

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

Evan B. Howard, 2/20/2014

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. This essay is written in two parts to encourage that embodiment, with special reference to one single aspect of monastic life: asceticism. First, we cannot embody the spirit and practices of early monastic asceticism until we understand just what early monastic ascetical practice was about. Part One of this essay ("Asceticism Summarized") provided a descriptive summary of early monastic asceticism. After reviewing definitions of asceticism, spiritual disciplines, and other similar terms, we explored the character of asceticism as 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.<sup>1</sup> We appreciated illustrations of early monastic acts and habits. We sympathized with various spiritual ends toward which Christians order their lives. Finally, we explored what "constraint in God's presence" might have meant for nuns and monks long ago, and I ventured a few thoughts regarding what this constraint in God's presence might mean in a general sense.

Now, in Part Two, I move to address the questions of Asceticism Applied: What do Christians today have to gain from the spirit and practices of early monastic asceticism? How can we take concrete steps to practice today--even in the midst of non-vowed (often labeled "secular") lives--what nuns and monks practiced in the midst of their extreme lives long ago? To repeat what I stated at the onset of Part One: I will not, in the present essay, be integrating an analysis of asceticism into a more comprehensive theology of spiritual formation. This will have to wait for a more general book on

---

<sup>1</sup> See Part One for the reasons why I have chosen to use the term "asceticism" more often than "spiritual disciplines."

spiritual formation. The same holds for the biblical/theological reflections necessary for a fully adequate recovery of Christian asceticism. My aim at this point in my own research is to understand the history of monasticism fairly, taking note of the key Scriptures and issues discussed. Later, after I have reviewed the history of monasticism, I intend on returning to the biblical and theological questions more directly by way of developing something of a contemporary theology of religious life. But in the meantime theology cannot really be entirely separated from practice, and I do find myself offering suggestions to new monastic folks that I have learned from my studies in history. Along the way I keep bumping into wisdom that I think is valuable (and thus "Old Monastic Wisdom for New Monastic Christians"). So, rather than wait decades until I have thoroughly examined every issue regarding every practice, I offer suggestions based on my research *in progress*, hoping that these offerings will (1) encourage Christians in their embodiment of the Gospel, and (2) stimulate further research and reflection that will advance our understanding of the history and theology of Christian monasticism and its relevance for Christians today.

The conviction that is currently driving my approach to the recovery of early monastic asceticism is this: *the ascetic practices which we see performed by the heroes of monasticism in bold relief point to features of spirituality lived in the midst of all our relationships, no matter how small.* Or--to look at the same conviction from the flip side--if we look deep into the best longings and endeavors of everyday Christian practice we find that they resemble the essential characteristics of early monastic asceticism at its best. Though the forms or the "degree" of ascetical practice between early monasticism and everyday contemporary life might differ (I don't really like the term "degree" but can't think of another one), the essential character of the life lived is the same for both. I touched on this in my essay on "The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monasticism" when I argued that an important principle of true religion expressed in early monasticism was that "Holiness--or, perhaps a "consecrated life"--is Available to Many, Not Just Those Who Formally Withdraw to Monastic Settings." It is not just that contemporary Christians can learn some nice insights from a few interesting

monastic practices. Rather *the essential characteristics* of monastic life provide a vivid model of some *essential characteristics* of Christian living embodied anywhere and anytime. Thus, by exploring the essential characteristics of asceticism practiced by "religious" or consecrated Christians, we discover valuable advice leading all Christians toward authentic whole-hearted devotion.

Furthermore, I have a suspicion that our practice of spiritual disciplines may be illuminated by contemporary psychological research. I am not an expert in psychology and can only point to interesting explorations that seem to me relevant to a contemporary recovery of asceticism. Again, my hopes here are to point out where I see potential for encouragement and to stimulate further study. By experimenting with the advice of early monasticism and incorporating the insights of contemporary psychological research, I think communities and individuals may more fruitfully cooperate with the Spirit's initiations and experience ourselves as communities and individuals profitably formed in concert with the heart of God in the midst of the details of our everyday lives. I will divide this second Part of my essay into sections which correspond to the categories and sub-categories used to summarize early monastic asceticism in Part One of this essay, with a couple of exceptions. First, the act of illustrating everyday practice and everyday spiritual ends necessarily involves a description of the natural constraint of the breadth of human experience in the presence of God. Consequently, I will not develop a third major division regarding constraint in God's presence, but rather I will offer a few miscellaneous reflections that bear on the topic of asceticism applied.

Second--and more importantly--I am leaving a large gap in this essay with its two Parts. In Part One, I have summarized the ancient "extreme." In Part Two, I aim to make asceticism accessible to the contemporary "everyday." And yet my real passion and desire is for "new monasticisms": emerging expressions of what I might call a "radical middle."<sup>2</sup> I say *middle*, in that these expressions demand

---

2 I am introducing the notion of a "radical middle" here for the first time. It bears some resemblance to what some representatives of new monastic expressions call "ordinary radicals." I identify new monasticism with the plural (monasticisms) to honor the diversity of forms and expressions emerging, rather than to simply identify "new monasticism" with, for example, Shane Claiborne and company. For a 2008 introduction to some of this, see my AAR presentation "Introducing New Monasticism," available at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/intnm1.pdf>.

sacrifices and commitments that do not reach the level of intensity of, for example, the early Syrian monks, but yet at the same time are sufficiently aggressive about their lifestyles so as to make these expressions something close to new forms of "religious life," legitimately distinct from contemporary non-vowed or "secular" Christianity. I say *radical* (sorry for the cliché), because I believe (1) that expressions of this sort are bound to address lived Christianity at its roots (*radix*) and (2) that these forms are experienced both by the participants in these expressions as well as by many outside observers as "radicals": standing on the fringes and calling accepted norms into question. I hope that my work, both in this essay and beyond serves to inform and encourage these emerging expressions.

