 266. See also 280, 283-84.

and less visible pains. John Calvin's insistence in the sixteenth century upon the importance of "bearing one's cross" in the Christian life was foreshadowed by early monastic practice, and of course before that, the sufferings of Jesus. Thus the Bohairic Life of Pachomius summarizes a description of the life of the early Pachomian community by saying, "Thus they fulfilled the word of the Gospel, *If anyone wants to come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*"<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the "disciplines of abstinence," early monks and nuns practiced a host of "disciplines of engagement."<sup>43</sup> Manual labor, spiritual warfare, reading and study, offering care to the needy, self examination, and especially prayer, characterized the life of the ascetic. And one could add to these the pervasive pursuit of virtue central to early monastic life. These were all *ascetic* in that their choices constrained their experience to *these* particular acts and habits. Once again, space prohibits my summarizing early monastic practice of these disciplines of engagement. I will simply offer a few comments on the discipline of study in early monasticism.<sup>44</sup> The discipline of study received mixed valuations in early monasticism. On the one hand, many pursued study as a spiritual exercise. Antony (251-356), considered the father of western monasticism, learned of the discipline of study from his mentors.<sup>45</sup> Many desert mothers are noted for their pursuit of study.<sup>46</sup> Ammonius, among others, was noted for his memorization of Scripture and other works.<sup>47</sup> Yet at the same time, some found the pursuit of study to be a place of pride, vainglory and dissension. Relationship with God was fostered not so much by debating truth, but by living it. Consequently, some monks chose to *renounce* their studies

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42 "Bohairic Life" 19 in *Pachomius-Lives*, p. 42. For Calvin on mortification and bearing the cross see, for example, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book III. 6-10 edited by John T. McNeill (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960) I.689-712.

43 The distinction between disciplines of abstinence and engagement can be found in Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*.

44 I have addressed the early monastic practice of prayer somewhat in my "Is Thoughtless Prayer Really Christian? A Biblical/Evangelical Response to Evagrius of Pontus" *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* (Spring 2014, forthcoming). The world is ripe, I think, for a solid book on the pursuit of virtues in early monasticism and contemporary psychology.

45 Athanasius, "The Life of Antony" #4 in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, translated by William A. Clebsch, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 33. I will refer to the "Life" by chapter (for example, Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 4).

46 Mention of study is made regarding Caesaria the Patrician, Juliana, Melania the Elder, Olympias, Marcella and Principia and Caesaria of Gaul. See *Forgotten Desert Mothers*, 77, 86-87, 115-16, 121, 136.

47 Palladius, *Lausiac History* XI.4.



rather than pursue them, becoming satisfied with the simple meditative reading of the Scriptures.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, one can identify the life of community itself as a form of ascetical practice. Obedience, kindness, and many other virtues are fostered through community. The aim of the Christian life is the love of God and neighbor. And life together, whether in intentional community or in periodic encounters, serves as an important crucible for the refining of that dual love.<sup>49</sup> Even those desert elders who withdrew into solitude had sufficient occasion for interaction that community life among fellow nuns or monks served as ascetical training in the Christian life.<sup>50</sup> But even more those monastics who lived in intentional community saw the community life as part of their spiritual discipline. Basil develops this in detail in Question 7 of his Longer Rule/Responses. A community offers occasion for one to correct the faults of another. Community life best enables the obedience to all those commandments which reflect love for one another. Thus, "it is an arena for the combat, a good path of progress, continual discipline, and a practicing the Lord's commandments, when brethren dwell together in community."<sup>51</sup>

Asceticism was a way of life for the early nuns and monks. It involved the exercise of a variety of different kinds of practice: withdrawal, abstinence, avoidance of judgments, separation from the world, perseverance in hardship, engagement in spiritual activities, and the life of community itself. Some monastics chose to wander without home, much as Jesus wandered from village to village. Others chose to stay in the same monastery for life.

Some are completely set upon the remoteness of the desert. . . . Some have devoted every painstaking effort of theirs to the instruction of the brothers and to the constant care of the cenobia, . . . The kindly duty of welcoming strangers is attractive to some . . . Some choose the care of the sick, others carry out the intercession that is owed to the downtrodden and the oppressed, some are intent upon teaching, and others give alms to the poor, and among great

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48 Lucien Regnault offers a fair portrait of this tension in early monasticism. See *Day-to-Day Lives*, 104-05. See also

49 This dual emphases is central to the rules, for example, of both Basil and Augustine.

50 See, for example, Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993).

51 Basil, *LR* Q7.

and noble men they have flourished by reason of their love and their goodness. Therefore it is beneficial and proper for each person, in accordance with the orientation that he has chosen and the grace that he has received, to strive most zealously and diligently to attain perfection in the work that he has undertaken."<sup>52</sup>

#### A Note on Sensibilities<sup>53</sup>:

There is *what* we do, our practices. There is also *how* we do it, with what attitude we do what we do. Different groups of people do things with different sensibilities, different moods or attitudes or predispositions to notice or feel in certain ways in certain situations. Pentecostals, for example, are characterized not only by particular actions (speaking in tongues), but also by their sensibility to the experience of the Spirit. This sensibility is present in many different practices (worship, healing prayer, prophetic utterance). Sensibilities are related to values (certainly Pentecostals value experience of the Spirit). But possession of a sensibility implies that this value has been interiorized, become a part of the very way that someone perceives or interacts with the world. A Pentecostal actually notices, perceives, lives in a world where the Spirit is experienced. It is not simply a matter of adopting a practice or two, but a matter of immersing oneself in a worldview and skill and more. This is how a sensibility is acquired.

My point here is simply to say that I think that a fully accurate interpretation of early monastic asceticism should not only account for the practices, but also for the sensibilities which accompanied these practices. I have only begun to explore this topic. Perhaps to describe early ascetic sensibilities is simply to represent their spirituality in general. I am not sure. And to complicate matters further, I have a suspicion that some contemporary promoters of "spiritual disciplines" have (consciously or

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<sup>52</sup> Cassian, *Conferences* XIV.IV.1-V.1. See also XIV.VI.

<sup>53</sup> I discovered the notion of "sensibilities" while working with Dan Albrecht on "Pentecostal Spirituality" to be published in the *Cambridge Companion to Pentecostalism*, Cecil M. Robeck and Amos Yong, editors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, to be published July, 2014). Dan Albrecht, weaves together Robert Grimes' notion of 'ritual sensibilities' and Steven Land's presentation of 'Pentecostal affections' to present a helpful portrait of the kinds of attitudes and embodied actions characteristic of Pentecostal worship. See, for example, Dan Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 177-195. In my own use of this idea, I do not tie it to ritual settings, but instead explore sensibilities to get at aspects of spirituality not well-described simply as practices.

unconsciously) attempted to recover early ascetic practices while reframing their use to create distance from some of the values and sensibilities characteristic of the early ascetics themselves.<sup>54</sup> In any case, three sensibilities seem to me to be characteristic of early monasticism. First, intention or even aggression. Monks and nuns took their Christian life very seriously. The point of monastic life was not simply to be "extreme," but rather to embody intention, an aggressive pursuit of God. I identify the second sensibility as watchfulness. Early ascetics paid close attention to what was going on in their mind and heart. It is characteristic. Third is warfare. Perhaps this sensibility is less present in later, communal expressions of early monasticism, but most early ascetics throughout the Christian lands were quite conscious of conflict. In particular, conflicts with the flesh and demonic forces were keenly recognized and manuals were developed to help people to navigate those conflicts.

