

What Does God Expect? From Whom? and Why?
Commandments, Counsels, Community
and the Theology of Religious Life

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A Presenting Problem -

I kept bumping into the question. During my teen years the Jesus People movement, which served as midwife for my spiritual rebirth, questioned the mainline Protestant churches I knew. Is the Christian faith simply about decent morality and church attendance? Of course mainline Christians had their own questions of evangelical faith. Is "born again" Christianity simply praying a prayer, attending Bible studies, and persuading others to believe in Jesus (we called it "witnessing" back then)?

Over the years I befriended many people who were living in "intentional Christian communities." As we talked about matters of faith, some of these communitarians would inform me that by sharing finances, living in geographic proximity, engaging in particular social issues, they were simply *being church*, living the way that God had intended all Christians to live. They told me that after Christianity became an accepted religion, the dominant form of Christian living became institutionalized, leaving its original (and divinely-intended) form of life behind.

My charismatic/pentecostal friends had their own set of questions. Doesn't God want us to experience the full Gospel? Among those connected with what was known as the "shepherding movement" the questions (and the expectations) went even further. Some charismatic communities assumed that believers—at least those who were valued—would experience the Holy Spirit in

supernatural ways, would make heroic sacrifices, would be in complete submission to a pastoral care provider. Some community members experienced these demanding commitments as the perfect vehicle for growth and service to the Lord. Others found them just too much for the long haul.¹

Still later, when I attended Roman Catholic graduate schools and got to know nuns and monks and friars and such, I noticed this same question squarely placed at the foundation of their identities. What makes a nun a nun? What is the basis for what is known as "consecrated" or "religious" life?² Are monks or friars better in some way than other Christians? Does God call some to greater commitments or a greater "holiness" than others?³

Sometimes the question bumped into me personally, for example when I tried to explain the life-commitments of our family. Since our marriage in 1978, Cheri, my wife, and I have felt led to use our time, money, and such in a manner that is not common in most Christian circles. Sometimes people have expressed confusion about our decisions. Do we think that all Christians should live as we live? Isn't this some form of pharisaic legalism? (I *have* at times been guilty of that one) Yet we still live out our commitments. And I still feel that the world needs communities that make such commitments.

Ultimately, the question had to be faced. Or, shall I say the *questions* have to be faced. What does God expect? From whom? Why? What does God want from us as Christians, as local churches or groups? Does God set the bar high or low? Does God expect the same things from all of us or does God invite one to a different form or level or kind of commitment than others? And perhaps more interesting

1 See my "Pentecostal Monasticism: Communities of the Spirit both Past and Potential" for more on this. Available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/pentecostal-monasticism-communities-of-the-spirit-both-past-and-potential/>. Accessed 1/19/21.

2 The definitions of "monasticism," "religious life," "consecrated life" and such are notoriously difficult to clarify. For my own reflections on these terms see Evan B. Howard, "What Do We Call It: New Monasticism and the Vocabulary of Religious Life." Originally drafted 2008 and available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/what-do-we-call-it/>, accessed 1/19/21; and "What is Monasticism? A Few Reflections," available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/what-is-monasticism-a-few-reflections/>. Accessed 1/19/21. For a good summary of the current use of terminology among Roman Catholic religious, see Mary Johnson, Patricia Wittberg, and Mary Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31-40.

3 The question of the "universal call to holiness" was a significant matter of discussion both before and since the second Vatican Council (1962-1965). See, for example, Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders* (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 1994), 213-217.

-- at least theologically -- *why* does God expect what God expects? Is there something about the nature of God's people, of God's salvation, or simply something about the nature of God, that shapes the character of the divine-human relationship in its various forms?

Some do not like the question of God's *expectations*. It sounds too legal. Perhaps the idea of God's *longings* or *desires* would be better in this case. But in the world of Christian groupings I find the language--or at least the behavior--of many at least implies a sense of divine (and consequentially congregational) *expectations*. Certain Anabaptist-heritage groups, for example, might argue that religion is not about a system of works to match God's expectations. Yet when push comes to shove, a new member may learn that following Christ is all about practicing the teachings of Christ. God *expects* those who would give themselves for Christ to conform to those teachings (I will treat Anabaptists below). Congregational expectation is tied up with our sense of divine expectation.

I discovered, a number of years ago while studying Patristic history, that something like this question--I called it the problem of elitism--goes way back. Indeed, a number of early Church Councils addressed this very topic.⁴ A few years later I noticed another form of this question in treatments of the distinction between "commandments" and "counsels." Though these concepts only appeared in the historical sources periodically, they ultimately were employed in what became the standard treatment of Roman Catholic religious/monastic vows. Some within the Roman church and certainly more within the early Protestant communities had serious concerns about their employment. (stay tuned for more)

More recently I have bumped into a sociological topic which bears on this question. From the work of sociological pioneer Max Weber through the present, scholars exploring the nature of human society have spoken of the phenomenon of religious "virtuosity." Respected sociological works contend that in nearly every society some people have either the desire, or the training, or the *je ne c'est*

⁴ See my "Spiritual Formation and Elitism: Reflections on EDarly Cojncils and Contemporary Practice." This is a draft of a paper I presented to the Evangelical Theological Society. Available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/spiritual-formation-elitism-reflections-early-councils-contemporary-practice/>. Accessed 1/19/21.

qua that leads them to excel, even in the religious life. Just as we speak of virtuoso violinists, so we can also speak of "religious virtuosi." How do we understand this from a Christian perspective? Are some actually "holier than thou"? What does this say about God's expectations? (again, more on this to come)

Examination of the historical and sociological material, particularly with an interest toward contemporary application, has even more recently led me further. I realized that I was at the edge of some kind of "theology of religious life," a project that was much too big to address within a historical review of divine expectations.⁵ Now I was *really* bumping into the question, and the problem became how to steward my learning about divine expectations (and specifically commandments and counsels), while perhaps cracking opening a door to the larger project of the theology of religious life more generally. I have ended up deciding to offer this paper as a summary of "the state of my studies" to date: a review of the historical discussion of counsels and commandments, a sketch of reflections concerning the theology of religious life as a way of considering how the question of counsels and commandments must be addressed, and finally a few practical suggestions: two unequal parts divided into four even more unequal chapters.

I want to document what I have learned from history so far (it *is* interesting); but still, it is only "so far." Thus in the first and largest part on "Divine Expectation in Christian History: On Commandments and Counsels" I will review my historical discoveries, especially what I have learned in literature from the fourth through the sixteenth centuries. Some of the historical developments are both subtle and relatively unexplored and I will only be able to sketch the lines of my conclusions at times. In the second part (and final chapter) "Divine Expectations in Theology and Practice," I move

⁵ Works that venture into something like a "theology of religious life" include François Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism* (Helicon Press, 1963), 107-57; John R. Sheets, "Toward a Theology of Religious Life: A Sketch with Particular Reference to the Society of Jesus, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* Vol. III, no. 5 (November, 1971); Donald Bloesch, *Wellsprings of Renewal: Promise in Christian Communal Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 99-113; Sandra Marie Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Reimagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), and more recently her three-volume "Religious Life in a New Millennium" series also published by Paulist Press (2001, 2013, 2014); and Diarmuid O' Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016).

beyond history to think briefly about theology and practice. The first section of the final chapter, “Divine Expectations in Christian Theology: Prolegomena to a Theology of Religious Life,” offers a few thoughts on interdisciplinary theological method. My hope here is to suggest—as I see it currently—the kind of work that needs to be done in order to address divine expectation and a theology of religious life more fully.