And yet to develop the implications of a recovery of early monastic asceticism for new monasticisms is much too large a task at this point. That task demands more cultural and theological analysis than is reasonable at this point. Furthermore, I find that the recovery of new monastic "radical middles" is a task that is relevant not only to the study of asceticism, but also to issues of withdrawal, identity, salvation, and more: issues that I either have written about already or am intending on exploring in the near future. Consequently, it seems best at this juncture, simply to offer a few brief comments regarding asceticism in the radical middle at the close of Part Two and to develop a fuller application for new monasticisms in a future work. Thus, for now what I offer is an open doorway for all Christians--for the most "everyday" experience--into the riches of ascetical life. My friends in the radical middle will simply have to imagine the possibilities of something more.

### **Everyday Practice**

Just as the devout nuns and monks of old were known for their practices, so in recent decades there has been a new movement of Christians interested in spiritual formation who are also known by their practices: usually referred to as *spiritual disciplines*. Particularly since Richard Foster's groundbreaking *Celebration of Discipline*, practices like meditation, simplicity, and guidance have been aggressively explored and employed by Protestants who had hitherto not even heard of them (and who

still might be unfamiliar with "asceticism"). Only the emphasis in this new movement has been less on the development of an army of elite renunciants, but on the relevance of ascetical acts and habits (spiritual disciplines) for the Christian's everyday life. My aim here in these reflections is not to rehearse, develop, or even summarize the writings on spiritual formation/disciplines in the past few decades,<sup>3</sup> but rather simply (1) to point out how the "spiritual disciplines" or "spiritual formation" movement has forged, whether consciously or unconsciously, everyday expressions of the essential characteristics of early monastic life, (2) to illustrate that everyday asceticism has always been a theme of the Church (and consequently, that asceticism is not the preserve (or the excess) of "special" (or "weird") Christians) and (3) to suggest that contemporary psychological research might offer some relevant insights toward our practice of everyday asceticism today.

I begin with a couple of illustrations. Wendy Wright and Joseph Power describe how the communities connected to the leadership of seventeenth century spiritual writer Francis deSales pursued the "little virtues" (gentleness, humility and so on) as follows:

These very Salesian virtues were to be acquired by following the time-honored ascetic pattern of self-mortification. Always in the Christian tradition death to self--asceticism--is linked to growing likeness to God--the obtaining of virtues. Only the mortifications prized in Salesian thought were not visible and heroic, but ordinary and unobtrusive. Patiently enduring the pains of work rather than observing long fasts, practicing charity toward an unlikable neighbor rather than wearing a hair shirt, curbing the immoderate impulses of one's own heart rather than violently assaulting one's sensual flesh--these are the preferred methods of Salesian asceticism.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Johannes Lindworsky summarizes the essential character of everyday asceticism by asserting

---

3 I provide a brief outline of the disciplines of a number of influential books on spiritual disciplines/ ascetical practices in my *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 290. This outline should also now be supplemented by the more comprehensive collection of spiritual disciplines in Adele Ahlberg. Calhoun, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005). There is now a vast supply of material on spiritual disciplines. Entire volumes and websites are devoted to the practice of individual disciplines.

4 Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, "Introduction: Theme VI" in *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 63.

that:

The child who, because of the exhortations of its parents, in whom it sees the representatives of God, takes particular pains with its school exercises, practices asceticism; the servant who, out of an awareness of a sense of duty, carefully watches the milk so that it does not boil over, practices asceticism; . . . asceticism is concerned with these comparatively small, trivial things . . .<sup>5</sup>

The practices of *withdrawal* are available to all Christians who desire to "steal away to Jesus." One need not relocate to the wilderness to find open space for God. As a teenager, Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century Christian woman, established her bedroom as a special place of prayer. The "family altar" was both a special time and a special place for Puritan and African-American families to withdraw from the world and focus on Jesus, even if that "place" was the meal table. Christians have found, in brief walks to the grocery store or in candle-lit baths, environments which facilitate awareness of the presence of God. And as with place, so also with times of withdrawal. One need not abandon one's career for a lifetime of isolation (unless the Lord invites). It is simply a matter of "doing what seems best." Twentieth-century physician and Orthodox priest, Anthony Bloom, writes of his own practice of "stopping time" in which he periodically just stands or sits right where he is, becoming consciously aware of the presence of God in the midst of the realities of his day. I have a friend who is employed as a physician in a hospital emergency ward and who uses the time he "scrubs" prior to seeing each patient as a time of realignment with God.

Constraint of our need for stimulation and for company does not necessarily require a primitive cell. It may be embodied simply through a thoughtful use of social media. What might it mean to "abandon the frameworks of meaning" common to our own age? I don't think it requires a journey to the desert. But it may require some very simple (and perhaps challenging) sacrifices. My point here is

---

5 Johannes Lindworsky, *The Psychology of Asceticism* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Carroll Press, 1950), 6.

that while one might encounter God in particularly profound ways through extreme forms of withdrawal, the essential character of the early monastic practices of withdrawal (elimination of distraction, attention to God, rejection of the world's sense of meaning, and so on) can--and *should*--be expressed by all Christians in the midst of our everyday lives.

In Part One I mentioned that the most commonly mentioned practices of early monastic asceticism were practices of *abstinence*: fasting, vigils, chastity, silence, poverty, and the like. In these forms of asceticism one eliminates the presence and influence of things (foods, sleep, sexual relations, conversation, possessions, etc.) to enable spiritual ends. Early monks often took abstinence very seriously: eating only a few meals per week, sleeping only a few hours each day, and so on. And certainly, this kind of "pushing oneself" to the edges enables confrontations between God, enemies (world, flesh, devil) and oneself that are not available in the same way through less intense measures. Nonetheless, for the sake of the transformation of ourselves, and for the work of the kingdom, we all can--and *must*--abstain from things, insofar as it is appropriate for our situation.

When I was a new believer (age 15) I had a hard time quitting swearing. Ultimately I had to make little pen marks on my wrist and donate money for each mark. After a sufficient loss of money, I finally gained the motivation to stop. Back then, this was learning to abstain for God's sake. Everyday asceticism. The decision to abstain from "speed"--choosing to do things more slowly and mindfully--can be a direct attack on our need to accomplish, to get things done, an abstinence from activity-addiction. Of course, abstinence from inappropriate judgments requires no special commitments beyond the commitment to love our neighbor. Richard Foster writes about fasting, "Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. . . . Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels."<sup>6</sup>

---

6 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 56.