These sensibilities cannot be identified with any single practice. Their influence can be seen in the midst of their practice of all of them. These sensibilities, and perhaps more, helped form something of an "ascetical environment" within which their practices made sense. Space prevents me developing this aspect more here. I hope to look into this further as I explore the early monastic understanding of salvation and the impact of their soteriology upon their life.

### **Spiritual Ends: The Motives, Aims, Functions, and By-Products of Asceticism**

As I mentioned above in my definition, the acts and habits of ascetical practice are undertaken for *spiritual ends*. Now that we have seen the range of spiritual disciplines possible for use in fostering a devout Christian community or person, we are equipped to explore the ends that ascetical acts and habits serve. But at this very point we encounter a complication. Or perhaps a few of them. First, just as with any training, one discipline may have multiple functions for different people. One person's fast is another person's feast. The intended aims of a given discipline may vary in any given situation and the

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<sup>54</sup> My interest here is not to evaluate this reframing, but rather simply to recognize that spiritual disciplines can be explored within contexts emphasizing somewhat different values and different sensibilities. That fact will shape both our interpretation of early monastic asceticism and it will shape our recovery as well.

unintended consequences of any discipline may vary between individuals and communities. Second, Christian asceticism is different than athletic training--or even the personal formation characteristic of Graeco-Roman antiquity<sup>55</sup>--in that it facilitates not only transformations of the ascetic actor, but also (and perhaps even more centrally) transformations of the divine-human relationships within which the ascetic actor dwells. For example, while some disciplines may be undertaken with the aim of addressing some particular virtue or vice (submissive obedience to an abbot can be employed to curb pride), other practices may have little directly to do with any particular training and may simply open space for spiritual awareness (withdrawal, prayer, Scripture reading). And I actually think that there is often a measure of ambiguity regarding the object, motive, and self of asceticism. In my reading of the literature and experience of listening to people talk about their spiritual lives, I have come to the conclusion that sometimes you know why you act, and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you know only a little. You just follow God and things happen. Finally--and as we will see below--Christian asceticism, as *spiritual* discipline--and again unlike athletic or secular character training--reckons on the participation of an omniscient and unpredictable Spirit. Sometimes we may think we know what a given discipline is "about," when God has a much bigger plan. And in these times, the unintended functions or by-products of asceticism end up being far more important than the intended aims.

John Cassian recounts an interview with Abba Paphnutius in which Paphnutius outlines three separate "callings" into the life of asceticism. The first is from God, when a Scripture or an inner voice draws one into a new life. The second is from other people wherein we are moved by the example or the teaching of others and we are inspired to live an ascetic life. The third is a calling which "proceeds from need, when we are compelled at least involuntarily to hasten to the God we had disdained to follow in time of prosperity." The point of Paphnutius' outline is to clarify that the initial motive is not so important as the end product:

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<sup>55</sup> On formation in Graeco-Roman antiquity see, for example, Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, translated by Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

Of these three kinds, then, although the first seem to be supported by better beginnings, nonetheless we find that even on the third level, which seems inferior and lukewarm, there have been people who are perfect and very fervent in spirit. . . Likewise there are many who have become tepid and have fallen from a higher level and very frequently ended in tragedy. . . . Everything, therefore, has to do with the end.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, with these complications in mind, we can begin to explore the aims, motives, functions, and by-products of ascetical practice. As I mentioned above, in the *Brazos Introduction* I described a few aims or goals of spiritual discipline. More recently, in my "Getting Away to It All: The Place of Withdrawal in Fourth-Century Monasticism and Postmodern Christianity" I treated the question of motive specifically with reference to monastic withdrawal. There I identified four "reasons" frequently given for early monastic withdrawal (flight from taxation and conscription, perpetuation of earlier ascetic institutions, fleeing persecution and the influence of martyrdom, creating distance from a shallow, post-Constantinian Christianity) and responded with the claim that the fourth-century texts themselves account for withdrawal more often by use of religious reasons (obedience to Scripture or a call from God, sincere pursuit of God, imitation of Christ or the gospel message, pursuit of perfection or remaking the self, preparation for the eschatological).<sup>57</sup> In the current essay I will briefly summarize some of the motives, goals, functions and by-products of ascetical practice. I will group them according to the relational sphere primarily in view as an ascetical act or habit is undertaken. Ascetical acts are initiated *with a view toward*. . . .

### 1. *One's Self*<sup>58</sup>

The "training" interpretation of asceticism sees the focus of the energies involved in ascetical practice to be on the self performing the ascetical acts. And this is, indeed, one function of spiritual disciplines for growing Christians, even in the fourth century. Here particular ascetical practices are

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<sup>56</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences* III.V.1. More generally on Paphnutius' discussion see *Conferences* III.III-V.

<sup>57</sup> Howard, "Getting Away To It All" at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/getting-away-to-it-all-the-place-of-withdrawal-in-fourth-century-monasticism-and-postmodern-christianity/>.

<sup>58</sup> See also "Getting Away To It All" under "Pursuit of Perfection or Remaking the Self."

employed as "tools" as part of a larger prescription for dealing with a need for re-orientation and re-habituation in a given area. We want to curb our gluttony and so we restrict the amount or type of food we eat. We become aware of the severity of our own self-hatred and so we engage in regular imaginative meditation on Gospel passages portraying Christ's love. Any number of means can be utilized to facilitate the transformation of particular areas of life; thus Evagrius of Pontus speaks of his readers having "restrained the wiles of the flesh with the sharp instrument of ascetic labours."<sup>59</sup> The discipline of fasting was often employed for those struggling with lust. The practices of reciting psalms or manual labor were used to bring focus and energy to those suffering from listlessness. Thorough self-examination was used to treat anger. And on and on. Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian were masters of the early therapeutic use of ascetical practice for the sake of moral and spiritual refinement. As Evagrius insisted: "you cannot otherwise extinguish the passions until you mingle with the flesh ascetic labours to overcome it."<sup>60</sup>

But ascetical practices can also be employed in a more general sense: not with the aim of "treating" a particular disease/vice or facilitating a particular virtue, but rather with the aim of facilitating virtue and transformation more generally. We find this modeled at the foundations of Antony's pioneering ascetical experiment, who

disapproved of oil for anointing the skin, saying that it was more fitting for youths to hold to the ascetic life intensely, and not to seek the things that relax the body, but to habituate it to labors, thinking of the Apostle's remark, *When I am weak, then I am strong*. For he said the soul's intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened.<sup>61</sup>

Fasting, for example, serves not only to purge the body from dependence on food (addressing

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59 Evagrius of Pontus, *To Eulogius* 1.1, published in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, translated by Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 29. Henceforth I will refer to Evagrius works in this volume by text, section numbers, and page number (for example, Evagrius, *To Eulogius* 1.1 GAC, 29).

