

# Spiritual Formation and Elitism: Reflections on Early Councils and Contemporary Practice

by Evan B. Howard

I am sure you have felt it at one time or another. I know I have. You reconnect with a Christian friend or friends from the past, and in the process of them telling you "what God has been doing in my life lately" you find yourself wondering about your own spiritual life. They read *this* book and have started doing *these* practices (or they went to *this* conference and had *this* experience) and now they feel that they are finally living the Christian life. Or they *really* took the dive: sold their car, quit their full-time job, and moved in with an intentional community in the inner-city. And they tell you that this is what living the Gospel is all about. And there you sit, your two-year-old at your side. You can't imagine finding the time to read the book, let alone practicing *those* practices. You've never had an experience like *that*, and your spouse would never ever consider joining an intentional community in the inner-city. Well then, perhaps you'll just settle for second-rate Christianity.

Conversations like these are subtle expressions of the age-old problem of 'elitism.' Elitism is when one segment of the Body is regarded for some reason as "higher" than others to the detriment of the unity of that Body. It is one thing to honor differences in gifts and maturity. It is quite another to make unfair expectations of brothers and sisters. The apostle Paul [following the lead of Jesus] consistently opposed religious elitism.<sup>1</sup> And I believe that we should do the same today.

Over the years I have heard concerns that the spiritual formation movement--and even more the new monastic movement--are guilty of fostering this very sin. The practices we promote do not pass the "soccer-mom" test: namely that our vision of Christian discipleship must be able to be lived by an ordinary soccer mom. The experiences we highlight are inaccessible to the run-of-the-mill Christian.

The level of commitment required for such an abandonment of the world is overmuch and perhaps even

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matthew 6:1-18; 23:1-32; Romans 14:1-23; 1 Corinthians 14:1-40; Galatians 2:11-14; Colossians 2:16-23.

inappropriate.<sup>2</sup> In our eagerness to promote spiritual growth, are we in the spiritual formation movement in danger of alienating some of our brothers and sisters from their sense of belonging in the family of Christ? Whether guilty or not, those of us who wish to advance the cause of authentic formation in Christ are obliged to face the concerns regarding elitism head-on. For to fail on this count would really mean to promote a Christian de-formation.

Needless to say, as my reference to Paul indicates, the problem of elitism is not new. Indeed, elitist factions have plagued the Church its entire history. Pentecostal experiences, utopian communities, Method-ist practices, and more have all been exalted to the point of creating spiritual elites of one form or another. And of course, monastic culture has struggled with elitism perhaps more than any other expression of the Christian faith.

Some traditions resolve the tensions of elitism by "lowering the bar" for everyone. Others raise the bar for all, assuming that all Christians are called to live a fully separated and committed life.<sup>3</sup> The monastic solution--or more technically, the solution for those who recognize a role for "religious life"--is to offer two bars: one for the ordinary, married, working, believer; and a second, perhaps "higher," bar for those who choose to renounce many of the ordinary constraints of life in order to devote themselves more fully to the direct pursuit of Christ and the Gospel. Needless to say, the monastic solution seems at first glance to be an open promotion of the sin of elitism.

But need it be? I think not. Furthermore, I think that careful reflection on the controversies and the councils of the fourth-century--when Christian identity was being definitively established in the midst of a changing world--might yield valuable wisdom regarding this question of elitism. While we

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2 See, for example Ben Witherington, "The Normal Christian Life" at <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/bibleandculture/2010/12/1-normal-christian-life-part-one> [through part-six]; Rick Langer, "Points of Unease with the Spiritual Formation Movement" in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 5/2 (Fall 2012) 182-206; other critiques of nm?

3 I think Luther (particularly in his reflections on monastic vows) would be an historical example of a lowered-bar approach. Calvin raised the bar higher than did Luther, expressing higher expectations of the average Christian. See Greg Peters, *Reforming the Monastery: Protestant Theologies of the Religious Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014) 19-47 for a treatment of Luther and Calvin. Though a monk, Basil actually aimed at encouraging all Christians toward perfection. On Basil, see for example, Charles Frazee, "Anatolian Asceticism in the Fourth Century: Eustathius of Sebastea and Basil of Caesarea" *The Catholic Historical Review* 66/1 (January 1980) 16-33 and Augustine Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000).

might not affirm every Canon of every Council, a reading of the spirit of the whole reveals a sense of authentic, evangelical, and "true Christianity" which guides every believer to his or her highest calling and guards the Church against elitist factions.