Some have suggested that abstinence facilitates the integrative re-wiring of our brains. We can imagine how abstinence permits a de-habitation (released synapse connections) through which a new re-habitation (new connections) might take place. Curt Thompson, in his *The Anatomy of the Soul*, contends that fasting and other disciplines facilitate the reintegration of the human mind/brain.<sup>7</sup> While more specific empirical research may be necessary to demonstrate the results of each discipline, what we can affirm is that abstinence makes us vulnerable and dependent. Through abstinence, we monks and farmers and retail clerks all "empty" ourselves in ways that leave us uniquely in God's hands.

Another form of ascetical practice is *perseverance*. In Part One I recounted how perseverance in the face of physical sufferings, uncomfortable situations, or personal criticisms was understood by early nuns and monks as part of their ascetic commitment. Needless to say, this form of suffering requires no special vows. We are graced with physical sufferings, uncomfortable situations and personal criticisms all the time. And to receive them with grace is truly the fruit of an ascetical practice today, just as long ago. Again, Wright and Power describe the everyday asceticism of Francis de Sales and his followers:

"Indeed, for de Sales, the mortifications one does not choose are in fact superior to those that one might select for oneself. For in those unbidden difficulties, self-discoveries and frustrations which call forth humility and patience, there is "more of God's will than our own." God's will--the will of God's good pleasure--is here discovered. And it is in dying to one's own will, even one's own will to achieve a certain idea of perfection, that God's will can come to live in each person."<sup>8</sup>

John Calvin speaks of a similar abstinence of perseverance in his chapter on "Bearing the Cross" in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He states, "That God has promised to be with believers in tribulation [cf. II Corinthians 1:4] they experience to be true, while, supported by his hand, they

---

<sup>7</sup> Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul* (TyndaleMomentum, 2010), 175-79.

<sup>8</sup> Wright and Power "Introduction," 63.

patiently endure--an endurance quite unattainable by their own effort."<sup>9</sup> To be a Christian is to experience conflict and tribulations. Christian spiritual formation is not about transcending conflict into some unreal tranquility. Rather authentic formation is that work of God which enables us to live victorious in the midst of various conflicts. Psychologists call this ability to persevere in the midst of difficulties "grit." Researchers like Angela Duckworth and others have demonstrated how perseverance and passion for long-term goals helps humans successfully adapt to the harsh changes in life. The asceticism of perseverance may help provide just the kind of "true grit" we need in life.<sup>10</sup>

And then there are those disciplines of *engagement*: study, prayer, service, and so on. Just as a life of ascetical practice refrains from some thing, so also it pursues others. The life of a nun or monk is a life give over to prayer, often accompanied by some blend of work, study, service, and community life. In monastic life, we free ourselves from distractions in order to devote ourselves to what is most important.

But again, we need not abandon career or family in order to devote ourselves to what is important. First, what is important (our vocation) may just be our family or career. God invites us each uniquely. Second--and more important for our point here--is that we do not need to pronounce life-vows in order to make room for prayer, study, service, and so on. Two of the principles of true religion in early monasticism were that "Holiness is Available to Many and not Just Those Who Formally Withdraw To Monastic Settings" and "The Application of Religious Practices Can Legitimately Vary a Great Deal."<sup>11</sup> Given these two principles, we can assume that the practices and framework for everyday (non-monastic) holiness will look different from that of monastic holiness. Yet we may also assume that we can engage our hearts, our minds, and our hands to the love of God and others in the

---

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), Book III, Chapter VIII, section 3 (henceforth III.VIII.3).

10 See, for example, C. Robertson-Kraft, C., & A. L. Duckworth. "True Grit: Trait-level Perseverance and Passion for Long-term Goals Predicts Effectiveness and Retention Among Novice Teachers. *Teachers College Record* (in press).

11 See my essay on "The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monasticism" at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/evangelical-vision-eremital-tradition-part-i-the-pursuit-of-true-religion-in-fourth-century-monastic-and-related-expressions/>.

midst of everyday life.

This is one of the functions of the sacraments and rituals of the church. We receive God through the celebration of Eucharist each week: hearing the Gospel proclaimed, offering up praise, bringing our prayers to God together, welcoming the presence of Christ through bread and wine. Through the rites (or the disciplines) of confession, spiritual direction and reconciliation we re-align ourselves with God again and again. Contemporary scholar Gail Corrington writes of Catherine of Siena, that her fasting "was accompanied by a nearly obsessive hunger for another kind of food, "the body and blood of Christ."<sup>12</sup> While Catherine's engagement was more extreme than most (as was her fasting), the point remains that the simple participation in the ordinary disciplines of a common local congregation often serve as vehicles to express the sincere engagement of everyday asceticism.

This is no place to go into a long discussion about spirituality and work. One comment and one quote must suffice. First, the comment. It requires virtually no extra time or space to punctuate the onset or conclusion of a time of work with a brief prayer. The Celtic Christians were known for their creative "blessings for" ordinary activities. We may not be able to recite Psalms during all our daily tasks, but at least we can begin or end them with a little reminder of who surrounds us in our work. Second, the quote. Farmer and writer Wendell Berry has this to say about work and health, work and spirituality:

Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection *is* health. And what our society does its best to disguise from us is how ordinary, how attainable health is. We lose our health--and create profitable diseases and dependencies--by failing to see the direct connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving. . . . The 'drudgery' of growing one's own food, then, is not drudgery at all. It is--in addition to being the appropriate fulfillment of a practical need--a sacrament, as eating is also, by which we enact and understand

---

12 Gail Corrington, "Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy: Self-control as Liberation and Transcendence," in *Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion* 2 (1986) 51-61.

our oneness with the Creation, the conviviality of one body with all bodies.”<sup>13</sup>

Another way we can engage God in the midst of everyday life--and renounce the worldly influences of our culture-- is to learn the art of monotasking. While multitasking might be helpful when we are doing mindless activities (like combining prayer with basket-weaving), more often than not our penchant to have "six tabs open" in our lives simultaneously is counterproductive. More often than not, we more successfully (and richly) engage in life when we are present to one thing at a time. I have a suspicion that when we learn to become more "present" in our everyday activities: either immersed in the "flow" of it all, or mindfully paying attention to the routines of our smallest tasks, we may discover a form of engagement with God that embraces the aims of monastic life in the midst of the everyday.<sup>14</sup>

I need not develop the disciplines of study or service here. It is obvious that study can become a contemplative discipline. And scripture is clear that the service we offer to the needy is service to God and even a way of "knowing me" (Matthew 25:40; Jeremiah 22:16). My point has been made: our devotion to God--our ascetical engagement--can, *and should*, be tailored to fit the ordinary lives of each and every Christian believer. This is what a growing relationship with God is all about.