Yet I *do* have practical concerns: to help fellow Christians interested in devout living to see how their practice might be understood within a larger scheme of things—and to avoid a few pitfalls along the way. I hope to propose a helpful way of looking at divine expectations, especially for “new monastic” Christians wishing to make headway in their efforts to embody the Gospel in the midst of the Church and world today. Thus, in the final section of the final chapter, “Divine Expectations and Christian Practice: A Few Suggestions,” I outline four principles regarding divine expectations that I believe may help us nurture our Christian life as individuals and communities. If you want the “four points” without all the academic journey getting there, just skip to the “Christian Practice” section.⁶

6 See pages 92-98.

Part One

Divine Expectation in Christian History: On Commandments and Counsels

Chapter 1. Late Antiquity:

Ambrose of Milan

Bishop Ambrose of Milan, in the twelfth chapter of his treatise “Concerning Widows,” (written around AD 377) distinguishes between those who fulfill God’s precepts or commandments and those who are invited to follow the counsels of the Lord.⁷ Although the way Ambrose presents his treatment of these two ways of Christian discipleship was fresh, he was crystallizing a sense of God’s work in the church that had been acknowledged for some time. Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *The Preparation of the Gospel* (begun around 313) described the two ways as follows (I quote at length):

Two ways of life were thus given by the law of Christ to His Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property nor the possession of wealth, but wholly and permanently separate from the customary life of mankind, it devotes self to the service of God alone in its wealth of heavenly love! And they who enter on this course, appear to die to the life of mortals, to bear with them nothing earthly but their body, and in mind and spirit to have passed into heaven. Like some celestial beings they gaze upon human life, performing the duty of a priesthood to Almighty God for the whole race, not with

⁷ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Widows*, chapter 12.72-73. (The Fig Classic Series, 2012). Kindle loc 437-446.

sacrifices of bulls and blood, nor with libations and unguents, nor with smoke and consuming fire and destruction of bodily things, but with right principles of true holiness, and of a soul purified in disposition, and above all with virtuous deeds and words; with such they propitiate the Divinity, and celebrate their priestly rites for themselves and their race. Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other more humble, more human, permits men to join in pure nuptials and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers fighting for right; it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion: and it is for them that times of retreat and instruction, and days for hearing sacred things are set apart. And a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them, giving just such help as such lives require, so that all men, whether Greeks or barbarians, have their part in the coming of salvation, and profit by the teaching of the Gospel.

A few things to notice here: First, Eusebius perceives both ways of life as given by “the law of Christ” to the church. Second, the primary distinction is between “common human living” (or “the customary life of mankind”) and a form of life that is “separate”: abstaining from marriage, property, governmental service and such in order to be fully devoted to the service of God. Yet Eusebius (third) gives value to those choosing the fully devoted form of life (speaking of “celestial beings,” “holiness,” “perfect form of the Christian life”). Fourth, Eusebius understands both ways of life as part of the broad “salvation” of the Christian Gospel. We will return to these four points again in this essay.

Finally, we must remember that in 313, when Eusebius began his *Preparation of the Gospel* which describes these two forms of life, Antony of Egypt, falsely named the “Father” of western monasticism, had just completed his first season of instructing followers. Pachomius, founder of the cenobitic monasteries in upper Egypt, was not even a baptized Christian. The monastic community of Sketis was not founded by Macarius the Great until around 330. The Edict of Milan, freeing Christians from the threat of persecution was issued in 313, the same year Eusebius began the *Preparation*. Thus,

Eusebius describes these two ways of life—and describes them as known phenomena—prior to the birth of institutionalized monasticism and before there could have been any “monastic reform of post-Constantinian Christianity.”

We must look earlier. The first- or second-century treatise known as “The Didache” instructs the Christian community as follows:

For if thou canst bear the whole yoke of the Lord, thou wilt be perfect, but if thou canst not, do what thou canst. And concerning food, bear what thou canst, but keep strictly from that which is offered to idols, for it is the worship of dead gods.⁸

Once again we find reference to the “whole yoke of the Lord,” not too far from Eusebius’s “law of Christ.” We are not told what this “whole yoke” involves, though it clearly indicates a stricter level of ascetical practice.⁹ Like Eusebius, the way of full commitment is a means to being “perfect.” Yet those who choose simply to “do what they can” are not condemned, but are welcomed into the life of the Christian community just as they are.

When I read the literature of the centuries before Constantine and the Nicene Creed, I find a church that expresses high expectations of their members, for example in their treatment of penance and the catechumenate.¹⁰ But at the same time I see groups of Christians emerging who wish to explore not simply a high standard of living the customary life (family, employment, civil service, and

8 The “Didache,” translated by Kirsopp Lake, in *The Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library Series) I (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1912), VI.2, p. 319.

9 Theodoret, Draper, Jonathan A. 1998. “Weber, Theissen, and ‘Wandering Charismatics’ in the Didache.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6(4):541-76. Aaron Milavek, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, & Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50-70 C.E.* (NY: The Newman Press, 2003) on the Didache see also Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998); Milavek’s *The Didache: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003); and Shawn J. Wilhite, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019).

10 On the early history of penance see, for example, James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986; and Robert M. Stewart, “De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam” *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991), 90-100. On the catechumenate, see especially Willim Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, revised edition (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2014). A worthy reflection on both penance and the catechumenate can be found within Gerald L. Sittser’s *Resilient Faith: How the Early “Thurd Way” Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2019).

so on), but who choose to separate from those forms of life in order to devote themselves in an undistracted manner to God's service. We see this especially in the mention of those who choose not to marry.¹¹ Groups of widows, virgins, and other forms of ascetics were a recognized and developing entity before the birth of the institutions of "monasticism."¹² Furthermore, the principle of inviting, but not imposing, serious levels of commitment was already being promoted in the council of Ancyra in 314 and would be further developed in a series of councils and synods thereafter.¹³ It is this blend of devout "common life" and exemplary "consecrated life" that had such a powerful impact in the early Christian centuries, and I think could have a similar impact today.

What I am saying is this (I repeat). When Ambrose articulated the distinction between fulfilling the commandments and following the counsels, he was crystallizing a sense of God's work in the church that had been acknowledged for some time. We must not see monasticism or religious life as essentially a late fourth-century response to shallow Christianity, or as an alternative to martyrdom, even though it did function in these ways at that time. The early forms of life that became (or rather, that were institutionalized into) "monasticism" emerged more as a response to Gospel invitation than as a movement of moral or devotional reform.¹⁴ Councils struggled with tensions regarding divine expectation and forms of life before Constantine's edict took effect. All this provides evidence for the church's early understanding of itself as being invited by God into different expectations of life.

11 For a summary of research regarding early "monastic origins" see William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 417-453. For a review of Patristic approaches to sexual renunciation see, for example, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

12 See for example, Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

13 On these councils, see my "Spiritual Formation and Elitism: Reflections on Early Councils and Contemporary Practice," available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/spiritual-formation-elitism-reflections-early-councils-contemporary-practice/>, accessed July 29, 2020.

14 I explore patristic approaches to asceticism in my two essays on "Dying to Live: Reflections on Asceticism, Spiritual Disciplines and Everyday Life," (available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/dying-live-asceticism-summarized/> and <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/dying-live-ii-asceticism-applied/>). Accessed 1/19/21.

Ambrose's treatment of *commandments* and *counsels* expresses the developed majority view of the church at his time.