60 Evagrius, *To Eulogius* 21.23 GAC, 49.

61 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 7. I can imagine that something like this is where some of Margaret Miles' mention of the use of ascetical practice for the focusing of energies can be envisioned. For an outline of her summary of various approaches to asceticism, see her *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

gluttony), but also trains the will in general to become aware of urges and to resist them. It "exalts the soul, sanctifies your way of thinking, drives away demons and prepares you to be close to God."<sup>62</sup>

There is a basic form of "will training" present in many acts of asceticism. Through fasting our will is strengthened, through obedience our will is softened, through solitude our heart is opened, through renunciations our flesh is weakened and through Scripture meditation our eyes are tuned to the divine.

[As an aside, this training is part of the very conditioning function of Christian ritual and sacrament. Through sacrament our minds are trained through aesthetic repetition and use of body, voice and such to "see" the universe through Christian eyes. Our hearts are trained to anticipate God's grace and to respond to it. Our wills are trained to reply to the call of the Gospel. In this aspect, sacrament and discipline function similarly.]

John Cassian envisions slightly different goals for the cenobite living in community and the solitary hermit. "The end of the cenobite," he states, "is to put to death and to crucify all his desires and, in accordance with the gospel precept, to have no thought for the next day. . . . But the perfection of the hermit is to have a mind bare of all earthly things and, as much as human frailty permits, to unite with thus with Christ."<sup>63</sup> One can see here that my category-division between an asceticism which has self primarily in focus and that which has God primarily in focus is somewhat artificial. Quite often to address the one is to address the other.

Another way that self is explored in asceticism is what I am calling the exploration of self-reconstruction through ascetical practice. I cannot get into this in depth here [and as I said earlier I hope to write on identity and renunciation in the future]<sup>64</sup> In short I think that Benedicta Ward, writing the introduction to *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* has put it well: "These men turn, then from anti-social behavior; they also turn from the ordinary ways of society, in order to stand before God and search

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62 Evagrius of Pontus, *The Foundations of the Monastic Life* 10, *GAC*, 10.

63 John Cassian, *Conferences*, XIX.VIII.3ff. See also conference XXIII on sinlessness.

64 I have outlined some of my thoughts on the currently constructed self in my "Metaphysics of Power." available at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/the-metaphysics-of-power-reflections-on-the-basic-framework-of-psychology-community-politics-and-spiritual-formation/>.

their own hearts to come closer to the reality of themselves."<sup>65</sup> Historian Simon Tugwell, in his *Ways of Imperfection*, similarly emphasizes the identity transforming experiment involved in the early desert tradition. He makes his point clear: "Before you can truly pray, let alone achieve any more refined feats of spirituality or service, you have first got to make sure that you are really there. And the discipline of simply staying in your cell is intended to bring you face to face with yourself and with your real needs and capacities."<sup>66</sup> Who we are and what we do are inextricably enmeshed.

A number of other self-oriented goals could be described. We fear taxation and join the ascetic life for temporal security. We are attracted to personal spiritual benefits and lay aside the things of the world to seek the treasures in the spiritual life. Or we fear damnation and join the monastic life to attain security of eternal life. All of these motives were--and still are--employed as reasons for engaging in ascetical acts or habits. The Spirit of God, however, seems to receive us in all the mixture of our motives and to invite us, partly through means of our disciplines, into profound transformation.

## 2. *A Wider Community*

Community is not only a means of spiritual discipline (as mentioned above); it is also an aim. Asceticism is not just about individual sanctification; it is also about community transformation. Furthermore, whether individual or community transformation is in view, asceticism also is about our relationship with our surrounding culture. At times our spiritual disciplines (like regular private prayer) are largely unnoticed choices and habits that have little effect on our place in society. Other acts, however (like a commitment to voluntary simplicity), proclaim in and of themselves our profound renunciation of the "ways of the world": the frameworks through which dominant culture communicates meaning to its members. Even the ways we choose to persevere in suffering can model alternatives to society or express a new way of being society (for example, forming interdisciplinary healing groups in a congregation rather than relying on the institutional medical model of health). Thus,

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65 Benedicta Ward, "Introduction" in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 34.

66 Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1985), 16.



there is a deeper connection than we might notice on the surface of things between how we treat our bodies and how we treat the body politic.<sup>67</sup>

First, some aim--in living the ascetical life (or in being an ascetical community)--to imitate the model community of the Gospel message and thus to embody an alternative vision of society.<sup>68</sup> The *Praeceptum* (one monastic Rule) of Augustine begins with a recitation of the goals of unity of spirit and common property, explicitly referring to Luke's account of the formation of the church in Acts 4:32-35.<sup>69</sup> It is clear that the Rule envisions the members of the monastic community to be aiming, by their very ascetical commitment to simplicity and sharing, toward a re-appropriation of that Biblical vision. Likewise with the early Pachomian monasteries. William Harmless says of them that, "They saw themselves not simply as pioneers of monasticism, but as pioneers in the art of Christian living, called to resurrect the New Testament's most radical vision of human community."<sup>70</sup> It is possible to see in the early monks of Syria (and later in Francis of Assisi) a similar recovering impulse in their ascetical practice: not, however, in order to re-embody the model of the Church in Acts, but rather to re-appropriate the abject life of the itinerant Jesus and his disciples.<sup>71</sup> To abandon the frameworks of one's society (family, career, inheritance, education and so on) in an effort to constrain one's experience in order to be fully devoted to God was a counter-cultural act and a counter-cultural life. We misunderstand asceticism unless we grasp this dimension.

But while in one sense, the ascetic life was an act of separation from the world, at the same time, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, the ascetic life was pursued in harmony with

67 The pioneering reflection of this dimension is Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). The essays in Wimbush and Valantasis, eds. *Asceticism* have developed Brown's perspective much further.

68 I mentioned this in "Getting Away To It All," under "Imitation of Christ or the Gospel Message."

69 Augustine of Hippo, *The Monastic Rules*, Praeceptum 1.1-3, translation by Agatha Mary and Gerald Bonner (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), 110. I will refer to the Rules of Augustine by title of Rule and section numbers (for example, Augustine, *Monastic Rules*, Praeceptum 1.1-3). I, along with the introduction to this volume, see these Rules at least as an early reflection of a follower of Augustine and therefore worthy of inclusion in discussion of the development of pre-Benedictine monasticism.