Finally, we learned that the life of *community* itself was seen as a form of ascetical practice. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). As I mentioned in Part One, even when we take a careful look at the those writings that reflect the more solitary lives of the desert mothers and fathers, we can easily recognize the significance of interpersonal dynamics for spiritual formation.<sup>15</sup> The works of the pioneers of monastic community (such as Pachomius, Basil, Augustine, and Cassian) emphasize the ascetical importance of community life even more. We choose to allow others to hear and to address our weaknesses, we place ourselves in dependence upon others who may be as dysfunctional as we ourselves, we join with others in the basic acts of life (sleeping, eating,

---

13 Wendell Berry "The Body and the Earth" in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 138.

14 For a summary of some of this research, see Matt Richtel "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price" *New York Times* June 6, 2010; For psychologist Adam Gazzaley's profile see <http://profiles.ucsf.edu/adam.gazzaley>. See also the work of Clifford Nass and Cathy Davidson.

15 See Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993).

praying, celebrating and so on), constraining ourselves to *this* people, allowing our hearts and minds to be shaped by *this* people, for the sake of more fully living a Gospel life. This is what I mean by community life as an ascetical practice. It can be accomplished by every Christian. It strengthens us as few other disciplines can.

Richard Foster divides his list of spiritual disciplines into three basic categories: inward disciplines, outward disciplines, and corporate disciplines. He includes, in the latter, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. Foster and Kathryn A. Yanni, in their workbook developed to accompany Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, state that the corporate disciplines are those practiced "through the bonds of community relationships."<sup>16</sup> There are specific practices that we can undertake (whether nuns or nannies) to receive from our communities. We admit our failings to significant others. We celebrate God's goodness together. We listen to the advice of a trusted friend. We refuse to judge. These corporate disciplines are not the preserve of professional monastics. Rather they are part and parcel of what it means to live the Christian life. The fact that monastic life and literature goes to great lengths to describe the characteristics of healthy community simply points to a feature of spirituality lived in the midst of all our relationships, no matter how small: we must learn to love one another in the practical details of how we share life itself.

But beyond the specific disciplines we might practice in the context of community, we must perceive community life itself as a discipline--an ascetical practice--designed for the formation of ourselves and others into the likeness of Christ. This is as true for the merchant as it is for the monk. We can, as Earnest Boyer puts it, "find God at home," employing the very wisdom of monastic spirituality for the everyday world of caring for a family.<sup>17</sup> We can, as Therese of Lisieux described her "little way," make a conscious effort to put up with the most annoying habits of those with whom we

---

16 Richard J. Foster and Kathryn A. Yanni, *Celebrating the Disciplines: A Journal Workbook to Accompany Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 159.

17 Ernest Boyer, *Finding God at Home: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). See also Larry Spears, "A Rule for Families of Faith," *American Benedictine Review* 40/2 (June 1989): 142-69; and David Robinson, *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

rub shoulders on a regular basis.<sup>18</sup> The very term "fellowship" (*koinonia*) speaks of a sharing of life together, a sharing which in reality must include "bearing-with" each other as much as enjoying entertainment together.

One thing we are learning about change these days, is that it is empowered by significant relationships. By placing ourselves in relationship with the right people, we are more likely to quit smoking, lose weight, and change all kinds of habits we desire. Change is not just a matter of knowing relevant information, but also a matter of motivation. And motivation is facilitated by communities that provide us hope and reinforce the values we wish to embody.<sup>19</sup> If we desire to make the most of the resources around us for the kingdom of God in the midst of our everyday lives, we would do well to listen to the advice of early monasticism (and contemporary psychology) and situate ourselves in the center of communities who will challenge and support us toward the best ends.

A Note on Sensibilities:

At the end of this section in Part One, I mentioned that I thought it important that we comprehend early Christian ascetic practice in dialogue with a set of sensibilities that characterized their employment of their practices. By the term "sensibilities" I mean patterns of feeling and thinking and perceiving that make one more able to respond to certain stimuli than others. I suggested that there were at least three sensibilities that characterized the early nuns and monks: intention (they took their faith seriously), interiority (they watched carefully what went on within), and warfare (they were conscious of conflict). These sensibilities informed their practice of all the disciplines. Our sensibilities shape not only *what* we practice, but also *how* we practice it. The question that rises, as we move from asceticism summarized to asceticism *applied*, is "What sensibilities should accompany our practice

---

18 See John Clarke, translator, *Story of A Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976), especially pp. 222-223.

19 See for example, Alan Deuschman, *Change or Die: Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2007), who speaks of the importance of relationships that provide hope. The importance of community support has also been demonstrated through research that has utilized the data of the massive Framingham heart study, for example, "Social Networks in Preventative Medicine: Revisiting the Framingham Heart Study-A Social Network Perspective" at [http://casemed.case.edu/preventive\\_med/SocialNetwrksPrevMed2.htm](http://casemed.case.edu/preventive_med/SocialNetwrksPrevMed2.htm) (accessed 2/13/14). For a sample study regarding weight loss, see Beth C. Marcoux, Leslie L. Trenkner, and Irwin M. Rosenstock, "Social Networks and Social Support in Weight Loss," *Patient Education and Counseling* 15 (1990): 229-238.

today in the midst of our everyday asceticism?" "Are intention, interiority and warfare the appropriate sensibilities to develop here and now in a contemporary asceticism of everyday life?" This is, an important question, and requires a bit of tight-rope-walking. Our approach to this question must grow out of a broader theology of religious life and spiritual formation. I hope to work on this in future explorations.

