

Evangelical Vision - Eremitical Tradition, Part I

The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monastic and Related Expressions

If there is any element that is characteristic of evangelical spirituality it is the emphasis on "true religion." D. Bruce Hindmarsh, in his survey of the contours of evangelical spirituality, for example, states that evangelical piety was "characterized by a focus on 'true religion' over against nominal affiliation to church establishments and a religion of law and custom."¹ Evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently distinguished "true" or "real" Christianity from a number of counterfeits. Scottish theologian Henry Scougal (1650-1678), for example, introduced his influential *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* with a discussion of common "mistakes about religion." The errors he enumerates include, for example, viewing religion as merely "orthodox notions and opinions," considering the faith to be a matter of "external duties," and thinking of it primarily "in the affections, in rapturous heats and ecstatic devotion." Scougal argues that all these have a "resemblance of piety and at the best are but means of obtaining it, or particular exercises of it." "But certainly religion is quite another thing," he proclaims. *True* religion is, as he puts it, "an union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul; or, in the Apostle's phrase, *it is Christ formed within us*. Briefly, I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed, than by calling it *a divine life*."²

This estimate of religion as something which is not--which indeed cannot and ought not be--identified with particular doctrinal nuances, religious experiences, ecclesiastical affiliations, or spiritual

1 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "Contours of Evangelical Spirituality," in Glen Scorgie, ed. *Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 147. I have made a similar claim in my own summary of evangelical spirituality. See Evan B. Howard, "Evangelical Spirituality" in *Four Views of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

2 Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868), 4-7.

disciplines, but is rather identified with a sincere relationship with Christ and others is, I believe, one of the important aims not only of evangelicalism, but also of the early monastic experiments of the fourth century.³ Many are aware of the intensity and extremes to which fourth-century desert elders pursued their faith.⁴ The desert elders themselves were aware of the dangers of those extremes. Like good athletes of the faith, however, most viewed their spiritual disciplines as training for the actual combat with the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to the finish line of victory and full maturity in Christ. Others were not so wise, however. Some sought to mimic the austerities or the experiences of the religious life without really comprehending their meaning. Consequently, we read in the literature of early monasticism stories of the "old men" or the wise ones who creatively deconstruct the false religious lives of those who were less wise. What I find, as I read the literature of fourth-century monasticism, is not a program of formal teaching about true religion, much as one might find in Scougal's treatise. Rather, as I read carefully between the lines of this odd collection of stories and aphorisms, I hear a familiar voice, a voice calling me beyond mere experience, doctrine and affiliation to something more, something "real." This literature speaks of the early monastic value of true religion. As Dominican historian Simon Tugwell argues:

Although the casual reader of the literature from the Egyptian desert is likely to come away feeling that the monks were primarily interested in excesses of austerity and in fantastic battles with demons, this is not really the kernel of their message. The austerities, whatever their significance may have been in earlier kinds of asceticism, are not viewed by the main tradition of the Egyptian desert as a way to become superhuman, nor as ideals in themselves. They are very firmly subordinated to much more fundamental values, such as humility and fraternal

3 Indeed, Bradley Naissif, in his response to my treatment of evangelical spirituality, specifically mentions this similarity between patristic (and even early monastic) interests and the evangelical interest in true religion. See Bradley Naissif, "Response to Evan Howard" in *Four Views of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 188-89.

4 For surveys of desert Christianity see, for example, Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, 2003), 1-81, Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), and especially William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

charity."⁵

By reading and reflecting on these accounts--some of them strange and foreign to us today--we can learn something of the character of true religion from a fresh perspective. For this reason I have collected a few stories under a few headings appropriate to the consideration of true religion. I have only given a brief sample of this literature. Nonetheless what I offer is, I hope, sufficient to give the reader a taste of the heart of early monasticism and its resonance with this evangelical concern.

1. The Sincere Love for God and Others is More Important than Religious Practices

It is clear that while Christian scriptures support the employment of religious practices like prayer, fasting, or almsgiving, they speak with caution about just how these practices are to be used. Our religious practices are not to detract from the primary aim of sincere love to God and neighbor. Jesus denounces those who misunderstand this point proclaiming,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:25-28; see also Jesus' commentary on the religious practices of prayer, fasting and alms in Matthew 6:1-18).

Likewise Paul declares, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. . . . If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body that I may boast [or hand over my body to be burned] but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). What is clear from these and many other passages of Scripture is that true Christian religion is

⁵ Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1985), 19.

a matter of sincere relationship with God and others. It must not be falsely identified with the religious practices or experiences or institutions which enable the pursuit of this faith. Let us see how this characteristic of true religion is discussed particularly in samples from the alphabetical collection of the *Sayings* of the desert fathers.⁶

"One Day Saint Epiphanius sent someone to Abba Hilarion with this request, 'Come, and let us see one another before we depart from the body.' When he came, they rejoiced in each other's company. During their meal, they were brought a fowl; Epiphanius took it and gave it to Hilarion. Then the old man said to him, 'Forgive me, but since I received the habit I have not eaten meat that has been killed.' Then the bishop answered, 'Since I took the habit, I have not allowed anyone to go to sleep with a complaint against me and I have not gone to rest with a complaint against anyone.' The old man replied, 'Forgive me, your way of life is better than mine.'" (*Sayings* "Epiphanius" #4 p. 57)

"A brother questioned Abba Hierax saying, 'Give me a word. How can I be saved?' The old man said to him, 'Sit in your cell, and if you are hungry, eat, if you are thirsty, drink; only do not speak evil of anyone, and you will be saved.'" (*Sayings*, "Hierax" #1, p. 104)

Abba Antony the Great summarized the *process* of the monastic life as follows: "Always have the fear of God before your eyes. Remember him who gives death and life. hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. renounce this life, so that you may be alive to God. Remember what you have promised God, for it will be required of you on the day of judgment. Suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness, be watchful and sorrowful; weep and groan in your heart; test yourselves, to see if you are worthy of God; despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your souls." Now notice how