70 Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 116.

71 On the wandering monks of Syria see the introduction to Theodoret, *History* along with the accounts, for example, of James of Nisibis (I), and Thalassius, Limnaeus, and John (XXII-XXIII). I will be addressing medieval monasticism in future research, but for a peek at Francis see Julien Green, *God's Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi* (New York: HarperOne, 1983).

expectations of culture and which consciously served a visible and important function in society. "Holy persons" were known in these parts. Through their intimacy with God, they exercised powers and offered advice to local communities and beyond. Ascetical extremes not only served to *facilitate* spiritual maturity, but they also *demonstrated* that maturity to others. Locals would come to these holy persons to find health for their families and community, receiving physical healing, deliverance from demonic oppression, and mediation between angry factions.<sup>72</sup> The extreme ascetic of Syria was seen as a living evangelistic message confronting the unbelieving world that surrounded them. Thus Theodoret writes--consciously responding to the fault-finders of Symeon the Stylite's strange ascetic extremes--that,

The Ruler of the universe ordered each of these things to be done in order to attract, by the singularity of the spectacle, those who would not heed words and could not bear hearing prophecy, and make them listen to the oracles. . . . therefore, just as the God of the universe ordered each of these actions out of consideration for the benefit of those inured to ease, so too he has ordained this new and singular sight in order by its strangeness to draw all men to look, and to make the proffered exhortation persuasive to those who come--for the novelty of the sight is a trustworthy pledge of the teaching, and the man who comes to look departs instructed in divine things.<sup>73</sup>

Thus Christian asceticism was (and is) not just a matter of spiritual growth, but in this sense also a matter of service to the local community. The author of the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* declares that "There is no town or village in Egypt and the Thebaid which is not surrounded by hermitages as if by walls. And the people depend on the prayers of these monks as if on God himself."<sup>74</sup>

### *3. Relationship with God*

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<sup>72</sup> The pioneering study of this is Peter Brown's "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101. The *Lives of the Desert Fathers* and Palladius' *Lausiac History* recount numbers of stories that describe this ministry. This function is especially prominent in Theodoret's *History* and Price's introduction and notes address it directly throughout the volume.

<sup>73</sup> Theodoret, *History*, XXVI.12.

<sup>74</sup> *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, Prologue 10. See Ward's introduction, pp. 12-19 on the social aspects of early monasticism.

Certainly there were (and are) personal and social elements involved in Christian asceticism. We do not comprehend ascetical practice in its fullness without acknowledging these dimensions. Nonetheless, the supreme goals of asceticism involve relationship with God. And because Christianity has an interpersonal view of God, Christian asceticism takes on a unique interpersonal character. For example we might forego food or say a list of prayers (fasting and the recitation of "Our Fathers") not merely as a means to self-improvement, but also as an expression of penitence, as part of an interpersonal exchange between ourselves and Christ, in which we demonstrate sorrow and the desire to live differently to a Lord who hears us, who has stepped toward us through the cross, and who is present with us today in Spirit, church, and sacrament.<sup>75</sup> Similarly we might perform some special act of sacrifice (asceticism) as an offering of thanksgiving for divine love expressed to us in some situation of life.<sup>76</sup> Even the less-than-healthy motive of divine manipulation ("I will perform this ascetical act if You will provide some beneficial service") is aimed finally at navigating the divine-human relationship. Again, just as we might constrain our schedule to make time for one we love, so the discipline of solitude is undertaken for the sake of making room for the Supreme Beloved. The divine-human interpersonal dynamic gives Christian asceticism its own distinctive character. I have already addressed some of this in my "Getting Away To It All" and in my essay on "The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monasticism."<sup>77</sup> I will only offer a few supplementary comments here.

Ascetical practice is ultimately about the pursuit of relationship with God, in all its richness.

Thus, Antony clarifies to his followers (who admire his prophetic gifts) that it is "not for the purpose of gaining foreknowledge are we to train ourselves and labor--but rather in order that we may please God

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<sup>75</sup> For an enlightening perspective on the desert tradition of penance in dialogue with contemporary views outside of the desert see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 238-39.

<sup>76</sup> The Evagrian literature is rich with the descriptions of the role of thanksgiving in ascetical practice. It would make a wonderful article to create a dialogue between Evagrius and current discussions of gratitude in positive psychology. See the index in Evagrius of Pontus, *GAC*.

<sup>77</sup> I addressed this in "Getting Away" especially under the headings of "Obedience to Scripture or the Call of God," "Sincere Pursuit of God," "Imitation of Christ or the Gospel," and "Preparation for the Eschatological." In "Pursuit of True Religion" I treated a number of relevant principles, among them: "Sincere Love for God and Others is More Important than Religious Practices," "Character is More Important than Our Position, Credentials, or Even at Times the Finer Points of Our Doctrinal Pursuits," and "Our Application of Religious Practices Can Vary." For URLs see footnotes 26 and 36.

in the way we lead our lives."<sup>78</sup> Asceticism makes space for intimate and undistracted devotion to God. Author Laura Swan writes of the desert mothers that "the desert ascetic practiced self-denial in small daily ways, such as choosing simpler and less appetizing foods, just enough sleep on a sufficient but not necessarily comfortable bed, and prayers spread throughout the day. Self denial was cultivated in order to deepen one's relationship to God, to deepen in compassion and to build bridges towards others."<sup>79</sup> The sixth-century nuns of Arles, as they lived under the Rule provided by Caesarius, saw their ascetical practice as an exercise in "trimming their lamps," of the virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, awaiting prayerfully the return of the Lord and preparing for the homeland of heaven.<sup>80</sup>

Relationship with God is also primarily in view in those ascetical acts which aim at simple obedience. I could give many examples, but the logic of Basil can serve well to illustrate this point. He begins his Longer Rules/Responses with a brief treatise on the importance of obedience to God, and particularly our obedience to the central commands of loving God and loving neighbor (Q2-3). Then he asks, "How is this obedience of the command to love God and neighbor to be accomplished?" To Basil these commands are most naturally fulfilled when we pursue obedience with an undistracted mind (Q5). And this, in turn necessitates retirement (Q6) with a group of people who are similarly devoted to wholehearted devotion (Q7). And this, then leads to the presentation of the entire Basilian Rule of life. It is a carefully designed program for obedience to the Scripture, in order that we might live a life pleasing to God, and in love of both God and others.<sup>81</sup>

Even when self-transformation is the aim of ascetical practice, it is really a matter of bringing the self to a place where union with or love of God becomes an experienced reality. This theme is overwhelmingly clear in the ascetical theologies of Evagrius of Pontus or John Cassian. Evagrius summarized the journey of spiritual formation to his readers by saying that, "The fear of God, my child,

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78 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 34.

79 Swan, *Forgotten Desert Mothers*, 41.

80 See, for example, Maria Caritas McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles: A translation with a Critical Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960), 2, 8, 57-58, 166.