### **Everyday Spiritual Ends: with a view toward . . .**

Following the components of our definition of asceticism outlined in Part One, we move now to an exploration of the various spiritual ends toward which ascetical actions are performed. Just as the ascetical practices of early monasticism were performed with a view toward self, the wider community and relationship with God, so all Christians, in the midst of all of our everyday lives, constrain our experience with a view toward:

#### *One's Self*

As I have already mentioned, a common (probably *the* most common) metaphor of asceticism is the image of athletic training. We sacrifice time to devote to our exercise. We persevere through pain so that our muscles are strengthened. We practice the right moves again and again so that under pressure we will be able to succeed with those same moves. This is all the world of asceticism, constraining ourselves for the sake of a better end. Everyday Christian asceticism is often performed for the same kinds of reasons, although as *Christian* asceticism the self-improvement is aimed toward fighting vice and following Christian virtue. One of the main principles of true religion among early nuns and monks was that "Our Character is More Important than Our Position, or Credentials or even, at times, the Finer Points of Our Doctrinal Disputes."<sup>20</sup> We do "everyday fasts" to reduce our gluttony. We join with difficult people not only to help them but to address our pride. We persevere in dry prayer to exercise our faith. Through everyday asceticism, we link wise disciplines to targeted ends as a means of grace

---

20 See my essay on "The Pursuit of True Religion."

for personal transformation.

In an article on ascetic theology and psychology, philosopher and theologian Diogenes Allen writes about his own engagement with the practice of biblical meditation (called *lectio divina*) and how this practice affected his problem of anger.<sup>21</sup> In reading the article, I cannot clearly tell whether Allen's practice of *lectio divina* was undertaken "in order to" address his anger. Honestly, I think not. He had a problem of anger and somewhere along the line, he started doing this practice of reading the Bible slowly and meditatively. He writes of one time where his reading, meditation, prayer, and resting contemplation, all focused around Psalm 139, introduced a profound and peaceful reconfiguration of his thoughts and feelings toward others. His anger began to heal. One can see from this simple example how ascetical engagement could also be *intentionally* chosen for the express purpose of addressing anger. I once meditated my way through all of Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees as a way of addressing my own pharisaic tendencies.

Johannes Lindworsky gives a nice example of the linking of what he calls "will psychology" and spiritual discipline. In order to get the gist of the example, I must quote at length:

Someone determines to stop the bad habit of uncharitable discussion of others. If in the morning he wishes to review this resolution, which his morning meditation has already strengthened with new motives, he must ask himself, "Where does an opportunity await me to carry out this resolution?" On the way to work, for example, he meets some of his fellow workers--this is always an occasion of characters being torn to shreds. He associates the notion of that meeting with his resolution. If he has thought over the matter carefully, the actual meeting with the colleagues will remind him of his resolution. But its execution is not yet thereby assured. As has already been said above, the modern psychology of the will teaches that the mere volition accomplishes nothing, unless a definite way of behaving has been planned and practiced. If

---

21 Diogenes Allen, "Ascetic Theology and Psychology" in *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology*, edited by Robert, C. Roberts and mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 297-316.

therefore the meeting with these colleagues is not to lead into the old customary track, one must have prepared oneself beforehand, how one can determine the direction of the conversation, by beginning to talk about some news of the day, or when the circumstances allow, come directly to speak about his resolution--this being done in a jocular manner.<sup>22</sup>

The disciplines of rehearsing the resolution, looking for opportunities to practice, and "planning and practicing" new behaviors serve to facilitate self-change: abstaining from judgments and nurturing virtues.

And again, as mentioned in Part One, I think that ascetical practices can be used not only to address specific vices or virtues, but also to strengthen or "train" the will more generally. We persevere through harsh weather not only in order to temper our persistent "need" for undue comfort, but also to exercise our power of will. I have not yet encountered (in my meager studies) this notion in more empirically-based psychological literature, but a number of years ago I gained insight from reading some of the phenomenological work of Italian psychiaiatrist Roberto Assagioli.<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes the idea of "will training": that is, developing the human ability to choose and use power just as one might develop one's physical abilities. He offers many examples of how to do this. Some of his examples employ quite trivial acts (such as standing on a chair for ten minutes). Nonetheless, his point is clear. Our strength and control of will can be shaped by simple practices. Thus we can use of everyday spiritual disciplines not only to "treat" some particular matter of growth, but also as a means to foster the development of our will in general. Through reading we not only learn about the content of a book, but we also become better readers.

Finally, everyday Christians--just like early nuns and monks--employ ascetical practices as means of exploring our own ordinary identities before God. Pastoral Care specialist Raymond Wooton writes this about the desert elders:

---

<sup>22</sup> Lindworsky, *Psychology of Asceticism*, 37-38.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, his *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* (Viking Compass, 1971); and *The Act of Will* (The Synthesis Center, 2010). A brief summary of his idea of training the will can be found at <http://www.synthesiscenter.org/articles/0117.pdf> (accessed 2/15/2014).

The Fathers did not flee into the wilderness so that they could consider themselves extraordinary; . . . they were rather, as they themselves insisted, quite ordinary human beings, troubled by their passions and susceptible to temptation. But they were ordinary with this difference: their long and arduous warfare against the flesh had given them an extraordinary understanding of human frailty and an intimate knowledge of the human condition. "Vigilance, self-knowledge and discernment," Abba Poemen said, these are the guides of the soul; and with these guides, the Fathers listened for the voice of God within them and followed after Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Who do we think we are? Who do we play with "being"? Our knowledge of our own real frailties blends with our awareness of the options for meaning and identity in the midst of everyday postmodern life. That, in turn, blends with our sense of God's work in us. We step out and explore ourselves in and through our practices of abstinence, of perseverance, of community, of engagement. Not just the "extreme Christian," but rather *every believer* distinguishes herself or himself *as Christian* by means of the practices with which they constrain themselves and the ends toward which these practices are aimed.

"Vigilance, self-knowledge, and discernment" are our guides, says Abba Poemen.