⁶ Quotations are taken from Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975). Citations will be listed in parentheses under the name and entry number along with the page number in Ward's translation.

he summarized the *attainment* of the monastic life [or shall we call it the *reception* of the authentically monastic life?]-in the saying just prior to that: "Abba Anthony said, 'I no longer fear God, but I love Him. For love casts out fear.'" (*Sayings "Anthony" #32-33 p. 8*)

The most important matter of the monastic life is not the process (fasting, vigils, and so on). It is the aim-- of love. It is for this reason that Antony answers Abba Amoun's question regarding reputation, not as a statement of pride, but as an opportunity to proclaim what is truly important in the Christian life:

"Abba Amoun of Nitria came to see Abba Anthony and said to him, 'Since my rule is stricter than yours how is it that your name is better known amongst men than mine is?' Abba Anthony answered, 'It is because I love God more than you.'" (*Sayings "Amoun" #1 p. 31*)

I will conclude my treatment of this characteristic--that sincere love is more important than religious practices and such--with a few more quotes from the *Sayings*:

"One day Abba Longinus questioned Abba Lucius about three thoughts saying first. 'I want to go into exile.' The old man said to him, 'If you cannot control your tongue, you will not be an exile anywhere. Therefore control your tongue here, and you will be an exile.' Next he said to him, 'I wish to fast.' The old man replied, 'Isaiah said, "If you bend your neck like a rope or a bulrush that is not the fast I will accept, but rather, control your evil thoughts.'" (cf. Isaiah 58) He said to him a third time, 'I wish to flee from men.' The old man replied, 'If you have not first of all lived rightly with men, you will not be able to live rightly in solitude.'" (*Sayings "Longinus" #1 p. 122*)

"Abba Poemen heard of someone who had gone all week without eating and then had lost his temper. The old man said, 'He could do without food for six days, but he could not cast out anger.'" (*Sayings, "Poemen" #203 p. 194*)

"They said of Abba Or that he never lied, nor swore, nor hurt anyone, nor spoke without necessity."

(*Sayings*, "Or" #2 p. 246).

"He [Poemen] also said, 'To throw yourself before God, not to measure your progress, to leave behind all self-will; these are the instruments for the work of the soul.'" (*Sayings* "Poemen" #36 p. 172)⁷

2. Our Character is More Important than Our Position or Credentials or even, at times, the Finer Points of Our Doctrinal Disputes

The authority of true religion is not exercised through a manipulation of ecclesiastical position or intellectual prowess, but rather is expressed through the recognition of the Spirit's ministry through the natural (and humble) service of one to another. Jesus corrects his disciples during a dispute saying,

You know among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

Similarly the first epistle of Peter encourages authority-wielders (elders)

"to tend the flock of God that is in your charge exercising the oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you do it--not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples of the flock . . . And all of you must clothe yourselves

⁷ See also *Sayings*, "Agathon" #8, "Theodore of Pherme" #11, "Isidore the Priest" #4 (pp. 106-07), "Joseph of Thebes" #1, "Cassian" #1, "Poemen" #27, "Serapion" #4, "Syncretica" #16. Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 90, and the indices of the literature under love of God. Gabriel Bunge, in his summary of this aspect of Evagrius of Ponticus' thought on prayer states, "Nevertheless, just as the "letter" cannot exist at all without the "spirit" or the "meaning", in the same way mere quantity does not yet make prayer "praiseworthy", that is, pleasing to God, without the corresponding inner "quality", its Christian content as the Lord himself has taught us." (see Gabriel Bunge, *Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Patristic Tradition*, trans. Michael J. Miller [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002], 121.).

with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" (1 Peter 5:2-5)

Furthermore, Christian scriptures encourage a delicate balance of concern for doctrinal precision. On the one hand we are encouraged to hold fast to the faith delivered from the apostles (see, for example, 1 John 4:1-3). Yet at the same time we are urged not to become overly concerned with factions and controversies. The first epistle of Timothy urges Timothy's circle "not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1: 3-5. See also, for example, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; 1 Timothy 6:4; 2 Timothy 2:23; Titus 3:9). Let us see how these matters are addressed in the context of fourth-century monastic life.

First, there is the question of one's relationship to position or authority. On the one hand, we know from comments in the literature that a number of monks were priests, and a few (for example, Abbas Ammonas, Apphy, and Epiphanius) were bishops. Yet the same literature also documents a monastic reluctance toward--and even avoidance of--ordination. Two monks of Nitria went so far as to cut off their ears to avoid ordination [self-mutilation disqualified one from consideration], and Abba Ammonius threatened to cut off his tongue for the same reason.⁸ It is difficult to determine the various factors that contributed to this reluctance. Monastic historian William Harmless suggests the following explanations of Pachomius' act of hiding to escape ordination:

The lives stress that Pachomius thought that ordination would be divisive, a cause of jealousy and a pursuit of honors. That is certainly a plausible concern. But the sources do not mention what may have been an underlying issue: namely was Pachomius fleeing ordination to prevent interference from the local bishop? There is no indication of any immediate conflict between

⁸ See Norman Russell, trans. *The Lives of the Desert Fathers (= Historia Monachorum)* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), "The Monks of Nitria" XX.14 pp. 106-07; and Palladius, *The Lausaic History of Palladius* (Willits, CA: Eastern Orthodox Books, n.d.), "Ammonius" XI.1-3 pp. 38-39. Hereafter reference to these two works will be abbreviated in parentheses respectively as *Lives* and *Lausaic History*. Macarius resisted early in his career, but then submitted to ordination in order to make the Eucharist available to his monks (see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 195).