I will first briefly summarize the context and conclusions of five controversies or councils: the council at Gangra in Cappadocia, the Messalian and the Origenist controversies stemming from the Middle-east, and the Semi-Pelagian and the Jovinian controversies in the West.<sup>4</sup> Then I will draw together a few relevant themes, trying to read the spirit of the whole in light of earlier Christian sentiment. Finally, I will offer a few reflections both Biblical and practical as I consider our advancement of both spiritual formation and new monasticisms today.

## 1. Gangra

In the mid-fourth century thirteen bishops met in Gangra, Cappadocia, to decide on "certain pressing matters of ecclesiastical business."<sup>5</sup> It seems that a certain bishop Eustathius was exercising influence over a number of churches and intentional communities in such a way that some believers were drawing away from the greater Church and threatening the unity of the Body of Christ. Followers of Eustathius were censuring marriage, claiming that only celibate Christians would enter the kingdom of God. They celebrated worship and coordinated their offerings separate from the established church. They rejected the clothing and hairstyles of ordinary life, donning a unisex form of monastic dress. They developed their own--and more rigorous--forms of fasting. In sum, they sought to live a "high bar" life--and then to claim--that "real" Christians were only those who were aiming for this high bar of obedience, renouncing family and culture to follow Jesus wholeheartedly (cf. Matthew 19:21).<sup>6</sup>

Eustathian Christianity was not new. Irenaeus and others had earlier condemned such elitist

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4 Space prevents me covering such other relevant groups or figures as the council at Ancyra, the Ebionites, Euchites, Montanists, and Hieracus in Egypt.

5 The translation I am using here is from O. Larry Yarbrough, translator and editor, "Canons from the Council of Gangra" in Vincent L. Wimbush, editor, *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1990) 450.

6 On Eustathius see, Frazee, "Anatolian Asceticism"; Elm *Virgins of God*, part I; and Anna M. Silvas, *The Ascetikon of St. Basil the Great*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 19-98.

tendencies under the label of "Enkratism,"<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as the fourth-century Church explored what it meant to be a Christian in a changing world, various experiments gave new expression to earlier rigorist and separatist impulses, and the Eustathian movement spread.

The response of the council of Gangra was firm in its rejection of any form of Christian elitism. The council wholeheartedly affirmed marriage and family life. "If any fail to provide for their children and, under the pretext of asceticism, neglects them, let such a one be anathema," the canons declare. Yet at the same time Gangra did *not* condemn the institution of religious life as such. In fact the council is explicit in its support of those who would consecrate themselves wholeheartedly to Christ. I quote:

We write these things not to cut off those in the church of God who wish to practice asceticism according to the Scriptures but [to cut off] those who undertake the practice of asceticism to the point of arrogance, both by exalting themselves over those who lead a simpler life and by introducing novel ideas. . . For this reason we admire virginity [when practiced] with humility; . . . we also approve of withdrawal from worldly affairs [when it is done] with humility. . . . and, to sum up, we pray that the things transmitted by the divine Scriptures and the apostolic traditions be done in the church.<sup>8</sup>

The family of Basil of Caesarea--and indeed Basil himself, devoted themselves to establishing forms of religious life along the lines of the council of Gangra. Orthodox monasticism has been essentially Basilian to this day.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Messalian

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7 A good history of Enkratism can be found in David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2007) 97-129. See also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press 2008/1998) 83-102; and Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, "Asceticism and Anthropology: *Enkrateia* and "Double Creation" in Early Christianity in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, editors, *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 127-46.

8 Canons of the Council of Gangra, Epilogue.

9 The relationship of Basil's *Ascetikon* (Rules) to Gangra is documented in Silvas, *The Ascetikon*. Though Basil never really founded a monastic "order" in the sense that we think of it today, his work at planting monasteries, his careful attention toward bringing order into the monastic culture of Cappadocia, and the influence of the *Ascetikon* make him a foundational figure in Orthodox monasticism. See, for example, Timothy [Kallistos] Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1963) 47.