Contemporary psychological discourse would call this "mindfulness." Mindfulness has been defined as the practice (or habit) of paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. Others speak of mindfulness as intending in an open, accepting and discerning way to whatever is arising in the present moment. Studies have demonstrated that mindfulness practice facilitates overcoming addictive behavior, increases emotional intelligence, assists individuals in the discovery of pleasures in human activity, develops the ability to dis-identify or re-perceive one's experience, and changes the very gene expression in our brains. Learning to pay attention to our own experience is not merely the preserve of a few gurus from the Far East or ancient desert saints of the Near East. A practice of Christian mindfulness can become a means of transformatively seeing,

---

24 Raymond J. Wootton, "Depth Psychology and Desert Spirituality," *Diakonia* 16/2 (1981) 132.

exploring, and becoming ourselves in Christ in the midst of everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

### *A Wider Community*

Our ascetical constraints are aimed not only at ourselves, but also at those that surround us: a wider community. We practice fellowship as a means of imitating the model of the Church in Acts. We persevere in sexual faithfulness in part as a voice to a sexually broken culture. We practice solidarity with God's kingdom and with the poor by inviting homeless friends to sleep on cold nights. Our choice of how we order our lives is shaped by--and shapes--our spheres of influence. Through the grace of God's Spirit acting through our ascetical practices (among other things), we as Christians provide an alternative to "the world," a living message of hope.

We Christians constrain ourselves in part to live into our calling as a Body of Christ. We abstain from criticism of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We heed those who have earned a place of respect and authority. We curb our self-obsession (in contrast to our narcissistic culture) in order to become all God has for us, not only as individuals, but as a *people of God*. As Christos Yannaras writes,

Every voluntary mortification of the egocentricity which is "contrary to nature" is a dynamic destruction of death and a triumph for the life of the person. . . . In a way that is perceptible and experiential, the Christian in his daily life repudiates the autonomy of natural survival; he rejects it as an end in itself in order to receive from God's love the gift of life, life as personal and loving communion with Him. Thus bodily asceticism defines in a tangible and concrete manner the eucharistic character of the Church's ethos, the way in which the eucharist, the holy communion, is extended into everyday life.<sup>26</sup>

---

25 See for example, Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010). For a Christian reflection on the relationship between mindfulness and the Christian faith see the video by UCLA research psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz, "Is Mindfulness Buddhist or Christian" at <http://cct.biola.edu/resources/is-mindfulness-buddhist-or-christian/> (accessed 2/15/2014).

26 Christos Yannaras, "The Asceticism of the Church and Individual Virtue," in Christos Yannaras and Chrestos Giannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, translated by Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 116, 117. For another interesting reflection on the Church's response to individualism see John Alexander, "On Taking Attendance in Church," chapter four of his *The Secular Squeeze: Reclaiming Christian Depth in a Shallow World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

We also employ spiritual disciplines as a means of living out a Christian alternative to the world. Capuchin Franciscan Martin W. Pable, summarizing earlier reflections made by James Carroll, speaks of

the assumptions of our time that mortification calls into question: that consumption of things, pleasures, and experiences makes one happy; to sit still is to waste time; the goal of life is to have; whatever (or whoever) is old is obsolete; permanent commitment is impossible and undesirable; being radical means denying what went before.

Pable then suggests, with specific reference to the practice of celibacy, that "the psychology and asceticism of celibacy lie in the fact that it too is an act of radical doubt about a number of things that our culture takes for granted."<sup>27</sup> My conviction is that contemporary Western culture (at least) is entrapped by attachments to security, comfort, convenience, and pleasure. Intentional asceticism is an act of protest against these self-centered cultural values. It is a celebration of the insecure, the uncomfortable, the inconvenient, the unpleasant. A phrase I have been playing with of late is the phrase "fasting from oppression." What this means is that I am slowly learning to voluntarily restrict my engagement with (1) the products, practices and perpetrators of oppression, (2) the particular values which tend to govern oppressive tendencies in culture today, and (3) the more pervasive self-oriented spirit which lies behind all oppression. Needless to say, I suspect this practice could affect my approach to housing, food, transportation, clothing, "entertainment", and much more. Everyday asceticism may require only simple acts, but those simple acts can become very difficult at times.

Our everyday ascetical practice serves not only as an expression which distinguishes us *from* the world, but also enables us to engage in mission *in* the world. Paul writes of the hardships he endures for the sake of his mission,

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes

---

<sup>27</sup> Martin W. Pable, "Psychology and Asceticism of Celibacy" in *Celibate Loving: Encounter in Three Dimensions*, edited by Mary Ann Huddleston (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 12,13.

minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

Paul describes a constraint of life designed to facilitate (or as a by-product of) Christian mission. Donald Gelpi calls this approach to self-constraint "functional asceticism."<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, our considerations of self-constraint have less to do with acquiring virtues or modeling an alternative life, but rather respond to the question of what kind of life-style will best enable our transmission of the Gospel to others. Of course, living a Gospel life and transmitting a Gospel message are intrinsically bound together, but at times we may need to consider particular disciplines in light of our aim to be the presence of God in a given context. We may fast from some foods (or partake of foods we might not ordinarily partake), simply because we would join with our neighbors if we ate \_\_\_\_ (or abstained from \_\_\_\_). We may learn to put up with difficult people, simply for the chance to share life with them. We may even risk various levels of persecution for the sake of the Gospel (as so much of the everyday Christian world risks today). I repeat my point: asceticism can (and must) serve to distinguish Christians from the world. It can (and must) also enable us to serve the world.

### *Relationship with God*

As I have said above, though we may undertake ascetical practices with a view toward the transformation of ourselves or the wider community around us (and legitimately do so--these are

<sup>28</sup> See Donald Gelpi, *Functional Asceticism: A Guideline for American Religious* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1966). I briefly addressed this theme in my essay on "Getting Away To It All."

indeed *spiritual* ends), a primary end of our Christian ascetical practices is the development of our relationship with God as communities and individuals. In my essay "Getting Away To It All" I identified sincere pursuit of God and obedience to Scripture and God's call as essential aims of early monastic withdrawal. In my essay on "The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monasticism," I identified their first principle of true religion as "Sincere Love for God and Others are More Important than Religious Practices." My point here in this part of the present essay is that the development of a sincere relationship with God--as fostered through the practice of spiritual disciplines--is available to everybody and can be practiced in the midst of our everyday lives.