Pachomius and the local hierarchy, nor of any sectarian feeling. Nonetheless, Pachomius's monastic system enjoyed considerable autonomy.⁹

Monastic indifference toward credentials can be perceived not only in their reluctance toward ordination, but also in their treatment of those who perhaps tried to push their academic or ecclesiastical weight around a bit too much. One story involves Evagrius of Ponticus, a brilliant scholar who eventually articulated a synthesis of monastic theology. In this story, however, we find Evagrius as a young upstart who spoke a little too much and perhaps with more confidence than he ought in the midst of a simple gathering of monks:

"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) (*Sayings "Evagrius" #7 p. 64*)¹⁰

Monastic expressions have, throughout history, often lived at the fringes of the ecclesial hierarchy. For some it offered a greater freedom to pursue a more singularly devoted course of vision. For others, it kept vainglory and other vices in check. Perhaps I am wrong, but somewhere within this, I sense a concern to ensure that religion is kept "true."

It is difficult to summarize the early monastic communities' approach to Scripture, doctrinal orthodoxy, and theological speculation. We must remember that the canon of Scripture was still in the process of being solidified. Furthermore, the fourth century was a period of tremendous theological upheaval. Christians were arguing about--excommunicating and persecuting one another over--some of

⁹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 122.

¹⁰ For some interesting examples of the monks' responses in the midst of theological disputes in the alphabetical *Sayings* see, for example, Gelasius #4; Phocas #1; Poemen #78.

the sharpest theological disputes in Christian history.¹¹ And yet these controversies are conspicuously absent from the early monastic literature. There are a few affirmations of the orthodoxy of an individual (for example, Athanasius' description of Antony in the *Life of Antony*) or a community (for example that of Oxyrhynchus in *Lives* V.4,6). There is also reason to believe that there was a diversity of doctrinal affiliations within the early monastic communities themselves.¹² Sorting out the ins and outs of monastic doctrinal loyalties and influences is beyond this essay and is really--in light of the insights being revealed through recent Coptic translations--a task for the future of early monastic scholarship.¹³

What we can be certain of, however, is the monks' high regard for Scripture. Abba Epiphanius stated it clearly and succinctly, "Ignorance of Scriptures is a precipice and a deep abyss." (*Sayings*, Epiphanius #11 p. 58). Douglas Burton-Christie has done a marvelous job of documenting the early monastic appreciation for Scripture.¹⁴ Indeed, it is because of their high view of Scripture that they saw so much importance in *living* it. For the early monks, one's understanding of the faith was not merely a matter of language and concepts, but of life and character. A couple of stories illustrate this point:

"Abba Abraham told of a man of Scetis who was a scribe and did not eat bread. A brother came to beg him to copy a book. The old man whose spirit was engaged in contemplation, wrote, omitting some phrases and with no punctuation. The brother, taking the book and wishing to punctuate it, noticed that words were missing. So he said to the old man, 'Abba, there are some phrases missing.' The old man said to him, 'Go, and practice first that which is written, then come back and I will write the rest.'"

(*Sayings* "Abraham" #3 p. 34)

11 For a survey of these controversies and their relationship to early monasticism, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 25-49.

12 See, for example, the relevant essays in James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

13 Once again I would recommend William Harmless' *Desert Christians*, as an excellent introductory discussion of these issues. Not merely in his chapter on controversies, but in his treatment of each form of literature, Harmless presents a fair assessment of the various interpretations of the issues at hand.

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

"Early in his career, he [Abba Pambo] went to one of the elders to learn a psalm. Having heard the first verse of Psalm 38 ("I said that I will take heed to thy way, that I offend not with my tongue"), he departed without staying to hear the second verse. He said to himself" [T]his one will suffice, if I can practically acquire it." More than six months passed before he returned to consult the elder again. When he did so, the old man reproved Pambo for staying away so long. But Pambo told him that the reason for his long absence was that he had been fully occupied with the verse he had been given. Even now, he said, "he had not yet learnt to practice the verse of the Psalm."" (cited in Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 156)

Douglas Burton Christie speculates on the early monastic reticence toward Scriptural discussion, saying "The reasons for their refusal to discuss the texts were varied: a general sense that one was treading on holy ground, genuine humility in that it was beyond the competence of even the greatest of the elders to inquire into their meaning, and a sense that more words about the meaning of a particular text would not contribute as much toward clarifying its meaning as a humble attempt to practice it."¹⁵ This, to me, is another example of the concern for true religion. It is all well and important to adhere to the faith of the Scriptures. But we must be careful, particularly in times of such heated debates, lest our attempts to clarify the meaning of the text distracts us from the understanding that comes from living the text. As one abba stated, bemoaning the decay of monastic life, "The prophets wrote books. Then came our Fathers who put them into practice. Those who came after them learnt them by heart. Then came the present generation, who have written them out and put them into their window seats without using them" (cited in Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 116).

3. The Application of Religious Practices Can Legitimately Vary a Great Deal

While the heart of the Christian faith is the same for all (a living relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit), we appropriate that heart-life differently as different individuals and

¹⁵ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 155.

communities. While Christian morality is essentially the same for all, such is not the case for many practices we use to foster or express our faith (such as eating and fasting habits, prayer particulars, accountability relationships, and so on). What one needs for spiritual growth may not be what another needs. The practices which serve one person or community at a given time may be unhelpful to another, or even to the same person at a different time. Thus Paul encourages the Thessalonian believers to "admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them." Paul also is careful to remind his readers that practices regarding food and drink vary for different people with different concerns and that consequently, for the sake of love and true religion, one's particular practice should be considered secondary to the main thing: the glory of God. "So, whether you eat or drink, whatever you do everything for the glory of God" (see 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:23-32). Let's see how the fourth-century nuns and monks acknowledged the need for diversity in the developing spiritual maturity of the individuals in their communities.