We can look earlier still. But to do this we must follow the lead of Ambrose himself.¹⁵ Ambrose wrote "Concerning Widows" partly in response to a situation in his diocese. A certain widow was reaching the age where her children were not in need of her care anymore. She was considering a second marriage. Should she remain a widow or should she remarry? He had already written a treatise defending the practice of vowed chastity ("On Virginity").¹⁶ In "Concerning Widows" Ambrose extends his discussion to the question of remarriage. In chapter eleven Ambrose states openly that "I do not forbid second marriages, only I do not advise them."¹⁷ He states, "This, however, I say as a counsel, we do not order it as a precept, stirring up the wills of widows rather than binding them" (11.68). Notice the words "counsel" and "precept."

Ambrose picks up on these words in the following chapter. He begins by summarizing his point ("Marriage, then, is honourable, but chastity is more honourable") and proceeds with a biblical defense. "And, therefore, the Apostle said well: Concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord, yet I give my counsel" (12.72). Ambrose is making direct reference to 1 Corinthians 7:25, where Paul distinguishes a divine command (*epitagê*) from a mere counsel (*gnómé* – also translated "opinion," or "judgment"), specifically with regard to the question of marriage. Ambrose elaborates. Commandments are issued to subjects; counsels are issued to friends. Commandments are associated with law; counsels with grace. Then Ambrose makes reference to a second passage, the story of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-30). He describes how the ruler was first given a list of commandments, all of which

15 For Ambrose's approach to consecrated virginity more generally, drawing especially from his liturgical hymns, see George E. Saint-Laurent, "St. Ambrose's Theology of the Consecrated Virgin," *Review for Religious* 41 (May-June, 1982), 356-67.

16 Text, see also the comments regarding the background of Ambrose's writing of this treatise in David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 60-61.

17 Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, 11.68, Kindle loc. Loc 410 (henceforth I will refer to this document in parentheses in the text by chapter and paragraph number).

he had fulfilled. Then, Ambrose recounts, “there is given to him a counsel that he should sell all that he had and follow the Lord, for these things are not imposed as commandments, but are offered as counsels” (12.73). In chapter twelve, Ambrose distinguishes between the character of commandments (binding) and the character of counsels (willing choice). He argues, drawing on Luke 17:10 and Matthew 19:27-30, that “the virgin” and “he who sold all his goods” approach God not out of a spirit of duty, but rather anticipating a heavenly reward.

In chapter thirteen, Ambrose employs the distinctions between commandment and counsel in order to reinforce his position on second marriage: “Chastity is commanded, entire continence counselled” (13.75; see also 14.82). He criticizes the practice of voluntary emasculation, for one should rather gain victory through exercise of the will. Later he returns to the Apostle Paul, commenting on Paul’s use of law and grace. By the end of this chapter—and then on through the next two—Ambrose concludes his thesis by arguing for the profit of the single life and arguing against various objections.

Thus, in three short chapters of a treatise on the remarriage of widows, Ambrose of Milan articulates a framework of viewing religious life as a whole (those who choose poverty and celibacy). As with our earlier examples, Ambrose permits but does not impose different forms of life. Yet at the same time, he gives higher value to those who willingly follow the counsels. He promoted this view in other works and actions, though without the language of “commandment” and “counsel.” Indeed, Ambrose served as a primary force toward the institutionalization of religious life. As W.H.C. Frend claims, “He established asceticism as an accepted Christian way of life under episcopal control.”¹⁸

Ambrose’s student, Augustine of Hippo, echoes the language of his mentor in Augustine’s own treatise on *Holy Virginit*y: “For, not in the same way as it is said: ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not kill,’ can it be said: ‘Thou shalt not marry.’ Those things are demanded; these are freely

18 W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 618. For his views on clerical continence see Stefan Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church: The Beginnings of a Discipline of Obligatory Continence for Clerics in East and West* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 245, 254, 261.

offered.”¹⁹ Similarly he writes in his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, “Wherefore, all God’s commandments, one of which is “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and all those special precepts which are not commandments but special counsels, one of which is “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” are rightly carried out only when the motive principle of action is the love of God, and the love of neighbor in God.”²⁰ Augustine employs Ambrose’s distinction of commandments and counsels—and through this an acknowledgement of the two ways of life—yet reminds his readers that the fulfillment of both commandment and counsel is not merely in the performance of the action but also through the motive of love. We shall return to this theme again.

19 Augustine, “Holy Virginitv” 30 (30), *St. Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 27 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 177. Adolar Zumkeller translates the core section, “one is a commandment, the other a counsel.” See Adolar Zumkeller, *Augustine’s Ideal of the Religious Life*, trans. Edmund Colledge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 252.

20 Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, CXXI (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1961), 139-140.

Chapter 2: The Medieval West

Historian Gert Melville affirms Ambrose’s contribution not only for his own time, but for the centuries which would follow. Melville writes,

He was among the first to develop a distinction between the precepts (*praecepta*) and the counsels (*consilia*) of the New Testament. That distinction came to inform assumptions about a fundamental division in Christian society between those who were expected only to follow the precepts (the laity and the clergy) and those who were also called to live out the counsels under the vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty (the religious). . . . The rules of the orders of the High Middle Ages—for example those of the Grandmontines and Franciscans, but above all thirteenth-century canon law—saw in the observance of these “evangelical counsels” the core essentials (*substantilia*) of the *vita religiosa*. These concepts allowed the world of monasteries and orders to define itself clearly, to set itself apart, and to form a common identity.”²¹

Melville’s way of summarizing the transmission of these concepts also summarizes my own experience of researching “commandments and counsels” in the middle ages. From Ambrose (and Augustine), to vague comments about divisions in society, then directly to the High Middle Ages.

Virtually nothing in between. Regarding divisions in society, it is fair to say that most medieval

²¹ Gert Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 316-17.

Europeans perceived their world roughly in terms of a three-fold division: “the clergy (*oratores*), whose function is prayer; the warriors or nobles (*bellatores*), who fight to maintain order and justice; and finally, the workers (*laboratores*), in other words everyone, particularly the peasants, who provide for human subsistence. Over these groups or categories sits the king, whose role is to guarantee the harmonious operation of the system.”²² Yet we can take this division one step further. Of the *oratores*, those living the religious life (nuns and monks) were often perceived as the “top.” This is why nobles made significant donations to monasteries. This is why parents would send their daughters into convents. Association with those who were holy could have eternal significance. Thus, while affirming different forms of Christian life, medieval society often emphasized the status of religious.

One other topic deserves mention before I move to the High Middle Ages: the Sermon on the Mount. This matter is extremely vague and I have not been able to document my hunches sufficiently. But, because of what we will see in Aquinas and especially in the Reformers, the matter must be mentioned. Eusebius, in the passage from *The Preparation of the Gospel* I quoted above includes, in his description of the customary form of life, to “undertake government” and to “give orders to soldiers fighting for right.” Eusebius mentions these as examples of common living in contrast to religious forms of life. Eusebius’s mention of these matters, however, indicates a development in Christian expectations. We read, for example, in the *Apostolic Tradition* (early third century, often ascribed to Hippolytus) regarding professions which disqualified newcomers seeking instruction in the Christian faith:

A soldier under authority shall not kill a man. If he is ordered to, he shall not carry out the order; nor shall he take the oath. If he is unwilling, let him be rejected. He who has the power of the sword, or is a magistrate of a city who wears the purple, let him cease or be rejected.

²² André Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*, trans. Margaret J. Schneider (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 30.