81 See Basil LR Q2-7. For a survey of Basil's spirituality more generally see Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*.

strengthens faith, and abstinence in turn strengthens fear of God, and perseverance and hope render abstinence unwavering, and from these is born impassibility of which love is the offspring; love is the door to natural knowledge, which is followed by theology [experiential knowledge of the Trinity] and ultimate blessedness."<sup>82</sup> John Cassian distinguished between the secondary or proximate goals of the monastic life and the principle thing or the ultimate aim. He writes, "It behooves us, then, to carry out the things that are secondary--namely fasts, vigils, the solitary life, and meditation on Scripture--for the sake of the principle scopus, which is purity of heart or love, . . . For it will be of no use to have fulfilled everything if this primary object, for the sake of attaining which all things are to be pursued, has been lost."<sup>83</sup>

Other examples and divine-centered motives for asceticism could be discussed. There is the wish to share in the sufferings of Christ, the simple endeavor to facilitate the most functional environment for devotion or service. There is the application of disciplines to weaken us and create an increased sense of dependence on God. There is the use of ascetical practices in spiritual warfare. I will simply close here with a section of Theodoret's delightful "Epilogue on Divine Love" in his *Histories of the Monks of Syria* regarding the "servants of the Word of God":

"they receive from all sources the goads of divine love; despising all things, they contemplate the Beloved, and prior to the incorruption for which they hope they have rendered the body spiritual. Let us too conceive this longing; let us become bewitched by the beauty of the Bridegroom, eager for the promised goods, paying heed to the multitude of benefits fearing the punishment for ingratitude, and so in our love be maintainers of his laws."<sup>84</sup>

#### A Note on Change:

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82 Evagrius, *Praktikos* 8. For a summary of the teaching of Evagrius see, for example, Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 311-372.

83 John Cassian, *Conferences*, I.VII.2. More generally this entire conference is on the goal of the monk, carefully distinguishing the proximate and the ultimate. For a summary of the teaching of Cassian see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 373-409; Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

84 Theodoret, *History*, Epilogue, #21.

It perhaps goes without saying that asceticism aims at change: change in the divine-human relationship, change in the self, change in one's community or in the world more generally. As we have surveyed the "spiritual ends" toward which asceticism is directed, change is a constant feature. Asceticism introduces a change in things in order to facilitate--by the grace of God--other changes in things. Salvation is change in all its complex fullness, and if we are going to understand the character of asceticism, we must acquaint ourselves with the dynamics of change.<sup>85</sup>

### **Intentional Constraint of Experience in the Midst of God's Active Presence: The Essential Character of Asceticism**

Having explored asceticism as a set of practices performed for spiritual ends, we are now ready to examine intentional constraint in God's presence, the essential character of Christian asceticism. But at this point we encounter a couple more complications. First, in order to summarize the character of the divine-human relationship as embodied through spiritual disciplines, we must investigate not only the practices and motives associated with asceticism, but also the theologies and philosophies informing the early monastic's approach to the ascetical life. This investigation is not a simple process, for the bulk of early monastic literature was not concerned with carefully articulating philosophical or theological foundations. One can recognize the influence of one author upon another (to some extent), but so much of the literature is anecdotal it is dangerous to presume (especially with my own limited research) that we have uncovered "the theology" of early monasticism by citing a few relevant quotes from the *Lives* or *Sayings* from Egypt or Syria or Palestine. Even when we draw from more theologically-oriented figures (such as Evagrius, Basil, Augustine, or Cassian), we find not *a single* theology of early monastic asceticism, but rather an ongoing dialogue regarding a number of issues, some of which were highly disputed. I hope in the future to offer a presentation and reply to a few select figures on particular ascetical debates (for example, the issue surrounding the council of Gangra,

<sup>85</sup> I have offered hints regarding some of these dynamics in *The Brazos Introduction*, 355-57, "Metaphysics of Power," point #3 and elsewhere.

the Origenist controversy, and the semi-Pelagian controversy), but there is no room in the present essay for that kind of analysis. Second, in order to summarize early monastic asceticism in a manner that begins to mediate between historical description and contemporary practice one must give an account of asceticism that reflects not only the language, concepts, and debates of antiquity, but also employs contemporary categories of thought. We must seek to comprehend the historical to some extent in the thought-forms of contemporary theology, philosophy, psychology and sociology (all of which have bearing upon and interpretation of asceticism). Once again, the task is simply too large.

In my writings I have been developing what I consider to be a fruitful way of comprehending spirituality in dialogue with contemporary discourse.<sup>86</sup> What seems appropriate in the present essay, then, is for me (1) to illustrate the obvious: namely that early monastic asceticism was understood as an intentional constraint of human experience undertaken in the context of an actively present God, and (2) to develop a few considerations regarding the constraint of experience in God's presence which, while remaining faithful to the overall thrust of early monastic asceticism, are presented in conversation with my own interpretive framework, one I believe may be useful for nourishing whole-hearted devotion to whole-Gospel living today.

Perhaps the most defining feature of asceticism is *constraint*. And for Christian asceticism it is constraint *in the presence of God*. I am not merely speaking here about how we might define the term "ascetic/ism," although, as I stated above, I do see constraint as an essential component of the term. But more importantly here, what I am trying to draw attention to is the character of an *ascetical life*. Or perhaps we could speak of the ascetical *dimension* of life. What is essentially characteristic of this "ascetical" aspect of Christian practice? To me, it is the intentional constraint of human experience in the presence of God. To illustrate this fact in Scripture and early monasticism is an exercise in stating the obvious.

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<sup>86</sup> See particularly chapter 5 of my *Affirming the Touch of God*, chapters 3-8 of *The Brazos Introduction*, and "The Metaphysics of Power."

The motifs of athletic and military "training" are not absent in Scripture. Rather the use of such motifs in Scripture served as the foundation for their use in later Christian ascetical literature. We see, in the New Testament's use of these motifs, a clear view of the of the New Testament writers' assumptions regarding the significance of the intentional constraint of experience. A few illustrations must suffice:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:1-3)

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; see also 2 Tim 2:5)

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." (Ephesians 6:10-13)

"Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer." (2 Timothy 2:3-4; see also 2 Timothy 4:7; 1 Tim 6:12; 1 Peter 4:1-2).



My point is that the New Testament writers saw their lives as involving an intentional, self-directed constraint of experience. Faithful readers of the New Testament writings would seek to "devote themselves to," or engage in, those means which would foster a faithful following of the Gospel. Faithful readers of the New Testament would "persevere" through various kinds of hardship. Faithful readers of the New Testament would exercise "self-control" changing or adding practices to their life which would facilitate an increase in Christian maturity and faithfulness to the Gospel. Faithful readers of the New Testament would also pay attention to the mutual support of the community in order that they might increase in faith and love (Hebrews 10:23-25). finally, faithful readers would abstain from worldly practices or even worldly influences that distracted them from whole-hearted Christian living. This is (a sketch of) the Scriptural foundations upon which the practice of early monastic asceticism was built.<sup>87</sup>

It remains, then, for me to illustrate the obvious with reference to early monasticism. Early nuns and monks saw themselves as intentionally placing constraints around virtually every aspect of their lives under the assumption that God was actively involved as they did so.