"A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man [Anthony] said to him, 'Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it.' So he did. The old man then said, 'Shoot another,' and he did so. Then the old man said, 'Shoot yet again,' and the hunter replied, 'If I bend my bow so much I will break it.' Then the old man said to him, 'It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs.' When he heard these words the hunter was pierced by compunction and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened." (*Sayings*, "Anthony the Great" #13 pp. 3-4)

"A brother questioned an old man saying, 'What good work should I do so that I may live?' The old man said, 'God knows what is good. I have heard it said that one of the Fathers asked Abba Nisterus the

great, the friend of Abba Anthony, and said to him, "What good work is there that I could do?" He said to him, "Are not all actions equal" Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. David was humble, and God was with him. Elias loved interior peace and God was with him. So do whatever you see your soul desires according to God and guard your heart." (Sayings "Nisterus" #2 p. 154)

"It was related of Abba Netras, the disciple of Abba Silvanus, that when he dwelt in his cell on Mount Sinai, he treated himself prudently with regard to the needs of his body; but when he became bishop of Pharan, he curbed himself with great austerities. His disciple said to him, 'Abba, when we were in the desert, you did not practice such asceticism.' The old man said to him, 'There in the desert, I had interior peace and poverty and I wished to manage my body so as not to be ill and not need what I did not have. But now I am in the world and among its cares and even if I am ill here, there will be someone to look after me and so I do this in order not to destroy the monk in me.'" (Sayings "Netras" #1 pp. 156-57)

This story of "an abba from Rome" (probably Arsenius) is long, but is a classic -

'There was a monk from Rome who lived at Scetis near the church. He has a slave to serve him. The priest, knowing his bad health and the comfort in which he used to live, sent the Roman monk what he needed of whatever anyone brought to the church. Having lived twenty-five years at Scetis he had acquired the gift of insight and became famous. One of the great Egyptians heard about him and came to see him, thinking he would find him leading a life of great corporal austerity. He entered and greeted him. They said the prayer and sat down. Now the Egyptian saw he was wearing fine clothing, and that he possessed a bed with a coverlet and a small pillow. He saw that his feet were clean and shod in sandals. Noticing all this, he was shocked, because such a way of life is not usual in that district; much greater austerity is required. Now the old man had the gift of insight and he understood that he was

shocked, and so the monk said to him who served the him, 'We will celebrate a feast today for the abba's sake.' There were a few vegetables, and he cooked them and at the appointed hour, they rose and ate. The old man had a little wine also, because of his illness; so they drank some. When evening came, they recited the twelve psalms and went to sleep. They did the same during the night. On rising at dawn, the Egyptian said to him, 'Pray for me,' and he went away without being edified. When he had gone a short distance, the old man, wishing to edify him, sent someone to bring him back. On his arrival he received him once again with joy and asked him, 'Of what country are you?' He said, 'Egypt.' 'And of what city?' 'I am not a citizen at all.' 'And what was your work in the village?' 'I was a herdsman.' 'Where did you sleep?' He replied, 'In the field.' 'Did you have anything to lie upon?' He said, 'Would I go and put a bed under myself in a field?' 'But how did you sleep?' He said, 'On the bare ground.' The old man said next, 'What was your food in the fields and what wine did you drink?' He replied, 'Is there food and drink in the fields?' 'But how did you live?' 'I ate dry bread, and, if I found any, green herbs and water.' The old man replied, 'Great hardship! Was there a bath-house for washing in the village?' He replied, 'No, only the river when we wanted it.' After the old man had learnt all this and knew of the hardness of his former life, he told him his own former way of life when he was in the world, with the intention of helping him. 'I, the poor man whom you see, am of the great city of Rome and I was a great man in the house of the emperor.' When the Egyptian heard the beginning of these words, he was filled with compunction and listened attentively to what the other was saying. He [the old man] continued, 'Then I left the city and came to the desert. I whom you see had great houses and many riches and having despised them I have come to this little cell. I whom you see had beds all of gold with coverings of great value, and in exchange for that, God has given me this little bed and this skin. Moreover, my clothes were the most expensive kind and in their stead I wear these garments of no value. Again, at my table there was much gold and instead God has given me this little dish of vegetables and a cup of wine. There were many slaves to serve me and see how in exchange for that, God troubles this old man to serve me. Instead of the bath-house, I throw a little water over my feet and

wear sandals because of my weakness. Instead of music and lyres, I say the twelve psalms and the same at night; instead of the sins I used to commit I now say my rule of prayer. So then I beg you, abba, do not be shocked at my weakness.' Hearing this, the Egyptian came to his senses and said, 'Woe to me, for after so much hardship in the world, I have found ease; and what I did not have before, that I now possess. While after so great ease, you have come to humility and poverty.' Greatly edified, he withdrew, and he became his friend and often went to him for help. For he was a man full of discernment and the good odour of the Holy Spirit." (*Sayings*, "An Abba of Rome" #1 pp. 208-210)

Other stories could be shared,¹⁶ but the point is clear. The early anchorites were conscious to preserve authentic relationship with God and others. They refused to impose a particular set of practices upon any given individual. An individual's 'rule of life' was to be designed in the context of their own background, health, and maturity. Taking the breadth of a person's condition into consideration is what best serves the formation of people into the image and likeness of Christ. This is what true religion is about.