The Messalian controversy emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries as Syrian faith struggled to find expression in Greek culture.<sup>10</sup> Doctrine, language, and community were all considered as the controversy developed. Messalianism, however understood or misunderstood, was officially condemned in the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431, another expression of the Church's response to elitisms.

The term "Messalian," simply refers to prayer; the Messalians were *those who pray*. You see, the Messalians took a strong view of original sin. Initial conversion alone (symbolized in baptism), was insufficient to purge our sin away. Prayer and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit were necessary to purge the believer of sin and the influence of the enemy. Consequently, their primary focus, was the pursuit of the Spirit. Dreams, visions, and prophecies received maximal attention. Sacramental rituals received minimal attention. Those who experienced the restoring work of the Spirit were assumed to have transcended the dangers of sin, and were no longer subject to the strictures of Christian culture. Whereas Eustathianism was an *ascetical* movement, Messalianism was a *mystical* movement.

And just as the Church would not approve of ascetical elitism, so it refused to allow any form of mystical elitism. The council of Ephesus declared that "those convicted of this heresy are no more to be permitted to have the rule of our monasteries, lest tares be sown and increase."<sup>11</sup> Clearly there was trouble when "super spiritual" Christians exercised influence over communities of those who were trying to devote themselves to God's service. The Body of Christ--and the health of the monasteries themselves--suffered. And yet, the council did *not* disband the monasteries. Unlike Martin Luther, this option did not even enter into their minds. Ephesus *permitted monastic distinctions, but prevented elitist divisions*.

### 3. Origenist

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10 On the Messalian controversy see Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

11 H. R. Percival, trans. "The Definition of the Holy and Ecumenical Synod of Ephesus against the Impious Messalians." in P. Schaff and H. Wace editors, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils, The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series II, Volume 14* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900) 240.

The Origenist controversy had a long and somewhat convoluted history.<sup>12</sup> It is the early emergence of the controversy that concerns us here. Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, who, wishing to curb pagan influences within Christian circles, issued an Easter letter in 399 attacking the "heresy" of "anthropomorphism." The Christian God is incorporeal, proclaimed Theodosius, and it is inappropriate to imagine such a God in terms of human or material forms. This letter was read in the midst of a group of monks. John Cassian, who happened to be in this gathering, records the monks' response in the tenth of his *Conferences*. After the letter was read and explained, they all stood up to pray and Serapion, an old man, "got so confused in his mind during the prayers, when he realized that the anthropocentric image of the Godhead which he had always pictured to himself while praying had been banished from his heart, that he suddenly broke into the bitterest of tears and heavy sobbing and, throwing himself to the ground with a loud groan, cried out: "Woe is me, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address."<sup>13</sup>

Serapion was not the only monk affected by this demand for thoroughly purified prayer. Scores of monks converged upon Theodosius demanding a reversal of his position. And in fact, he *did* recant. More than that, Theodosius embarked on a formal campaign against certain elements of the teachings of Origen that were used to promote this elitist approach to prayer. Underlying the campaign against Origenism was a concern to secure access to God for all believers, no matter how simple of mind. Yes, God transcends earthly form, but this same God condescends such that he can be approached by means of the simplest of images. Once again, the decision of the Church was one that sought to appreciate the most exalted theologies while at the same time respecting the sincere faith of the least member of the Body.

#### 4. Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian

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12 On the history of the Origenist Controversy see William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 359-63; and Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

13 Cassian, *Conferences* 10.3.4. See Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, Ancient Christian Writers (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1997) 373.

The Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversies identify debates emerging from the late fourth-century until the council of Orange in 529.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversies were about theology: the doctrine of sin and the relationship between divine grace and human agency. On the other hand these were controversies regarding spirituality and elitism. Thus Peter Brown, in his biography of Augustine, writes that "the victory of Augustine over Pelagius was also a victory for the average good Catholic layman [or soccer mom?] of the Later Empire, over an austere, reforming ideal."<sup>15</sup> And yet those who won this victory for the cause of divine grace-- Augustine in the early fifth century, and Caesarius of Arles in the early sixth--were both monks: each of whom were instrumental in founding monastic communities within their own spheres of influence.<sup>16</sup> The question of the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian controversies was never really one of dismantling the monastic way of life out of respect for the average good Catholic layperson. There was no sense of promoting *only* those practices or ways of life which might be available to that layperson. The concern of Augustine and Caesarius--beyond faithfulness to Scripture--was to free lay and religious alike from the undue demands of expectations regarding Christian perfection and the role which human effort played, and thus to empower each, within their own spheres of life, to pursue God as best they can.