The most visible expressions of early monastic constraint can be identified in their practices of abstinence and withdrawal. Those who withdrew to the desert or to intentional communities, for example, saw themselves as restricting (constraining) their contact with the world. Thus Basil writes in his Longer Responses, "So also we practice successfully the art (*askesis*) of being well-pleasing to God according to Christ's gospel, by retirement from the cares of the world and complete estrangement from distractions."<sup>88</sup> When questioned about his eagerness to return to his cell after a visit with a secular official, Antony responded, "Just as fish perish when they lie exposed for a while on the dry land, so also the monks relax their discipline when they linger and pass time with you. Therefore, we must rush back to the mountain, like the fish to the sea--so that we might not, by remaining among you, forget the

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87 To develop this further would require an analysis of the many biblical passages discussing what has been labeled the "counsels" of Scripture. other issues are in need of exploration as well, but this will have to wait for later.

88 Basil, *LR*, Q5. See also Holmes, *Life Pleasing*, 107ff.

things within us."<sup>89</sup> Antony constrains his social life to maintain the constraint of his ascetical practice ("discipline"), in order that he might be present with the things within (the presence of God). Virtually every aspect of early monastic life was subject to constraint. Their diet was measured. Their clothing was simple. Their housing was primitive. Their furnishings were sparse. Their social contact was regulated. Rather than depending on medical care, they persevered through injury and illness.<sup>90</sup>

The term "constraint" carries not only the meaning of eliminative "restriction," but also the idea of being funneled (constrained) into a particular channel. In this sense not only the practices of abstinence and perseverance performed by the early nuns and monks, but also their engagements were a kind of intentional constraint. Prayer, study, service to the poor, and contemplative union with God were all funnels into which devout Christians would pour themselves as they freed their lives from other cares and distractions. The abba Palamon instructed monastic pioneer Pachomius regarding the fundamental principles of monastic life, specifically mentioning vigils, recitation, manual work, fasting, synaxis [the personal or corporate office of prayer] and prayer [presumably private prayer].<sup>91</sup> Similarly Laura Swan summarizes the early devout women of Rome by saying that, "From the earliest days of the Jesus movement, Rome attracted active and dedicated groups of women who were committed to prayer, service to the marginalized and the study of scripture."<sup>92</sup> We misunderstand the ascetical life of early monasticism if we characterize it simply as an asceticism of "restraint." Their constraint of experience was also a profound funneling of themselves into--a devoting themselves to--a life given over to God and to the things of God.

One way early monks and nuns summarized their constraint of experience was to speak of renunciation. They saw themselves as renouncing the world, the flesh, and the devil. The renunciation of the world was especially present as they established themselves into their new life. Thus Cassian

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<sup>89</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 85.

<sup>90</sup> See Regnault, *Day-to-Day Life*.

<sup>91</sup> "Bohairic Life" 10, in *Pachomius-Lives*, 31.

<sup>92</sup> Swan, *Forgotten Desert Mothers*, 73. See also pp. 115-16 where she summarizes the life of Melania the Elder by speaking of "prayer, work with the poor, hospitality toward pilgrims, and the study of scripture."

writes regarding how it is that monks persevere in the monastery until the extremest old age, "but when we observe how they begin their life of renunciation, we can understand how it comes to pass that they build such an edifice of perfection on such firm foundations."<sup>93</sup> Renunciation of the flesh and the devil, however, was made again and again in the ongoing context of the monastic life. Evagrius of Pontus speaks of three renunciations:

The first renunciation is the voluntary abandonment of the things of the world for the sake of the knowledge of God; the second is the rejection of evil which ensues by the grace of Christ our Savior and by the zeal of the human individual; the third renunciation is the separation from ignorance of those things which are naturally manifest to people in proportion to their state.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, the entire life of a monk or nun could be comprehended in the term "renunciant." But once again, it is important not to misunderstand "renunciation" as an oppressive restriction. Basil spoke of renunciation as being "loosed from the chains of attachment to this life"<sup>95</sup> Evagrius urges, "Let him who has chosen to practice the ascesis of renunciation make for himself a wall of faith, a fortification of hope, and a secure grounding in love. For faith is not the abandonment but the substance of superior goods in the hope of perseverance and the love of life (cf. Heb 11:1)."<sup>96</sup> The constraints of monastic renunciation actually provide a freedom of space, an openness of life. The renunciant need not concern herself or himself with possessions, with family responsibilities or sexual needs, with negotiations of power in interpersonal relationships, or with career interests. Renunciants are free to devote themselves whole-heartedly to God. In one sense (and especially in the early stages of monastic life), the constraints of withdrawal and abstinence provide the environment in which, along with the constraints of perseverance and community, enable the constraints of engagement to facilitate a wholly new life in Christ.

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93 Cassian, *Monastic Institutes*, 4.2. See also *The Rule of the Master*, translated by Luke Eberle (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), chapter LXXXII.

94 Evagrius, *Thoughts* 26 *GAC*, 172. For the renunciation of the devil see Evagrius' *Talking Back*, translated by David Brakke (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

95 Basil, *LR*, Q5, cf. Q8.

96 Evagrius of Pontus, *To Eulogius* 12.11 *GAC*, 38.

Now for a few considerations regarding constraint of experience in God's presence:

***Asceticism is one part of a divine-human relationship***

When we comprehend asceticism within divine-human relationship, rather than interpreting it as self-improvement or social navigation (even when either of these are salient elements of a given ascetical expression), we begin by acknowledging that the broader reality to be considered is the divine-human interpersonal experience. Experience (or Reality<sup>97</sup>) arises in many "kinds." Botanical experience (for example, flowers) is one kind of experience. It incorporates sunlight, water, soil, and other factors to give rise to the realities we call "plants". Individual human experience (for example, my brother) is another kind of experience. It incorporates physical health, mental states, social relationships, spiritual encounters and other factors to give rise to what we call "human beings". Interpersonal experience (for example, my relationship with my wife) is another kind of experience. Interpersonal experience incorporates expectations, interactions, personal histories and so on to give rise to a reality that is different than any of the individuals involved in that interpersonal experience (just like sunlight and water are factors in plant experience but plant experience cannot be reduced to these factors). The point I am making is that interpersonal experience is a primary reality in view in ascetical practice. The *relationship* is the central element. Consequently, asceticism is not just a matter of practices and conditioning (the "training" metaphor). Trust, disclosure (from God to us and from us to God), mood, sense of threat, past failures of relationship (unanswered prayer) and more are all involved in the dynamics (and, frankly, the effectiveness) of asceticism. This is why the motives of love, gratitude, penitence, bargaining and the like play a part in Christian asceticism. They all exchange on relationship. Similarly some practices are performed simply to make room for the relationship itself (solitude to make space for intimacy, opening one's heart through Scripture meditation to enable a sharing of concern with the Author of the text, and so on). The choice of practices and the way each are

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97 I use the word "Experience" to name the fundamental category of metaphysics.

employed must be wisely tailored to the spiritual life of any individual. Thus Cassian instructs his readers concerning fasting, "we have come to agree on the following rule which was handed down to us: the time, manner, and quantity of food should be varied according to physical strength, age, and sex. . . . Nevertheless there is one goal in mind, that no one should be sated and burdened with having eaten his fill."<sup>98</sup> It is easy to look at asceticism and think that it is about "the practices." But this is a misunderstanding. Asceticism is the application of practices for the sake of something else.