4. Although We Pursue Our Growth in Christ, Divine Grace is Required and Assumed

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in

¹⁶ See, for example, the Life of Syncletica on the variety of both ascetic practice and demonic attack (Elizabeth A. Castelli, trans. "Pseudo-Athanasius: The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" in Vincent L. Wimbush, editor, *Ascetic Behavior in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 265-311. For early communal wisdom see, for example, the accounts of Pachomius' and Theodore's leadership wisdom in *Pachomian Koinonia Vol 1: The Life of Saint Pachomius* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Christians have been navigating the tension between "faith" and "works" at least since the New Testament was written. And the extremes of this tension have frequently been labeled as "mistakes of religion." On the one side are the antinomians, who, excusing themselves from obedience by reason of the extensive grace of God and the primacy of faith, live a life that never progresses in holiness and at times becomes an embarrassment to the Gospel. On the other hand are the legalists, who draw careful attention to the standards of Christian maturity and the means of grace and end up with no real, loving relationship with God. It is not easy to navigate between these two extremes, though the best Christian spiritual literature wields this rudder with care. The fourth century itself (and into the early fifth century) struggled mightily with these matters. The well-known debate between the Augustinians and the Pelagians was precisely a debate begun by a few monks over this very question. Furthermore, John Cassian, the man who was perhaps most influential in interpreting the desert tradition to the Latin world, contributed directly to this discussion in his 13th Conference.¹⁷ Just to whet your whistle, here are a few quotes demonstrating that many monks--while they pursued their faith with serious effort--assumed that the grace of God was beneath all they did.

"If you see a young man climbing up to heaven by his own will, catch him by the foot and pull him down to earth: it is not good for him."¹⁸

"Wishing to show that to fill every commandment is a duty, whereas sonship is a gift given to men through His own Blood, the Lord said: 'When you have done all that is commanded you, say: "We are

¹⁷ See John Cassian, *The Conferences*, translated by Boniface Ramsey (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1997), 465-502.

For surveys of the Pelagian controversy see, for example, Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997).

¹⁸ Cited in Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well* [Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007], p. 89

useless servants: we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). Thus the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but a gift of grace prepared by the Master for his faithful servants."¹⁹

"Those who because of the rigor of their own ascetic practice, despise the less zealous, think that they are made righteous by physical works. But we are even more foolish if we rely on theoretical knowledge and disparage the ignorant." (*Philokalia* I.126 #11)

"Some without fulfilling the commandments think that they possess true faith. Others fulfill the commandments and then expect the kingdom as a reward due them. Both are mistaken." (*Philokalia* I. 126 #18).

5. Holiness--or, perhaps a "consecrated life"--is Available to Many, Not Just Those Who Formally Withdraw to Monastic Settings

One of the characteristics of evangelical interest in "true religion" is a concern that the riches of the faith be available to all, even the least, and not merely to the intellectual, the ecclesiastical, or even the devout "elite." Just as Jesus disparaged the elitism of the Pharisees and offered the Gospel to all, even "the least," opening the doors of holiness to any and every one who might follow him, so an emphasis on true religion today is careful to give room for *all* who would follow Jesus.

But was this believed among the early monks and nuns of the fourth century? In our stereotype of monks as an overly scrupulous elite, we miss the point. We look at their means and miss their end. The monks themselves, however, frequently reminded one another that they were not the elite. There were others as holy as they, living outside the world of the religious life (or, should we say, inside the "world" of ordinary people). Here are a few stories that illustrate the monks' consciousness of the

¹⁹ Mark the Ascetic, "On Those Who Think They are Made Righteous by Works" in *The Philokalia* (St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth compilers, G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, nd Kallistos Ware, translators, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) I. 125-46; #2 p. 125. Further references to the *Philokalia* will be listed by volume and page along with chapter references when appropriate.

wideness of the availability of holiness.

"One of the greatest of the desert stories tells how Abba Macarius heard a voice telling him that he had not yet attained the standard of maturity of two women who lived in a nearby city. He immediately went to the city and found the two women. He asked them, "Tell me how you live a religious life." Surprised by his question, they told Macarius that they had been married for fifteen years; in fact they had sexual relations with their husbands the night before (a comment that would have shocked and offended Macarius). Asking their husbands if they could live the celibate life, they had been denied. So they purposed to live faithfully for God as wives, choosing to show kindness and speak graciously to everyone they knew, especially to each other. Macarius then said, "Truly, it is not whether you are virgin or a married woman, a monk or a man in the world: God gives his Holy Spirit to everyone, according to their earnestness of purpose." (cited in Sittser, *Water*, 90-91)

Here it is instructive to consider the 'rule' or way of life of a number of individuals documented in Palladius' *Lausaic History*:

Apollonius - "A man named Appolonius, a merchant who had renounced the world and come to live on Mount Nitria, being unable owing to advanced years either to learn a craft or work as a scribe, had this occupation during his twenty years' life on the mountain. From his private money and from (the produce of) his own labours he bought in Alexandria all kinds of drugs and things needed for the cells, and provided all the brotherhood with them in their illnesses. And one might see him from early morn until the ninth hour going the round of the monasteries and entering in at each door in case there should be any one ill in bed, taking with him dried grapes, pomegranates, eggs, and bread made of fine flour, the things which such people need. This plan he had devised for a [spiritually] profitable life in his old age." ("Apollonius" chapter XIII, *Lausaic History*, p. 41)

Paesius and Isaias - "There were two brothers called Paesius and Isaias, sons of a Spanish merchant. On their father's death they divided the real property which they got, also the personal property consisting of 5000 pieces of money and clothes and slaves. They considered with each other and took counsel saying: "What mode of life shall we adopt, brother? If we adopt the merchant career which our father followed, then we shall have to die and leave our labors to others. Perhaps we may even succumb to dangers from the robbers or on the sea. Come, then, let us embrace the monastic life, that we may make a profitable use of our father's riches and not lose our own souls." So the ideal of the monastic life pleased them. But they found themselves at variance, differing from each other in their views. For having divided the property, they applied themselves each to his purpose of pleasing God, but by different tactics. For the one bestowed everything on the monasteries and churches and prisons, and having learned a trade by which to earn his bread applied himself to asceticism and prayer. But the other parted with nothing, but making himself a monastery and getting together a few brethren welcomed every stranger, every invalid, every old man, every poor man, preparing three or four tables every Sunday and Saturday. In this way he spent his money.