We do not need to relocate to an obscure desert to make space for God in our lives. The omnipresent God meets all of us right where we are and there is no real barrier to any Christian making some authentic space for the development of an intimate and undistracted love relationship with our Creator and Redeemer. First, there are real, tangible moments of physical space and time open to us everyday. I can withdraw into my bathroom and relieve myself of my bodily waste--and my sins through a brief confession--all at the same time. We all have the moments just prior to falling asleep where we can withdraw into our beds and be present to God and be aware of God's presence with us. For some, moments of transition from one place to another can provide space for sacred withdrawal (walking, riding a bicycle, driving). For others, dressing, eating, cleaning workspaces, or many other basic tasks can--when viewed afresh--become windows into the divine, "micro-cells" of monastic solitude.

Ascetical practice can open us to our dependence on God no matter how ordinary our lifestyle. There is nothing like hunger to remind us of our weakness and fasting does not need to take time, but rather might open up the time that would have been used for preparation and eating. What other simple practices could be used to remind us of our dependence upon God. Some have tried, at times, a practice of never buying impulse items, refusing to buy something for themselves when they are alone. This is a way of reminding oneself to wait for the pleasures that come from God. It is one small way, through

ascetical practice that we can open ourselves to dependence on God.

Preparation for eternity need not require a solemn monastic vow. According to Revelation 22:5, we humans will spend that time reigning for ever. Our time on earth, then, is a place of "training for reigning." The kindness we show our children, the willingness we have to inquire of God before a decision, the eagerness with which we hear another's point of view, all contribute to our everyday asceticism of preparation for our eternal home.

Constraining our experience in order to facilitate relationship sooner or later means spending time communicating. This is true of our relationships with other human being; it is true of our relationship with God. We abstain from the world. We devote ourselves to prayer. Cloistered nuns have one way to spend time communicating with God. Committed nannies have another. Perhaps they lift up worship to God with their children in family devotions. Perhaps they speak to God through brief journal entries at the end of the day, or through the mysterious speech of tongues as they change diapers. Perhaps they read Bible stories to their charges: a story for the child, listening to the Word for the adult. And then there is church. The practice of listening to the sermon and taking notes: listening to God through the word proclaimed. Speaking to God through the prayers of the people. Giving praise through song. Offering a little money--and our very souls--through the offertory. Sharing in the ministry of the Spirit through the testimonies and the ministry prayers of fellow sisters and brothers in the faith. We speak to God, we listen to God, and we sit still with God in the space-in-between speaking and listening through the ordinary rhythms of "going to church."<sup>29</sup> Ordinary church-going becomes everyday asceticism when we choose it, consciously, as a means of constraining our lives to communicate with the Creator.

We practice spiritual disciplines especially to foster and express our relationship with God. When everyday asceticism is seen in this perspective all kinds of small, ordinary, ascetical acts become

---

<sup>29</sup> I outline the dynamics of speaking, listening, and the space-in-between in my chapter on prayer in the *Brazos Introduction*, 314-320.

the expression of all our moods with God.<sup>30</sup> We make a small act of sacrifice to a stranger as a statement of gratitude to God. We have a song running through our mind as an expression of worship. We speak to someone at work and honestly declare just why we live the way we do. It is not just "witnessing." It is a choice to constrain your words into a form that will give glory to God. Ordinary asceticism for the sake of relationship with God. There are the things we give up for the sake of promoting holiness. There the altar calls and prayer-ministry opportunities we respond to, even when it's easier to give up and go home. There are those flash prayers lifted up when we think of the loved one in trouble, or the prayers of petition prayed over and over again: each one an act of asceticism performed to bring us closer to God. We confess our sin to our spouse and find that it is also a confession to God. We step out in some small act of obedience. We persevere through sufferings small and large. All of these are expressions of everyday asceticism, small acts of self-constraint undertaken to bring us closer to God.

Again on Change -

As I mentioned in Part One, 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. This is what revival is all about: change. With regard to change, a few things should probably be mentioned by way of contemporary psychological studies that I haven't already mentioned above. First, it is relevant to asceticism to know that will-power or self-control is an exhaustible resource. Human beings who dutifully resist temptations actually weaken their will-power over time. Better to flee temptation or try to find some other way of dealing with pressure on the will. As mentioned above, the human will can be trained, but it also can be drained. We must be wise about how we step into change.<sup>31</sup> Brothers Dan and Chip Heath have emphasized this point along with a number of other interesting features of change. In their books (*Made to Stick, Switch, Decisive*), they take psychological studies and apply the

30 Could we consider these relational moods another way of exploring Dan Albrecht's "ritual sensibilities"?

31 See, for example, <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/willpower-limited-resource.pdf> (accessed 2/22/14).

results for everyday people (especially everyday business people). They have found, for example, that change is facilitated when people look for the "bright spots," where things are working well; when people engage feelings rather than mere analysis; and when a strong leader encourages a group along.<sup>32</sup> Caroline Adams Miller affirms similar recommendations for setting and meeting goals: evaluating who we are at our best, nurturing good relationships, fostering grit in order to persevere and more.<sup>33</sup> In the end what we find is that reason, analysis and will-power can only take us so far in change. Emotion provides even more energy to support change. Relationships and rehabilitation secure change in the long run.

### **Conclusion: Everyday Constraint in God's Presence**

I concluded Part One of this Essay with some reflections on the notion of constraint. I suggested that the essential elements of early monastic asceticism were (1) constraint of human experience, and (2) the active presence of God. Early nuns and monks saw their spiritual disciplines, indeed their entire lives, as involving an intentional, self-directed constraint of experience. They eliminated various things from their lives (food, sleep, sex, and so on). They funneled their energies into particular channels. They renounced the world for the sake of Christ. Ascetics cooperated with God through the complexities of their forms of human living. And we can--and must--do the same today. Throughout Part Two, *Asceticism Applied*, I have been giving examples of how this constraint in God's presence can be embodied in the midst of everyday life. Consequently, there is no need at this point to go over all the features of constraint in God's presence. As I mentioned in my introduction to Part Two, I will use this concluding section to offer a few miscellaneous reflections that bear on the topic of asceticism applied.