Furthermore, as part of divine-human relationship, Christian asceticism is embedded in the larger story of God and so is subject to all the realities of that story. What this means is first, that while personal sanctification is part of God's plan, it is not the whole story. God is involved in a much greater restoration than my conversion and sanctification. Consequently the aims of my ascetical practice--even the "spiritual ends," and even those ends which may have transformation of self as a significant component--point not merely to personal transformation but also beyond this to God's larger mission. Our embeddedness in the larger story of God also means that God and ascetic actor are not the only characters present in the ascetic pursuit. Antony discovered very early in his journey that demonic forces had to be addressed as inescapable players in the drama of ascetical practice.<sup>99</sup> Social forces (for example, governmental and ecclesiastical officials) also play a part in the ascetical life. Asceticism is not simply the expression of an individual or a small group of people. It is also one aspect of the life of the Church, as the record of topics discussed in the Patristic synods and councils will verify. Asceticism is not about withdrawing in order to eliminate conflicts (from nature, the world, spiritual forces, the flesh and so on), but rather provide an environment in which these conflicts can be faced head-on. This is simply what it means to be involved in relationship with God in the midst of the already-not yet of God's larger story.

Needless to say, if we understand Christian asceticism as comprehended as one part of a divine-

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<sup>98</sup> John Cassian, *Monastic Institutes* 5.5.

<sup>99</sup> See Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 5, 22-43. More generally see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of a Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

human relationship, then it follows that, as a part of that relationship, asceticism will exhibit all the characteristics of divine-human dynamics. This statement may sound rather esoteric, but it is of the most fundamental practical (and theological) importance. Let me explain:

**As part of a human-*divine* experience, asceticism is essentially a response to and cooperation with the work of God: "In the midst of God's active presence"**

When we fast, when we endure trials, when we soften to our communities, we do so as Christians because of *God*. What we do as Christians is fundamentally done in response to--and in cooperation with--God. We understand ourselves as Christians, even as humans, only when we understand ourselves within God's story, God's big work. That work is a massive project of making all things new (Revelation 21:5). Our maturity or perfection is only one component of that work. God's mission incorporates our initial conversion and subsequent growth in spiritual maturity but it is not limited to that. It involves the defeat of evil forces, the reconstruction of human society, and the reconciliation of the human-nature relationship. Consequently, our spiritual disciplines are not simply about our personal spiritual growth. They are also about our increasing conformity with the Gospel, God's plan for all things. Or perhaps I should suggest that our view of "personal spiritual growth" should be kept nice and broad.

One of the most fundamental patterns of the divine-human relationship is that God initiates, we respond, and God responds to our response.<sup>100</sup> The Christian God is an actively present God, who brings his presence and influence to bear upon ordinary human life. Followers of this God recognize these initiations or invitations and respond to them as such. Asceticism, then, can be understood as one way that Christians recognize, respond to, and cooperate with, the active initiations of God's active presence.

How was this initiation perceived? Certainly through Scripture. Antony wanders into a church

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<sup>100</sup> See Howard, *Brazos Introduction*, 204-223.

and hears the Gospel read, "Go and sell all . . . come and follow." He hears this as an invitation to him personally as Scripture and Spirit work together. Much of Basil's *Ascetikon* is a list of passages and queries concerning how to live them out. Basil and his communities clearly saw reading the Scriptures as an act of opening themselves to the invitation of God. The first part of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* makes a similar case as he articulates the characteristics necessary to understand Scripture. The desert elders also saw themselves as attempting to live Scripture more fully through their ascetical choices.<sup>101</sup> The word of an elder or abba/amma was also often taken as a sign of God's invitation. Early monks and nuns took their fellowship quite seriously and a more mature brother or sister was to be heeded. As mentioned above, Cassian described three different kinds of "callings" to monastic life. Some of these were stimulated by ordinary, even selfish, factors. And yet they were described as "callings." God's invitations could sometimes be acknowledged in the most mundane of affairs. But at other times God invited through spectacular events. For example, Antony prayed about his own listlessness and an angel appeared to model his rhythm of work and prayer.<sup>102</sup> These are only a few examples of a larger point: the early nuns and monks saw themselves, both in their general commitment to the monastic life as well as in the specifics of their ascetic practice, not merely as facilitating the work of God but also as responding to God's prior invitations.

This then brings us to the discussion of grace and the ways in which early monasticism saw asceticism in relationship with the grace of God. Virtually all saw their ascetical practice as performed within the larger invitation and empowerment of God's grace. Yet monastic writers differed on just how human will and divine grace related. Needless to say I cannot begin to address all the complexities of the Pelagian and semi-Pelagian controversies in the West, as well as the various ways that the early East talked about similar themes. That is, again, a topic for another essay. Some stressed God's grace-filled initiation through the creation of our own will and the offering of the commandments for our

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101 On the latter, see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

102 *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the early Christian Monks* [systematic collection], (NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 60.

response. Others stressed the need for special works of grace to make us capable of responding to God's inviting Word. Others spoke of the grace expressed through the transforming work of the Spirit.

John Cassian says this with regard to the performance of ascetical practices in particular:

Now as we have learnt from the teaching of the Fathers, we should be eager for perfection, using fasting, vigils, prayers, mortification of heart and body, lest we lose all these things through the swelling up of pride. It is not enough to believe ourselves incapable of reaching perfection through our own efforts and works, but we must know that we cannot even perform the very works which aim at perfection (i.e. our labour, toil and study) without the help of God's protection. Through the grace of His inspiration, at His chiding, with His encouragement we can perform these works; and in His love He does pour that grace into our hearts, either through other people or by His direct intervention.<sup>103</sup>

Grace invites us into ascetical practice, grace guides us to the practices themselves, grace empowers us to live them, and grace produces the fruits of the practices.