When the two were dead, various eulogies were pronounced over them, as if both had reached perfection. And some preferred Paesius, others Isaias. But a contention having arisen in the brotherhood over their praises, they went to the blessed Pambo and referred the decision to him, imploring that they might learn which was the better method. But he said to them: "Both are perfect; for one showed the works of an Abraham, the other those of an Elijah." [The Syriac version of this story gives the sense accurately: "One man made manifest the works of Abraham by his hospitality, and the other by the self-denial of Elijah."] And when one party said: "By your feet (we ask), how can they possibly be equal?" and preferred the ascetic and said, "He performed an Evangelical work, selling all and giving to the poor, and every hour both day and night bearing the cross and following the Savior and his prayers." But the other side contended with them and said: "Our man showed such great mercy

to the needy that he even sat in the roads and collected the afflicted. And not only did he refresh his own soul but the souls of many others, treating their diseases and helping them." Then blessed Pambo said to them: "Once again I tell you, they are both equal. I assure each of you that the one, unless he had been so great an ascetic, was not worthy to be compared with the benevolence of the other, while the second again, refreshing the stranger, was himself refreshed, and though he seemed to carry the burden of toil, yet had a refreshing that follows it. But wait until I receive a revelation from God, and after that come and you shall learn." So they came a few days after and he said to them: "I saw both standing in Paradise, as it were in the presence of God." ("Paesius and Isaias" chapter XIV, *Lausaic History*, pp. 41-43)

Eulogius and the Cripple (again - long, but a classic)- "Cronius the priest of Nitria told me this: When I was young and because of accidie fled from the monastery of my archimandrite, I came in my wanderings to the mountain of the holy Antony. It lay between Babylon and Heracles in the great desert that leads to the Red Sea, about thirty miles from the River. So having come to Antony's monastery by the River where his two disciples dwelt at the place called Pispir--I mean Macarius and Amatas, who also later buried him when he died--I waited five days for an interview with the holy Antony. For he was said to visit this monastery at intervals now of ten days, now of twenty, now of five, as God led him, to do good to those who happened to visit the monastery. So a number of brethren were assembled, one with this need, another with that. Among them was a certain Eulogius, a monk of Alexandria, and another man, a cripple, who had come for the following reason.

This Eulogius was a learned man, having had a good all-round education, who, smitten with a love of immortality, renounced the clamours (of the world) and disposing of all his goods left himself a little money, since he was unable to work. Well, suffering from accidie and wishing neither to enter a convent nor to reach perfection alone, he found a man lying in the market-place, a cripple, with neither hands nor feet. His tongue was the only part of his body that was undamaged, and was used to appeal to

the passer-by. So Eulogius stood and gazed at him and prayed to God and made a covenant with God (saying): "Lord, in Thy name I take this cripple and comfort him until death, that I also may be saved through him. Grant me patience to serve him!" And approaching the crippled man he said to him: "Would you like me, great one, to take you to my house and comfort you?" He said to him: "Yes, indeed." "Then shall I get an ass and take you?" He agreed. So he fetched an ass and carried him and brought him to his own guest-chamber and took care of him. Well, the cripple lasted on for fifteen years and was nursed by him, being washed and tended by the hands of Eulogius, and fed in a way suitable to his malady. But after the fifteen years a demon attacked him, and he rebelled against Eulogius. And he began to dress the man down with great abuse and reviling, adding: "Assassin, deserter, you stole other folk's property, and you want to be saved through me. Throw me into the market-place. I want meat." He brought him meat. Again he cried out: "I am not satisfied. I want crowds. I want to be in the market-place. Oh the violence! Put me where you found me." If he had hands he would have quickly strangled him, to such an extent had the demon infuriated him. So Eulogius went off to the neighboring ascetics and said to them: "What shall I do, because this cripple has brought me to despair? Am I to cast him out? I pledged myself to God and I am afraid. But am I *not* to cast him out? He gives me bad days and nights, so that I do not know what to do with him." But they said to him: "While the great one is still alive"--for so they called Antony--"put the cripple in a boat and go to him, and take him to the monastery and wait till Antony comes out from the cave and refer the case to him. And whatever he says to you, go by his decision, for God speaks to you by him." And he heard them patiently, and putting the cripple into a rustic boat went out by night from the city and took him to the monastery of the disciples of the holy Antony. Now it happened that the great man came the next day in the late evening, as Cronius had said, wrapped in a cloak of skin. When he reached the monastery, this was his custom, to summon Macarius and ask him: "Brother Macarius, have any brethren come here?" He answered, "Yes." "Egyptians or from Jerusalem?" And he had given him a sign: "If you see them inclined to be careless, say Egyptians; but when they are more serious and

studious, say from Jerusalem." So he asked him as usual: Are the brethren Egyptians or from Jerusalem?" Macarius answered and said to him: "A mixture." Now when he said to him "They are Egyptians," the holy Anthony would say to him: "Prepare some lentils and give them a meal," and he would utter a prayer for them and say good-bye. But when he said "from Jerusalem," he would sit up all night, talking to them about salvation. So that night he sat down, (Cronius) says, and called them all to him and, though none had told him what name he bore, called out in the dark and said "Eulogius, Eulogius, Eulogius"--three times. He, the learned man I mean, did not answer, thinking that another Eulogius was being called. He said to him again: "I am speaking to *you*, Eulogius, the man who came from Alexandria." Eulogius said to him: "What are your commands, I pray?" "Why have you come?" Eulogius answered and said to him: "He that revealed to you my name, hath also revealed to you my business." Antony said to him: "I know why you came. But speak before all the brethren, that they also may hear." Eulogius said to him: "I found this cripple in the market-place and I pledged myself to God that I would nurse him and so be saved through him and he through me. So since after all these years he torments me to distraction, and I contemplated casting him out; on this account I came to your holiness, in order that you might counsel me what I ought to do and pray for me, for I am terribly distressed. Antony said to him with angry and stern voice: "Cast him out? But he who made him does not cast him out. Will *you* cast him out? God will raise up a better man than you, and he will succour him." Eulogius, who had been calm up till now, trembled. And Antony leaving Eulogius to castigate the cripple with his tongue and cry: "You crippled and maimed man, deserving neither earth nor heaven, will you not cease fighting against God? Do you now know that it is Christ Who is serving you? How dare you utter such words against Christ? Was it not for Christ's sake that he made himself a slave to minister to you?" And having conversed with all the rest about their needs he returned to Eulogius and the cripple and said to them: "Do not wander about any more, go away. Do not be separated from one another, except in your cell in which you have dwelt so long. for already God is sending for you. For this temptation has come upon you because you are both near your end and are about to be counted