## 5. Jovinian (393)

The last controversy I will review is the Jovinian controversy.<sup>17</sup> Jovinian (d. @405) was a Roman monk whose late fourth-century preaching was influential among the aristocracy of Rome. He proclaimed a thoroughly anti-elitist message: both celibate and married earn the same merit before

14 On Pelagianism see the treatment of nature and grace in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Volume I, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971) 278-331; and Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010/1968). On Semi-Pelagianism see Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Responsibility: A Study in the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, North American Patristic Society Patristic Monograph Series 15 (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996).

15 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000) 349.

16 For Augustine's view of religious life see, for example, Adolar Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1986); George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). For the monastic contributions of Caesarius of Arles see *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles*, Studies in Mediaeval History, New Series (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1960).

17 On the Jovinianist Controversy see David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

God, eating with thanksgiving is just as virtuous as fasting, and there is a single reward for all believers. By now you can probably recognize these themes common to the orthodox opposition to Eustathianism, Messalianism and other elitist "heresies." And yet there was one slight difference. Equality. Jovinian claimed not merely that the "secular" and the "religious" callings were both legitimate, but also that they were of *equal* honor or merit. And this claim was ultimately just one step too far for some. One by one, pope Siricius of Rome, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, and both Pelagius and Augustine refuted his views. Synods in both Rome and Milan were called in 393 to condemn Jovinian. And, of course, we know that even today clerical celibacy is the standard in the Roman Catholic tradition, a standard that reaches back to this very controversy. In spite of the fact that both Pelagius and Augustine offered moderate alternatives to Jovinian's views, a form of elitism--perhaps even a moderate form of encratism--received the official approval of the Church.

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So now, having provided a sketch of each of these situations, let me identify a couple principles of evangelical "true religion" that appear--as I read the spirit of the whole--to guide the Church as it shepherds our relationships with God and each other:<sup>18</sup>

First, all are called to holiness. The Trappist monk and the soccer mom alike are asked to "be ye perfect." *Whoever* loves me, Jesus says,--both lay and religious--will obey my commandments. Our life-practices--whether commanding demons or changing diapers--all contribute to our universal response to God's universal call to holiness. None can escape Christ's demands. None can claim fulfillment by mere practice or experience. The Gospel, with all of its challenge and hope, is upon us all.

Second, people are different. Different circumstances, different capacities, different interests, different levels of spiritual maturity. And God loves all of us, offering us sanctification and spiritual

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, these controversies were also exegetical debates. And the details of the exegetical debates were quite sophisticated. Ultimately a full and evangelical recovery of early monastic reflection will require a review and evaluation of this debate with regards to the key passages relevant to each particular issue as well as to those passages which find their way into the debate again and again. But that is a task for another day.



formation just the way we are. I talked to one young man this week who, after graduating from Wheaton and serving successfully as a youth pastor, has discerned that he just might offer his best service to God as a carpenter. He struggles with feeling "less than" his peers who have devoted themselves to "full time Christian work" and blog about the latest theological ideas and spiritual practices. I was also talking this week to a middle-aged woman who used to work for Frontiers missions and who, when I related the concern of some that spiritual practices are not always achievable for the soccer mom, stood up on a nearby rock and loudly proclaimed, "But we are not all soccer-moms!" Then she displayed her ring, showing me that she had recently made a commitment to celibacy and a somewhat solitary life of prayer. Both of these individuals are mature Christians. Yet each discerns a different calling in life, and each will engage in different practices and encounter different experiences as they step forward. The young man wishes to be welcomed, not distanced by an elitist spiritual culture. The middle-aged woman wishes to have permission by her Christian culture to pursue a somewhat unique and more spiritually-focused life among the people and the mission of God. People are different.

And that brings me to my conclusion. If I read the controversies and the counsels accurately (at least when they have functioned at their best), I hear a desire to permit but not prescribe; to invite, but not impose; to honor, but not to exalt. And this, I think, is a wise option for us in the spiritual formation movement today.