#### *God's Presence with Us Today*

God is omnipresent, everywhere with us. That is part of what it means to be God. On the one

---

<sup>32</sup> See Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (Crown Business, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> See Caroline Adams Miller, *Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide* (Sterling, 2011).

hand, we wish that God would show up in wonderful, spectacular ways. We long to participate in the miraculous or to feel those "special moments" of God's manifest presence. And sometimes God does. But on the other hand, if we pay careful attention we discover that, to quote folksinger Peter Mayer's song, "the challenging thing becomes not to look for miracles but finding where there isn't one . . . cuz everything is holy now."<sup>34</sup>

There are a number of practices that can keep us in touch with this omnipresent God. None of them require a great deal of extra time, special equipment or advanced education. The Spirit of Christ is as close to us as our own breath (the word for *Spirit* in Hebrew and Greek also means "breath"). We take a single breath and remember that God's Spirit is within us. That is all we need to do: just breathe, aware of Who it is that gives us our breath in the first place and who is the Supreme Breath. The Jesus prayer is a well-known means of retaining presence with the omnipresent God. Constructed out of a few of verses of Scripture (Matthew 15:22; Luke 17:13; Luke 18:9-13, 35-42), frequent recitation of the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ [Son of God], have mercy on me [a sinner]") can serve to root us in the most fundamental truths of the Christian Gospel.<sup>35</sup> Some have explored taking "slow bites" as they eat, consciously aware of the food that nourishes them. Research shows that when we appreciate our food we actually get more nutrients out of it. So why not be nourished by our food and the presence of God at the same time? Jesus declares that insofar as we offer ourselves in service to the needy, we offer ourselves to God. We can make a practice of "seeing" the needy as the presence of God with us. Once again, it takes no extra commitment other than a shift in our awareness (and maybe our presence to the needy). The point of all this is to say that we can engage in a number of small activities that will remind us of God's presence and maintain our presence to God's presence. The everyday asceticism of simple devoted attention.

---

34 Peter Mayer, "Holy Now" from his album "Million Year Mind" 1999.

35 For a brief guide to praying the Jesus Prayer see my "Living the Jesus Prayer: A Brief Guide," available at <http://spiritualityshoppe.org/living-the-jesus-prayer-a-brief-guide/>.

## *Tiny Habits*

This brings me to my second miscellaneous comment, and that is to give mention of tiny habits. Perhaps of all the insights of positive psychology, B. J. Fogg's work on tiny habits is one of the most relevant for asceticism applied to the everyday. B. J. Fogg, a research psychology professor at Stanford, has been studying human change and motivation for over twenty years. He discovered that patterns of change often develop as a function of three factors: Motivation, Ability, and Trigger (MAT). If we have high motivation (hard to find at times) and high ability (hard to find at times) we can change something. We can do any number of push-ups every day to improve our strength. But that commitment might not last long. So why not simply do one more push-up every week. It does not need a lot of motivation and it requires only a small increase in ability. A "tiny habit." But *when* will be do those push-ups? This is where "trigger" comes in to play. I identify some already existing habit. Fogg uses the example of going to the bathroom. So we do a few push-ups each time we go to the bathroom (and one more each week). Tiny habits associated with ordinary, all-ready-established patterns. Now *this* can be life-changing. Every time I turn on my computer, I choose to praise the wisdom of God. I use my moments of undressing and redressing into pajamas to strip myself of my sins for the day and to reclothe myself in the mercy of Christ. I can go on and on. This is everyday asceticism at its most accessible. Withdrawal, abstinence, community, engagement, perseverance all can be explored using Fogg's principles. It only requires a little creativity.

## *The Radical Middle*

True, everyday asceticism requires only a little creativity. I believe that the means for sincere holiness are available to every Christian. No one is left out of God's grace. But then, this means that no one has an excuse not to be fully devoted to God. What goes around comes around.

And yet I am convinced that God is raising up new experiments in Christian living. The Spirit of God is inviting communities and individuals into forms of living that have been somewhat

unfamiliar, especially to Western Protestantism.<sup>36</sup> I suspect that these forms, as lived out by intentional communities and devout individuals, will require more serious commitments. I can imagine a return of "fasting" in some new forms as we seek to respond to issues of food justice and healthy living in the decades ahead. New conversations on celibacy are already taking place. Needless to say, we are currently witnessing a bit of a revival of commitments to "poverty" or simplicity among some Christians. I predict that the practice of persevering in the midst of marginal neighborhoods and persecuted populations will become increasingly important. After decades of burned out believers, we are now ready to choose into engagement with regular rhythms of prayer, intentional self-examination, and Rules of Life. Many have already left the modern individual approach to Christian living behind and are ready to explore (sometimes, painfully) new forms of community as a crucible of spiritual formation and growth. All this for the sake of embodying within ourselves the truth of the Gospel afresh. All this for the sake of modeling an alternative community and caring for the communities that surround us. All for the discovery of a deeper, more authentic, relationship with God than we have previously known. I am convinced that we have a lot to learn from the monks and nuns of the fourth century. I bless all the creative, imaginative work that is being done these days by people experimenting with ways to recover some of the perspectives and practices of the ancients. We have only begun, but it is a good beginning.

Jesus told his followers that "whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39; see Luke 17:33). And again he says, "whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25; see Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25) The message is clear, in all four Gospels: in order to live, we must die. Furthermore, there is an intentionality in the kind of "losing your life for my sake" described here. This is the essence of

---

<sup>36</sup> For reflections on some of that history see, for example, Ivan Kauffman, *Follow Me: A History of Christian Intentionality* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2009); Greg Peters, *Reforming the Monastery: Protestant Theologies of the Religious Life* (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).

asceticism: the willing constraint of our experience for God's sake. Will we choose true life through a voluntary death of the shallow, comfortable life with which we are so comfortable? Or will we choose to hold onto the things we take to be life, but are really death? That is the question of asceticism old and new.