worthy of crowns. Do nothing else therefore, and may the angel when he comes not find you here." So they journeyed in haste and came to their cell, and within forty days Eulogius died, and in three days more the cripple died too." ("Eulogius and the Cripple" *Lausaic History*, pp. 65-69)

Finally here are a couple of other brief summaries illustrating the diversity of holy lives in the fourth century:

Piamoun - "Piamoun was a virgin who lived the years of her life with her mother, eating every other day in the evening and spinning flax." ("Piamoun" chapter XXXV, *Lausaic History*, p. 85)

Magna - "In this city of Ancyra many other virgins, some 2000 or more, are eminent as women of both continence and distinction. Among them Magna takes a prominent place in religion, a most venerable woman; I do not know what to call her, virgin or widow. For having been forcibly linked with a husband by her mother, she wheedled him and put him off, so people say, and thus remained inviolate. When he died a little later she gave herself wholly to God, attending in a serious spirit to her own houses, living a most ascetic and continent life, having her conversation such that the very bishops revered her for the excellence of her religion. While she provided for the needs, primary and secondary, of hospitals, the poor and bishops on tour, she ceased not to work in secret with her own hands and by means of her most faithful servants, and at nights she did not leave the church." ("Magna" chapter LXVII, *Lausaic History*, p. 148)²⁰

6. We are Wise When We Make an Effort to Apply Religious Practices in Secret

Jesus encouraged this practice specifically: "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash

²⁰ See also Palladius' stories of Stephen, Elias, Candida, Melania the Younger, Verus and Bosporia, and the Compassionate Monk, as well as the story in the *Lives of the Saints (Historia Monachorum)* of Paphnutius and those whom he resembled.

your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:17-18; see also verses 1-6). We mistake religion for what it is not when we exhibit our spiritual practices. And yet at the same time Jesus in the same sermon encourages us to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Once again we seem to face a tightrope in the pursuit of true religion. On the one hand, if we do not live differently and do so before others, we offer the world no attractive alternative and do not speak the Gospel of Christ with our lives. But then there is also the danger of doing our religious works particularly before other believers in order to be admired and considered "better" than they. Religious showmanship is a false religious practice. Consequently the virtue of secrecy is especially important for those who desire to "raise the bar" for themselves.

Among fourth-century monks and nuns, this virtue was particularly valuable. Obviously we know about the world of these early elders of the faith because they did show their practice to a certain extent. Word spread of their lives and deeds. And yet among the communities of spiritual athletes, many were careful not to draw attention to their practice, and when they weren't they were reprimanded. Here are a few stories illustrating the virtue of secrecy.

"A certain Eulogius, a disciple of the blessed John the bishop, a priest and great ascetic, used to fast two days together and often extended his fast to the whole week, eating only bread and salt. Men thought highly of him. He went to Abba Joseph at Panephrisis, in the hope of finding greater austerity in him. The old man received him joyfully and supplied him with everything he had to refresh him. Eulogius' disciples said, 'The priest eats only bread and salt.' Abba Joseph ate in silence. The visitors spent three days there without hearing them chanting or praying, for the brothers laboured in secret. They went away without having been edified. By the will of God, it became so dark that they lost their way and returned to the old man. Before knocking on the door, they heard chanting. So they waited for

a suitable moment and then knocked. Those who were inside, having ended their psalmody, received them joyfully. Then because of the heat, the disciples of Eulogius rushed to the water jar and offered it to them. Now it contained a mixture of sea-water and river-water and offered it to them. Coming to himself, Eulogius threw himself at the old man's feet and, wanting to know about his manner of life, he asked him, 'Abba, what is this? You did not chant before, but only after we left. And now when I take the jug, I find salt water in it.' The old man said to him, 'The brother is distraught and has mixed sea water with it by mistake.' But Eulogius pressed the old man, wanting to learn the truth. So the old man said, 'This little bottle of wine is for hospitality, but that water is what the brothers always drink.' Then he instructed him in discernment of thoughts and in controlling all the merely human in himself. So he became more balanced and ate whatever was brought him and learnt how to work in secret. Then he said to the old man, 'Truly, your way of life is indeed genuine.'" (*Sayings*, "Eulogius the Priest" #1 pp. 60-61)

"Another time a magistrate came to see him [Simon] and the clergy who went on ahead said to him, 'Abba, get ready, for the judge has heard of you and is coming to be blessed by you.' So he covered himself with sackcloth and took bread and cheese in his hand, and sat down in his doorway and began to eat it. The magistrate arrived with his retinue. When they saw him they despised him and said, 'Is this the hermit about whom we heard such great things?' They turned round and went straight home."²¹

"A hermit was fasting and not eating bread, and he went to visit another hermit. By chance some other pilgrims came there and the hermit made them a little vegetable soup. When they sat down to eat, the fasting hermit took a single pea which he dipped in the soup and chewed it. When they got up from the table, the hermit took him to one side and said, 'Brother, if you visit someone, don't make a display

²¹ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* [Systematic Collection] (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), #18 in the chapter "Nothing Done for Show," Kindle loc. 1790. Further references to this work will be identified in parentheses with the chapter title, number and Kindle location.

there of your way of life. If you want to keep your own rule, stay in your cell and never go out.' The brother accepted the advice, and thenceforth behaved like other people and ate what was put before him." (*Sayings* [Systematic Collection] "Nothing for Show" #22; Kindle loc. 1796ff.)