Catechumens or believers who want to become soldiers should be rejected, because they have despised God.²³

I could not find specific sources, but presumably the prohibition of killing and the taking of oaths goes back to Jesus's injunctions regarding murder and oaths in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). We see here that the early catechumenate (represented by the *Apostolic Tradition*) rejected those who would violate these injunctions. Yet Eusebius's comments suggest that a century later, those who lived the Christian faith from a customary way of life were permitted to employ themselves as soldiers and magistrates (requiring oath-taking), while those who devoted themselves to a life separated from the customs of society made themselves free to literally fulfill these injunctions.

In a study of the late-twelfth/early-thirteenth-century religious movement known as the Humiliati, Frances Andrews treats their refusal to take oaths, identifying their grounds "because several gospel passages prohibited swearing and because through long tradition, monks did not swear oaths."²⁴ Similarly, Augustine Thompson describes the lifestyle of Italian penitents in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, men and women who "were called to a higher standard of lay life, not a cloistered monasticism."²⁵ He states that "Penitents followed, in their own lay style, the "counsels" of Christ, something previously understood as the preserve of vowed religious alone. They foreswore taking oaths, bearing arms, going to court and so on."²⁶ What is interesting to note here is that Thompson associates "counsels" not with voluntary poverty and celibacy, but rather with taking oaths and bearing arms, activities connected not to Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, but to the Sermon on the Mount. My suspicion is that during the medieval period it was extremely difficult to pursue civic or military life

23 Geoffrey Cuming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students: With Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Notes* second edition (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books Limited, 1987), 16.

24 Frances Andrews, *The Early Humiliati* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 100-101. See also further on p. 101.

25 Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 84.

26 Thompson, *Cities of God*, 84-85.

and avoid oath-taking and bearing arms. Thus, only those who chose a form of life separate from customary medieval society (namely, nuns and monks – or penitents trying to imitate them) would be able to keep these injunctions. This, combined with the general reverence given to religious and the high standards of the Sermon on the Mount, gradually led to a (populist?) view that at least some of the injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount were “counsels” rather than “commandments”: invitations to the few rather than expectations of the many.

Thomas Aquinas

And this brings us to Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’s account of the evangelical counsels and their relationship to religious vows ultimately became the standard treatment of the topic in Roman Catholic Christianity.²⁷ Medieval historian John Van Engen summarizes the contexts surrounding Aquinas on this issue nicely: “Thomas had to define a position that could weave its way through critics attacking from several angles: other religious who located perfection in monastic withdrawal or Franciscan poverty, secular clerics who resented the friars’ pastoral or magisterial interference, bishops who saw themselves as the head of any hierarchy of perfection.”²⁸ I cannot cover all the complexities of these contexts here, but will rather summarize Aquinas’s treatment of commandments and counsels in his most important works.²⁹

27 This is at least implied in Aidan Nichols, *What is the Religious Life: From the Gospels to Aquinas* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2015). See also Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 22, 46. For a treatment of Aquinas on religious life more generally, see Antonin Motte, “La definition de la vie religieuse selon saint Thomas d’Aquin” *Revue Thomiste* 115, no. 3 (July-September 1987): 442-453.

28 John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) Kindle loc. 5356.

29 The history of the conflict with secular clerics is summarized nicely in Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mendicant Controversies: Three Translations* John Proctor, trans. (Leesburg, Virginia: Alethes Press, 2007), xv-xx. See also Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 1: The Person and His Work*, revised edition, translated by Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 75-95. William of St. Amour’s critique of the mendicant orders, *A Brief Tract on the Dangers of the Last Days* translated by Jonathan Robinson is available at http://individual.utoronto.ca/jwrobinson/translations/wsa_de-periculis.pdf (see esp. pp. 54-61). For surveys of the conflicts with Franciscans regarding poverty, see Van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the Way to God: Thomas Aquinas on Evangelical Poverty* (Leuven: Peeters, 1994) and Giacomo Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth: From Voluntary Poverty to Market Society*, translated by Donatella Melucci (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2009), 92-103. See also St. Bonaventure, “Defense of the Mendicants” chapter XII, #12-41 *St. Bonaventure: Works*, Volume XV, translated

As Thomas Aquinas entered the faculty of the university of Paris in 1256 he was confronted with a few questions (*Quodlibetal Question VII*) aimed at clarifying his position with regard to the secular/mendicant controversy. Aquinas developed his responses to these in his “Against Those Who Attack Religion” (1256). He begins by defining “religion” itself. Whereas sometimes the word is used with reference to any binding of oneself to God (for example, in Baptism), the word is also often used to refer to those who bind themselves to God through special acts of love and renunciation of the world, viz., those who choose to live a consecrated life. Whereas those entering the faith through baptism die to sin, those entering “religion” through vows die not only to sin, but also to the world. Aquinas identifies three areas of worldly life that threaten to entangle one in the world: marriage, possession of riches, and one’s own will. “Hence,” writes Aquinas, “perfect religion is consecrated to God by a threefold vow.”³⁰ He then devotes the remainder of the treatise to a treatment of the relationship of consecrated life (religion) to preaching or teaching in a college, manual labor, pastoral ministry, renunciation of property, and living from alms.

A couple of matters deserve mention here. First, Aquinas, like Ambrose and others, identifies two distinct ways of following Christ: through baptism and through vows, vows being labeled “perfect.” Second, unlike Ambrose and those of the Patristic period, Aquinas names not simply voluntary poverty and chastity as the *two* primary *counsels*. He names *three* vows. By this time, things have changed and religious life was associated now with three formal vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience.³¹

by José de Vinck and Robert J. Karris (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2010), 334-366. Regarding Aquinas on vows more generally see Antonin Motte, “La définition de la vie religieuse selon saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste* XCVe ANNÉE – T. LXXXVII – No 3 (July – September, 1987), 442-453 and Marie-Vincent Leroy, “Theologie de la vie religieuse” *Revue Thomiste* Ce ANNÉE – T. XCII – No 1 (January – March 1992), 324-343. Another nice summary can be found in John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, loc 5356-5379.

30 Thomas Aquinas, *Against Those Who Attack Religion* in *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mendicant Controversies*, 10.

31 In 1139 Pope Innocent II provided the Templars with a Rule of Life, calling for commitments to poverty, obedience, and chastity. Innocent III in 1198 asked for the same commitments from the Trinitarians as they founded their religious order. The same formula was used for the Franciscans in their first Rule of Life. See Melville, *World of Medieval Monasticism*, 171, Francis and Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, “The Earlier Rule” Vol 1, p. 63, footnote c, at <https://franciscantradition.org/francis-of-assisi-early-documents/the-saint/writings-of-francis/the-earlier-rule/78-fa-ed-1->

Whereas in “Against Those Who Attack” Aquinas describes vows which express entire abandonment to God, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (written between 1259-1265) Aquinas speaks specifically of the distinction between *counsels* and *precepts*: *counsels* inviting us to forego lesser goods for the sake of the greater.³² He repeats his comments about the three distractions of the world, here using the language of the “cares” of the “general mode of human life.” Aquinas then cites Matthew 19:21, 1 Corinthians 7:25 to defend the biblical grounds for the counsels, adding Hebrews 13:17 as the biblical grounds for the counsel of obedience. He argues that these are not perfections of themselves, but rather that they dispose one to pursue perfection more wholeheartedly (through abandonment and freedom from worldly distraction), and they act as effects or signs of perfection (as when pure love sacrifices all for the Beloved).