Finally, as part of God's work, we realize that we are not in charge of the results of the fruits of our spiritual disciplines. God responds to our responses, and God's responses may or may not be what we would imagine. We pursue a discipline of fasting in order to draw closer to God and we discover that we are angry, hungry, and that the practice seems to do no good. We hit the wall and are forced to come back to God and perhaps find God anew through some other means (for example, listening to contemporary praise music). Or we simplify our lifestyle in order to respond to God's invitation to identify with the least, only to discover in time other dimensions of "simplifying" that we had never thought of (in career, in social life, in our own self-image, and so on). God's gracious responses seem to be woven into the many less than conscious by-products of spiritual disciplines. Christian wisdom is simply to acknowledge this and press forward.

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<sup>103</sup> Cassian, *Monastic Institutes*, 12.16.



**As part of *human*-divine experience, asceticism is embedded in the complexity of human living**

God initiates. We respond. Asceticism is a response to God. It is also a *human* response to God. And as such it will display all the characteristics of human behavior.

Asceticism is the intentional constraint of one's own *human* experience. Human experience encompasses a broad range of phenomena. Consequently, asceticism can touch us in many ways. Eating and sleeping habits play an important part of human experience: hence fasting and vigils address constraint where it hits hard. But human experience also involves desires for fulfillment and ascetic constraint (for example, certain choices of careers or volunteer activities) can touch these desires. Human experience involves relationships and our choices of relationship and solitude can express an ascetic dimension. We can engage in aesthetic meditation, persevere through relational irritation, and withdraw from willful initiation. Every aspect of human experience has ascetic potential.

Asceticism, then, is simply the intention to place *this* aspect of our experience under *that* influence, whether through initiating something, persevering in something, changing something or ending something--in the context of God's presence and serving spiritual ends. Simple fasting, for example, is a choice to place my self-centered urge-response patterns under the influence of a self imposed refusal to satisfy those urges, in the expectation that the presence of God has something to show me (or some other way of influencing me) through the means of my non-satisfaction. Different kinds of asceticism involves the exposure to different kinds of influence. Withdrawal and abstinence involve the influence of lack. Perseverance involves the potential influence of many things: environmental conditions (mosquitos), triggers for engagement (bells to remind us of prayer), relationship pressures (spiritual direction) and on and on. And of course the intensity, duration, and significance of the chosen influence will shape the character of the ascetical practice. It is one thing to fast from doughnuts for Lent. It is quite another to eat one meal a day for a decade. Ascetical wisdom is all about discerning the right influences for the right person for the right time. For this reason there can

be no place for pride in our ascetic practice.<sup>104</sup>

Asceticism is an exercise of power (choice of action) in order to abandon power (constraint of experience) in order to reorient power (shaping my life in harmony with Christ and the Gospel). We do not speak of it much, but renunciation is at the foundation of the Christian Gospel. Adam is instructed to "leave" father and mother. Abraham leaves his home to follow the invitation of God. He is further invited to renounce his son. God renounces his own exalted place to become one of us (see Philippians 2). The followers of Jesus are invited to renounce the world (and their worldly possessions) in order to follow him. All renunciation--indeed perhaps all intentional constraint--is a giving up of power. We move from the familiar into the unfamiliar. Even when we persevere through trials, we choose to receive difficulties which may be familiar in an unfamiliar way. We set our power aside in order to open ourselves to a remaking of power.

And yet at times this "setting aside" requires an aggressive act or habit. The human "will" is a strange force. We plant seeds, and sometimes this takes work. We must resist the temptation to return to the familiar. We learn, by God's grace, to stand above the forces that might seek to distract us from progress in Gospel living. And just as we must train ourselves to read in order to receive the benefits of Scripture study, and we must strengthen our legs in order to receive the benefits of mountain climbing, so we may have to train our wills in order to receive the full benefits of ascetical practice. Human will is expressed in the context of a variety of factors: the dominance of patterns which surround us; the presence of perceived unmet need; the strength of developing tendencies to think, act, or feel in certain ways; remote or immediate factors shaping our ability to act; arousal and degree of interest; the presence and strength of other possibilities; and on and on. The ascetical exercise of our will and the ascetical renunciation of our will are often strangely intertwined.

In asceticism, desire is denied, refined and reborn. Renunciation is the furnace of the remaking of desire. Where is the distinction between will, want, and desire? There is, in asceticism, a strange

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<sup>104</sup> Palladius tells a story about how Macarius of Alexandria humbled the spiritual pride of some monks in his *Lausaic History* XVIII.12-16.

blend of intention taking aggressive steps in order that intention itself may be reconstructed. Our will and God's will separate and return again and again through the constraint of experience as God's ends are served, often whether we are aware of them (or whether we even "want" them) or not.

This brings us to the ordinary human experience of motive. Why do we constrain our experience? I have discussed this above with reference to the variety of motives or reasons encountered in early monastic writings. We have learned that the early nuns and monks acted not so much from a desire to deny life as to follow it. Nonetheless, a range of motives will ordinarily be present in any person's spiritual disciplines (as will be present in any aspect of human experience). Spiritual pride, a desire to guarantee eternal salvation, fear of social conditions, a dissatisfaction with other surrounding expressions of Christianity and more all influenced the character and style of individual expressions and practices. But we cannot reduce asceticism to activities driven by such motives. The texts indicate that the spiritual motives (longing to imitate Christ, to draw near to God and so on) were predominant. They should be so today as well.

And of course, as I have already mentioned earlier, ascetical practice can (and *will*) touch our sense of identity. Human beings are constantly constructing their identities.<sup>105</sup> Our choice to step into a spiritual discipline, our sense of who we are as the discipline influences us, and our sense of self as the fruit is born from a discipline are all part of the life of Christian ascetical practice. There is the training and expressing or stating or communicating or constructing a just-near-present self/Self with regard to various spheres of influence relationships. Asceticism and identity formation play on each other, or perhaps they are two lenses from which we view the same part of experience. We cannot separate act from identity. They are fused.<sup>106</sup>

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105 On the construction of the self see Howard, "Metaphysics of Power," in the section on "Reflections on the Place of the Currently Constructed Self."

106 Elizabeth A. Clark notes this in her summary reflection on a set of essays on asceticism. "Another blurring often noted in these pages is the relation between persons and texts, and texts, and behavior: who imitates whom or what?" in "The Ascetic Impulse in Religious Life: A General Response," *Asceticism*, 508.

## **Conclusion -**

In this first part of the essay I have tried to describe or to summarize the nature of asceticism, especially as presented in the literature of early monasticism. In this part, we have learned that asceticism is more than mere self-punishment. Rather, authentic Christian asceticism is seen in those acts or habits of intentionally constraining one's own human experience in the context of God's active presence and aimed at serving spiritual ends. We have glimpsed at a few of the acts and habits; we have shared some of the spiritual ends; we have examined what it meant (and means) to constrain experience in the presence of God. Now we must explore what significance the ascetical life of early nuns and monks might have for us today.