7. 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

A final characteristic of true religion is a non-judgmental attitude toward other believers, and even other human beings in general. True religion is a matter of the heart (whether we are speaking of an individual, a local community, or an entire denomination), and we cannot know the heart of another. Consequently we have no right to judge another apart from the context of a relationship within which correction is appropriate. Furthermore, it is for us as saints of God to extend grace and mercy to others, even at great expense on our part. Jesus exhorts us, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged" (Matthew 7:1-2, see verses 3-5). This is an important virtue among the early monastics. Indeed the systematic collection of *Sayings* devotes an entire chapter to this theme. Rather than recite those, which can be easily found in the volume, I have chosen here to collect various stories from the alphabetical collection.

"A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, 'Come, for everyone is waiting for you.' So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, 'What is this, Father?' The old man said to them, 'My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.' When they heard that they said no more to the brother, but forgave him." (*Sayings* "Moses" #2 pp. 138-39)

"The same abba [Xanthias] said, "A dog is better than I am, for he has love and he does not judge."

(*Sayings "Xanthias" #3 p. 159*)

"Abba Ammonas came one day to eat in a place where there was a monk of evil repute. Now it happened that a woman came and entered the cell of the brother of evil reputation. The dwellers in that place, having learnt this, were troubled and gathered together to chase the brother from his cell. Knowing that bishop Ammonas was in the place, they asked him to join them. When the brother in question learnt this, he hid the woman in a large cask. The crowd of monks came to the place. Now Abba Ammonas saw the position clearly but for the sake of God he kept the secret; he entered, seated himself on the cask and commanded the cell to be searched. then when the monks had searched everywhere without finding the woman, Abba Ammonas said, 'What is this? May God forgive you!' After praying he made everyone go out, then taking the brother by the hand he said, 'Brother, be on your guard.' With these words, he withdrew." (*Sayings, "Ammonas" #10 p. 28*)

"A brother came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, 'I sow my field and give away in charity what I reap from it.' The old man said to him, 'That is good,' and he departed with fervour and intensified his charity. Hearing this, Abba Arnoub said to Abba Poemen, 'Do you not fear God, that you have spoken like that to the one brother?' The old man remained silent. Two days later Abba Poemen saw the brother coming and in the presence of Abba Arnoub said to him, 'What did you ask me the other day? I was not attending.' The brother said, 'I said that I sow my field and give away what I gain in charity.' Abba Poemen said to him 'I thought you were speaking of your brother who is in the world. If it is you who are doing this, it is not right for a monk.' At these words the brother was saddened and said, 'I do not know any other work and I cannot help sowing the fields.' When he had gone away, Abba Arnoub made a prostration and said, 'Forgive me.' Abba Poemen said, 'From the beginning I too knew it was not the work of a monk but I spoke as I did adapting myself to his ideas and so I gave him courage to increase his charity. Now he has gone away full of grief and yet he will go on as before.'" (*Sayings, "Poemen"*)

"Some men came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, 'When we see brothers who are dozing at the *synaxis* (the common worship service), should we rouse them so that they will be watchful?' He said to them, 'For my part when I see a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.'"

Abba Macarius said this about himself: 'When I was young and was living in a cell in Egypt, they took me to make me a cleric in the village. Because I did not wish to receive this dignity, I fled to another place. Then a devout layman joined me; he sold my manual work for me and served me. Now it happened that a virgin in the village, under the weight of temptation, committed sin. When she became pregnant, they asked her who was to blame. She said, "The anchorite." Then they came to seize me, led me to the village and hung pots black with soot and various other things round my neck and led me through the village in all directions, beating me and saying, "This monk has defiled our virgin, catch him, catch him, and they beat me almost to death. Then one of the old men came and said, "What are you doing, how long will you go on beating this strange monk?" The man who served me was walking behind me, full of shame, for they covered him with insults, too saying, "Look at this anchorite, for whom you stood surety; what has he done?" The girl's parents said, "Do not let him go till he has given a pledge that he will keep her." I spoke to my servant and he vouched for me. Going to my cell, I gave him all the baskets I had, saying, "Sell them and give my wife something to eat." Then I said to myself, "Macarius, you have found yourself a wife; you must work a little more in order to keep her." So I worked night and day and sent my work to her. But when the time came for the wretch to give birth, she remained in labour for many days without bringing forth, and they said to her, "What is the matter?" She said, "I know what it is, it is because I slandered the anchorite, and accused him unjustly; it is not he who is to blame, but such and such a young man." Then the man who served me came to me full of joy saying, "The virgin could not give birth until she had said, 'The anchorite had nothing to do

with it, but I have lied about him.' The whole village wants to come here solemnly and do penance before you." But when I heard this, for fear people would disturb me, I got up and fled here to Scetis. That is the original reason why I came here." (*Sayings "Macarius the Great" #1 pp. 124-25*)²²

Conclusion -

I repeat: my aim in this essay is not to make fourth-century monks into twentieth-century evangelicals. They weren't. There are too many differences for that kind of identification. My point is to show that one of the primary concerns of historic evangelicals was also a primary concern at the origins of Christian monasticism. We can get lost wrangling over doctrinal details, questioning the practices of another brother or sister, or keeping what appears strange at arms' length. My hope is that like the wise ones of the fourth century, like the best of the evangelicals, we will whole-heartedly pursue true religion, being careful to avoid the mistakes on the left and on the right.

²² See also "Pior" #3, "Poemen" #64, "Isaac of Thebes" #1 and the many stories in the Systematic Collection in the chapter on "Non-Judgment."