Further conflicts between secular clerics and mendicant orders (especially the Franciscans) in 1269 drew Aquinas into the controversies once again. The question of perfection kept coming up and he needed to address the issue head on. In what does Christian perfection consist? Is it poverty?³³ What is the relationship between perfection and the counsels or vows? Aquinas responded with “On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life” (1269).³⁴ Aquinas, in the first two chapters, answers the first question: perfection is found in charity: love for God and love for others. In each of these there is an element which is necessary for salvation (precept or commandment) and there is an element which is a matter of counsel. He states, regarding the latter (and citing Paul’s own pursuit of perfection in Philippians 3:12) “although the perfection of the blessed is not possible to us in this life, we ought, nevertheless, to endeavour, as far as we can, to emulate it. Now, it is in this effort that consists the perfection in this life,

[page-63](#), accessed 8/6/2020. For vows in the early Humiliati see, Andrews, *Early Humiliati*, 172-201.

32 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.130. I access this document through the Logos Library System.

33 It is worth noting that Bonaventure wrote, in 1269, his own Franciscan defense of the mendicants (*apologia pauperum*). See Bonaventure, *Defense of the Mendicants*, translation by José de Vinck and Robert J. Karris, *The Works of St. Bonaventure*, Vol. 15 (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2010).

34 Thomas Aquinas, “On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life” in *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mendicant Controversies*, 237-323.

to which we are invited by the counsels.”³⁵ He then presents “means” of perfection: the abandonment of possessions, the renunciation of marriage, and the abnegation of our own will, also calling them “counsels of perfection” and further identified particularly with religious life and the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He argues how the counsels facilitate the perfection of both love of God and love of neighbor and then further defends the role of a vow in sealing one in what he calls the “state” of perfection: a state being defined as a settled and chosen form of life within which one lives. One can live a chaste life without making a vow, but a vow places one within a “state” of chastity. Thus when one chooses to renounce the world through entrance to the religious life, they enter into the state of perfection, selecting the form of life wherein the means of perfection are employed most naturally. And yet Aquinas reminds his readers at the end of chapter 15, “as some men perform works of perfection without any vow, and others fail to accomplish the works of perfection to which they have vowed their whole lives, it is perfectly possible for persons to be perfect without being in the state of perfection, or to be in a state of perfection without being perfect.”³⁶ It will be important to see this when we evaluate the critiques of the Protestant Reformers.

In his Commentary on Matthew, Aquinas mentions (and does *not* mention) counsels in a few interesting places.³⁷ Regarding John’s baptism in chapter three, Aquinas distinguishes between the “way” to prepare and the “paths” to be made straight. Thus, as Aquinas states, “**‘the way’** is understood as the whole of that which pertains to common salvation; [the precepts]. . . **the paths** are the keeping of the counsels, . . .” (255). In his comments on the Sermon on the Mount, Aquinas does *not* treat the command prohibiting oaths (Matthew 5:33-37) as a counsel. Indeed he defends the practice in general. When he treats revenge (Matthew 5:38-42) he declares that “what the Lord says is in some cases a precept, and in some cases, a counsel.” Aquinas gives examples, saying of the refusal to take revenge

³⁵ Aquinas, “On the Perfection,” 245.

³⁶ Aquinas, “On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life,” 281.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Matthew, available at <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Matt>, accessed 8/7/2020. I will refer to this document by paragraph number parenthetically in the text. The bold and italics words are original.

that “It is a counsel, when it does not involve overlooking what one is bound to, as when someone endures many injuries from his parents for the sake of entering religious life, the counsel is that he not let go of what is better” (#530; see also #535). Aquinas seems to identify *counsels* of the Lord when these commandments seems to invite sacrifice beyond the necessary requirements of social relations. Aquinas clarifies commandments and counsels further in his comments on Matthew 10:1-15 (the mission of the apostles). What do we say about the regulations Jesus gives those he sends out to minister: are they commands or counsels? On the one hand, they are commandments, because the text simply says “*Jesus sent: commanding them.*” But then, Aquinas queries, are they commands to the apostles as members of the faithful? If so then all would be obliged to possess nothing and this is a heresy. Likewise, if the command is given to the apostles “as apostles” then prelates (as the apostles successors) would be bound by these commands. Aquinas addresses the question (leaving it finally unresolved) simply by reviewing three interpretive options, one of which (following Augustine) involves a distinction between counsels, commands, and *permissions* (see #822-826). In his treatment of the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:1-30), Aquinas does not mention counsels per se, although he does distinguish between “two ways. One, sufficient for salvation; and this is the love of God and of neighbor with one’s own benefit, . . . The other is the way of perfection, to love neighbor with one’s own detriment; . . .” For Aquinas, the abandonment of possessions associated with joining a religious order is a holocaust, an offering of abandonment that both facilitates and expresses the perfection of love to God and neighbor.

Thomas Aquinas treats matters related to the interpretation of counsels and commandments in three places in his masterful *Summa Theologica* (*ST*).³⁸ Part I-II Q108, Art 4 deals with the New Law and the Ethics of the Law. Part II-II Q88-89 deal with vows and oaths. Part II-II Q183-184 deal with

³⁸ Aquinas also provides an introductory treatment of the concept of a counsel in I-II Q14, Art 2. The edition of *ST I* am using is *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica*, complete English edition in five volumes, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1948).

perfection and then Q186-189 deal with aspects of Religious Life more particularly. In these sections Aquinas sums up and develops all that he has previously said about commandments and counsels.

Aquinas presents a treatise on law in Questions 90-114 of Part I-II. After addressing the nature of law, eternal law, human law, and the old law (OT law), he moves in Question 106 to discuss the New Law, a law which is founded upon the work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Aquinas argues that one of the ways that Christ fulfilled the precepts of the Old Law was “by adding some counsels of perfection,” mentioning Matthew 19:21 (see I-II Q107 Art. 2). Central to our concerns is Aquinas’s treatment of the contents of the New Law, covered in Question 108, and more particularly his discussion (in Art. 4) of “Whether Certain Definite Counsels Are Fittingly Proposed in the New Law?” He distinguishes commandments and counsels as we have seen all along in Aquinas’s work: “a commandment implies obligation, whereas a counsel is left to the option of the one to whom it is given.” Commandments indicate matters which are necessary for salvation; “counsels are about matters that render the gaining of this end more assured and expeditious.” Thus, while anyone can gain salvation and even perfection without following the counsels, “he will attain more speedily thereto by giving up the goods of this world entirely: wherefore the evangelical counsels are given for this purpose.” Notice that Aquinas identifies these further invitations as “the evangelical counsels,” linking this further invitation with the vows of religious life: explicitly associating them in this section with “perfection” and with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He then distinguishes between following the counsels in particular instances (such as a moment of sacrificial generosity) and what he mentions here, but develops later, regarding the *state* of perfection.

In Part II-II Q81-91 treats the subject of “religion.” Religion, as worship or service of God is expressed through both internal and external acts. Whereas internal acts are “principal” acts, external acts, though secondary, are important. Within the category of “sacrifice,” wherein external things are offered to God, Aquinas considers not only oblations and tithes, but also vows (Q88). By a vow we

offer our life in some form as an intentional sacrifice to God. We bind ourselves to God through the combination of a deliberation of the mind, a purpose of the will, and a pronouncement of the mouth (body). Thus, a vow is an offering of the whole self to God. Furthermore, a vow *to God* is an act of worship, recognizing the One to whom this promise is offered. As we noticed in his “Perfection of the Spiritual Life,” Aquinas contends that it is more praiseworthy to do something in fulfillment of a vow than to perform the same action apart from the vow: first, because performed in the context of a vow they are considered acts of worship; second, because the one who vows makes a greater submission to God than one who just does a good act; and third, because the vow fixes the will on the good. Aquinas goes on to distinguish between solemn and simple vows, the dispensation of vows and the relationship between vows and oaths (a complicated topic which I will touch on later).

Finally, Aquinas treats the role of counsels in his Treatise On “Acts Which Pertain Especially to Certain Men” (II-II Q171-189). Having covered the external acts of religion which pertain to all people (like virtues and vices), Aquinas moves to treat the Christian life insofar as it is applied to people with particular circumstances: those with different spiritual gifts, those with a special sense of calling to the contemplative or active life, and those who are members of particular “states” in society (and especially those who have chosen religious life). With regard to his discussion of states and the religious life, his first task (Q183) is clarify the notion of “states” which he defines ultimately as involving one’s freedom or servitude (Art. 1). Just as the parts of a human body fit together through a united difference, so the members of the church differ with regard to states, offices (duties), and grades (Art. 3). In the Fourth Article Aquinas argues that differences of state apply to a distinction between beginners, those in the middle of spiritual maturity, and the perfect. Our relationship to sin and justice is different (remember, “state” is about settled conditions of servitude and freedom) whether we are beginning the spiritual life, whether we are in the midst or whether we are proficient. With these points made, Aquinas is able to speak directly to the state of perfection and the religious life (Q184-189).

Aquinas identifies the perfection of the Christian life with charity, referring to Colossians 3:14, “*Above all things have charity, which is the bond of perfection.*” This kind of perfect love can be approximated in this life, he argues, by our “removal of obstacles to the movement of love towards God” (Q 184, Art. 2). When we remove our affections from mortal sin or when we remove ourselves from “whatever hinders the mind’s affections from tending wholly to God.” This conclusion, then, naturally leads to the exploration of the role of commandments and counsels (Art. 3): “Whether, In This Life, Perfection Consists in the Observance of the Commandments or of the Counsels?” While we (or at least some secular clerics) might imagine Aquinas arguing that perfection is the preserve of those following the counsels, Aquinas places the heaviest weight on the commandments.³⁹ “Primarily and essentially,” Aquinas writes, “the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity . . . [love of God and neighbor], both of which are the matter of the chief commandments of the Divine Law, as stated above.” Yet he argues further. “Secondarily and instrumentally, however, perfection consists in the observance of the counsels, . . .” The point of the evangelical counsels is the removal of hindrances to charity (citing the reference to Augustine’s *Enchiridion* we mentioned above). He refers to the counsels as *means* of attaining to perfection. He reiterates the point he had made in “On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life,” that some may attain to Christian perfection without being in the state of perfection (Art. 4). The *state* of perfection is not a matter of certain acts, but rather “through binding himself in perpetuity and with a certain solemnity to those things which pertain to perfection.” It is the professed obligation to a life of the removal of obstacles such as marriage, possessions, and self-will (the vows – see earlier) that places one in the state of perfection. Religious “bind themselves by vow to refrain from worldly affairs, which they might lawfully use, in order to give themselves to God, wherein consists the perfection of the present life” (Art. 5).

39 I see this Aquinas as consistent here with what he has developed throughout his works up to this point. Developed, but essentially consistent.

Having clarified the state of perfection, Aquinas then moves to describe how different kinds of people fit this state: prelates, bishops and religious. He reiterates his idea that religion as an offering, a holocaust to God and combines it with the notion that perfection “consists in adhering wholly to God” to conclude that “religion denotes the state of perfection” (Q186, Art. 1). Again, this does not mean that religious are necessarily perfect. “The religious state,” Aquinas asserts, “is a school or exercise for the attainment of perfection” (here echoing the Prologue to the *Rule of Benedict*). In Q186, Art. 3 Aquinas argues (with the mendicants) that voluntary poverty is a “first foundation” of the attainment of the perfection of charity. Likewise with the vows of celibacy and obedience: “The religious state requires the removal of whatever hinders man from devoting himself entirely to God’s service” (Art. 4). He repeats the importance of not only living a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but of obligating oneself to that life through a vow (Art. 6), concluding that religious perfection—the religious state—consists, finally, in the vows themselves (Art. 7). Having established the centrality of the vows, Aquinas then is able to address the primacy of the vow of obedience (Art. 8) and matters related to religious who sin (Art. 9-10). The rest of his treatise deals with the kinds of religious life and entry into religious life, including a defense of the Dominican Order itself.⁴⁰

Through his writings, and particularly in the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas summarized and developed a theology of the religious life, rooted in the distinction between commandments and counsels. He both affirmed and emphasized Ambrose’s distinction between two ways of life: those who obey the commandments and those who choose to follow the counsels.⁴¹ He also broadened the notion of counsels beyond Ambrose’s mention of poverty and chastity. He added the counsel of obedience on

40 “Accordingly, the highest place in religious orders is held by those which are directed to teaching and preaching, which moreover are nearest to episcopal perfection, . . .” (Q 188, Art. 6).

41 I see Aquinas emphasising the distinctions in, for example, his mention of Vigilantius and Jovinian as heretics (see *ST II-II*, Q186, Art. 4; “Against Those Detering Men from Religion,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mendicant Controversies*, p. 328.

the same level as poverty and chastity. Though he did not describe the Sermon on the Mount as itself a list of counsels rather than commandments, he did describe aspects of the Sermon on the Mount in this language. He did not know what to do with Matthew 10. A further step Aquinas took was to tightly associate the counsels with the vows of religious life. As Dominican theologian Aidan Nichols writes, “Vows were much more important in Religious life for Thomas and for medieval theologians generally than had been the case for the Fathers of the Church.”⁴² Even though he describes the choice to enter a life of following the counsels in terms of renouncing hindrances to charity, his presentation identifies those who follow the counsels with those who join formal religious orders.⁴³ Though he taught that perfection did not consist in the counsels and he admitted that people could attain perfection of charity apart from the state of religious life, he consistently privileged religious life: describing it as a fast-track to salvation or as adding perfection to salvation. While Aquinas steers away from what he perceives as the dangers of equalizing the lay and religious lives, I feel like he took a step closer toward the dangers of those, like Eustathius and the Messalians, who expected “full Christians” to make the choice of the renounced life. I think that one consequence of all these elements expressed in Aquinas’s work was to permit the transformation of religious life into an institutional elite. This institutionalization, combined with corruptions in the following centuries, gave reason for the Reformers to perceive religious life to be exactly what they despised. But before we move to the Reformers we must see how Aquinas’s theology of commandments and counsels fared within a few other circles prior to the Protestant Reformation.

The Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life

⁴² Aidan Nichols, *What is the Religious Life: From the Gospels to Aquinas* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2015), 69.

⁴³ Dominican practice often followed Aquinas’s presentation. John Van Engen documents the tensions, for example, between the Dominicans and the Beguines, who wanted to live a form of religious life without taking formal vows. See, for example, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, loc. 5334.

In 1374, precisely one hundred years after the death of Thomas Aquinas, Master Geert Grote experienced a profound change of life. Some called it a “conversion.” He renounced the career he had been pursuing as a minor cleric in the low countries (Netherlands), along with the income he received from this position. Yet contrary to medieval norms, he expressed this conversion neither by entering a cloister nor joining a community of mendicant friars. Instead he wrote himself a list of “Resolutions and Intentions, But Not Vows.”⁴⁴ The list begins with Grote’s commitment to economic simplicity and generosity (yet not monastic poverty). It continues with a renunciation of speculative intellectual pursuits, be they esoteric astrology or university studies. His was to be a life of practical, spiritual reflection on sacred texts. He did not abandon the church, but rather urged himself on to wholehearted devotion through participation in daily mass. He pledged to treat food, relationships, and other temporal matters, with the rigor of monastic consecration. Grote visited a Carthusian monastery—and deeply respected their way of life from that point on—but ultimately chose to live a life of devotion unaffiliated with any religious order. Grote turned his spacious home into a hospice for poor women, keeping a small corner for himself. After a time he discerned a call to proclaim the Gospel. Rather than seek priestly ordination, Grote received permission to preach as a deacon, which he did in public squares throughout the region for the next four years until his untimely death of the plague in 1384.

Geert Grote communicated an ambiguous affirmation of religious life. He chose a life of devotion outside the frameworks of monasticism or mendicancy. He frequently criticized the ease and the superficiality of institutional religion. And yet he advised, on his deathbed, that some of his circle establish a community affiliated with an approved rule and order. The Congregation of Windesheim

44 See John Van Engen, translator. *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 65-77. For an introduction to this document see pp. 39-40. On the changes in the idea and experience of conversion at this time, see for example John Van Engen, “Conversion and Conformity in the Early fifteenth Century,” in Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 30-65; Augustine Thompson, “From Conversion to Community,” chapter 2 of his *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 69-102; and the first two chapters of Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*.

grew to become a wide network of houses, playing a notable role in the monastic reform movement of the fifteenth century. Grote's passion was to promote sincere, whole-hearted, living faith for anybody and everybody, through whatever form was most appropriate. His contemporaries identified this vision as a novel expression, a *modern devotion*, and this is one of the phrases (*devotio moderna*) we use today to describe the movement which emerged from the followers of Grooten.⁴⁵

Whereas the followers of John Wycliff in England (who also died in 1384) advocated for the replacement of religious orders through a spiritual renewal of parish life, the Modern Devout sought to make spaces for lay monastic communities. For the Lollards—as Wycliff's followers were labeled—the only acceptable abbot was Christ, the only Rule was the Gospel, and the “counsels” were norms appropriate for every Christian to be applied in the context of ordinary domestic existence. Wealthy monasteries and hypocritical friars were unnecessary.⁴⁶ The Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, however, committed themselves “to acquiesce willingly in the admonishments and counsel of our priest” (who functioned as the head of the house), ordered their communities through “Customaries” and “Ways of Life,” and adapted the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience for their unique settings.⁴⁷

These “settings”—the forms of life practiced by the Modern Devout—varied. Indeed, the Devout were forced to adapt their settings in the context of tensions with secular and religious authorities. It is possible to identify three somewhat distinct community expressions of the Modern

45 Another phrase used to identify the communities of modern devotion is the *Sisters* (or *Brothers*) *of the Common Life*. I will use both phrases [along with “Modern Devout”] to identify the movement throughout this essay.

46 On Wycliff and the Lollards, see for example Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (Hampshire, England: Palgrave, 2002); Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, editors, *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2003); and Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, loc 5391-5442.

47 See the samples published in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 155-186. Pages 170-172 address the counsels, including obedience. On obedience, see also J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Reforming authority, reforming obedience: Ignatius of Loyola, John Calvin, and the Modern-day Devout.” *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, Vol 16, No. 2 (July 2014), 138-162.

Devout.⁴⁸ The first were the independent houses. As mentioned above, Grote donated the use of his own home to serve as a house for women. In time other houses of women were established, each with their own customs yet affiliated with other kindred houses. Houses of men were established as well with similar arrangements. Also—again mentioned above—at the end of his life Grote advocated the foundation of formal religious communities. The Congregation of Windesheim, a branch of the order of canons and canonesses regular was consecrated in 1387. This was a fully “approved” expression of the spirit of the Modern Devout, involving all of the securities and some of the difficulties of institutional religious life. The third expression—at times a response to pressures from outside—were communities of Tertiaries, men and women who adapted (for example) the Rule of the Franciscans and lived the Devout spirit formally associated with religious orders. I will focus my attention here on the independent communities of Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life who were not formally affiliated with either the Augustinians or another Tertiary order.

Although the independent communities of the Devout were not formally “monastic,” the structure of their lives resembled the rhythm of medieval cloisters.⁴⁹ Waking up early for prayer, they would then spend time in manual labor (often textile work or copying manuscripts), interrupted by periods of private or corporate prayer. Meals were eaten in common. Community gatherings would appear periodically. Sisters usually slept in a common dormitory while Brothers often had their own cell/room. The houses of brothers incorporated a mix, unusual for the time, of priests, minor clerics, and laymen in a single community. As in Carthusian monasteries, time spent in solitary work was also time of prayer.

Though the community lived by a simple, semi-monastic schedule, the individual members of the community often ordered their lives by means of reflections recorded in journals. These notebooks

48 Identified in Diemel, Bas and Jeroen Deploige. “United or Bound by Death: A Case-Study on Group Identity and Textual Communities within the Devotio Moderna.” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique*. Vol 105, Issue #2 (2010) 347.

49 Van Engen summarizes this in *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 2085-3206

(*raparia*) served as both guides for and expressions of personal devotion. Perhaps the inspiration for these books came from Grote's own recorded list of personal "resolutions." But the private notebooks of the Devout would record much more than resolutions. Devout attending a message, "listened to the rector but also took a few notes or jotted down the main points in their *raparia*, or personal notebooks, from which they could later retrieve material for individual meditation."⁵⁰ Devout would document experiences, insights, stories of people's lives, sermon notes, and spiritual practices, all tailored to facilitate their own times of meditation and self-examination. In this respect the houses of the Modern Devout once again resembled Carthusian monasteries: providing a common venue to foster private devotion.

The public did not know what to make of this movement, especially the independent communities. Were they a new form of "nun"? Were they social rebels, unwilling to conform to the expected social norms? We must remind ourselves of their context. Van Engen writes of the world surrounding the Modern Devout:

Theirs was a world where a single church claimed jurisdiction over virtually every person in society, and where towns extended liberties to, and exercised oversight over, most within their walls.⁵¹

Needless to say, in a context like Van Engen describes, criticism and conflict was inevitable. Women were reproached as "beguines" and men were labeled "Lollards."⁵² Some associated the Modern

50 Diemel and Deploige. "United or Bound by Death," 368. On *raparia*, see also Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 47; Anthony Dupont and Lieve Uyttenhove. "Deiformity and the Ultimate Human Freedom: Gerlach Peters' *Soliloquium ignitum cum Deo*." in *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014), 223; and [regarding the canonesses of Windesheim] Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and Their Writings*. David F. Johnson, translator. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004.

51 Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, loc 130.

52 I have mentioned Lollards above. The beguines of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries served as an important earlier kindred expression, both for those who admired and those who condemned the Modern Devout. On the beguines, their semi-monastic life [with some application to new monastic explorations] see Evan B. Howard "The Beguine Option: A Persistent Past and a Promising Future of Christian Monasticism" in *Religions* Vol. 10, Issue 9 (August 2019), available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/9/491>, and accessed on September 17, 2020. For more on the criticism of the Modern Devout see Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, chapter Three ("Suspicion and Inquisition"), loc 1895-2668.

Devout with circles of suspect doctrine, such as the Free Spirit movement.⁵³ Others were concerned with their use of vernacular sacred texts, as the translation and use of the vernacular for religious purposes was regulated at that time. Still others complained about their clothing since the habit of the Modern Devout precisely fit neither secular nor religious norms. Other priests in the region, perhaps threatened by the competition, criticized the meetings some of the Devout held on Sundays for the education of youth. Accusing the hosts of unauthorized preaching, they threatened to close down the houses, or at least prevent them from holding meetings.

Indeed, authorities and populous alike did not merely threaten but acted against this “new devotion.” Some priests denied the Eucharist to communicants they knew were Devout. Authorities forced some houses to affiliate with a formal order (such as the Franciscan Tertiaries) or to join a kindred “official” expression such as the Windesheim canons. Other houses were simply closed down: its members scattering throughout the region or moving to Devout houses in nearby towns. The point for this paper is that these trials (both spiritual and literal) served as the environment within which some Modern Devout carefully explored and defended their right to this way of life. And in exploring this defense the Devout found themselves examining the very nature of religious life—and the place of commandments and counsels. As Van Engen puts it, “their lifestyle also raised issues that were finally theological: what was the status of “religion”? How did the “counsels of perfection” for religious relate to the “commands” for all the baptized? Was there greater merit simply in acting under a vow? How could they justify their “estate” in terms of the gospel?”⁵⁴ I will here summarize a few key arguments made by important representatives of the Devout expressed between Zerbolt of Zutphen’s *Circa Modum* (@1396-98) and John Pupper’s *Freedom of the Christian Religion* (finished @1470-71).⁵⁵

53 See Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

54 Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 5289-91.

55 Due to my own limits in accessing the primary sources, I am relying, in this section particularly on the work of Van Engen in *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*. References to this work are indicated here by Kindle location within parentheses). I discovered the excellent treatment of John Pupper Goch in David Steinmetz’s *Calvin in Context*, second

One argument was the defense of the Devout's freedom to establish communities that owned properties and shared income. Upon entry, members of a Devout household would resign all goods and incomes to the house (society) by means of a notarized civil transaction.⁵⁶ Skeptics (either secular or ecclesiastical) looked upon these communes of priests, minor clerics, and lay persons as either the independent (and illicit) formation of a clerical house or the spread of a subversive sect. Zerbolt of Zutphen wrote his *Circa Modum* as a defense of the common life in response to just such critics.⁵⁷ Zerbolt cited Scripture, arguing that groups who owned possessions but shared them in a practice of common usage followed the example of both Christ and the church in Acts. Common life was the norm of the [pre-monastic] early church and should be practiced by non-religious as well as religious. Those who sought Gospel perfection, Zerbolt contended, "were to imitate the early church, where a common life existed long before any religious orders" (loc. 3773; cf. 3801). Similarly, when John Pupper read the book of Acts he found no vows, but rather an outpouring of the Spirit on a populous who lived in common in "perfect observance of Gospel law" (loc. 5838; see also loc. 5742).⁵⁸

In my reading of the literature, I have come to the conclusion that this concern of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life to defend their freedom to form communities and to live in common simply expresses one element of a much broader concern, perhaps their strongest concern. The Modern Devout were fundamentally trying to free up space for any who wished to live the counsels. A life of common ownership, holy celibacy, and submission to recognized leaders should not be restricted only to those who were literate in Latin and could offer a dowry upon entry into an ecclesiastically recognized order. While Aquinas acknowledged that perfection was not limited to clergy and religious,

edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 188-190 too late for careful integration.

56 See *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, loc. 3639; *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 168.

57 See *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 14, for this context.

58 I find it interesting to see how readers interpret the common life of the community in Acts in different ways. Whereas Zerbolt and Pupper see in Acts 2 and 4 a reference to a non-monastic sharing of possessions (thus making the counsels available to the broad church), John Cassian (360-435) saw the foundations of a primitive monasticism in the same passages. See John Cassian, *The Conferences*, translated by Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1997) 18.V.1, pages 637-39. See also Adalbert de Vogüé, "Monasticism and the Church in the Writings of Cassian," in *Monastic Studies* Number 3 (1965), 19-51.

he privileged those who joined formal orders as members of the “state of perfection.” In the century that followed Aquinas, professed religious made much of that privilege, further dividing pious laity from what appeared to be an increasingly hypocritical caste of bishops and monks. The Modern Devout responded to this state of affairs by declaring the institutionalization of the counsels unacceptable.

They argued this point variously. Zerbolt of Zutphen argued, regarding the counsel of poverty, that “to deny this counsel to the nonprofessed . . . was to impede the Gospel injunction” (loc. 3766). Similarly Dirk of Herxen in the early fifteenth century recognized the goodness of people in the world, yet “set their status in the church lower than any who kept the counsels of perfection.” For Dirk of Herxen the point was “to keep the counsels, not take vows” (loc. 4598). John Pupper’s *Dialogue* was a careful response to those who claimed that “any perfect observance of the evangelical law, indeed of apostolic life in the early church, required an obligatory vow” (loc 5583). Yet in his “Freedom of the Christian Religion” Pupper “repudiated any argument (meaning especially Thomas’s) that counsels had been added to the commandments as a better and more efficacious way.” Pupper concluded, developing theologically what other Devout had been assuming in their practice, that “in Gospel law counsels thereby functioned as commandments and became necessary for all . . . , with each to observe it according to their time and place” (loc. 5854-58).⁵⁹ Thus, in “A Customary for Brothers,” written for the community as Zwolle between 1415 and 1424 we find in consecutive order treatments of obedience, poverty, and chastity which adapt the norms of monastic life for the context of a nonprofessed persons who wish to “progress in the way of God.”⁶⁰ The aim of the Devout was not to minimize the counsels but rather to provide acceptable vehicles where they could be pursued by any,

59 Notice Pupper’s discussion of “Gospel Law.” People were forced to reconsider their understanding of “the law” in this period, as the later middle ages responded to Aquinas and Scholastic theologies. The role of law in the Christian life becomes an important topic not only for late medieval discussions of religious life, but is then developed further in the theologies of the Protestant reformers.

60 *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 170. See pp. 170-72 for treatment of the counsels.

whether understood literally as the commitment of a few devout laity or as commandments incumbent upon all believers yet interpreted to fit individual contexts.

What this meant for the Devout was that one's standing with God—one's "merit"—was not significantly improved by the taking of vows. As we have seen, Thomas Aquinas contended that it is more praiseworthy (meritorious) to do something in fulfillment of a vow than to perform the same action apart from the vow.⁶¹ For Aquinas, an act of obedience in the context of a vow is not merely a single act of submission but rather is part of a life consecrated through a prior and greater submission to God, an act of worship fixing the will upon the good. For the Modern Devout, however—one or two centuries later—the taking of vows appeared not as a "holocaust" of full abandonment to God, but rather as an institutional formality, neither expressing sincere worship, nor fixing the will, nor even facilitating a holy life. The commitments of the Devout were serious acts of consecration (see loc. 3968), but they were seen as acts of gospel liberty. It was the interior freedom of the individual devout—rather than the institutional structure of religion—that gave these commitments their value. Thus, "the truly meritorious, John Pupper declared by contrast, operated out of gospel liberty; it was the weak who acted under vow" (loc. 5731 see also loc. 5731). Vows, argued Pupper, "were nothing but a law added (*superadditum*) by the church (*positiva constitutio*) to the original "Christian religion" to force exterior observance." Pupper is concerned with "the enormous distance between doing something good on command, and doing the good well in love." All are called to the Gospel law of Christ, not just an elite, and "it is a law of perfect love, or perfect liberty, which cannot abide "necessitating obligation" (loc. 5752, 5750). Whereas Aquinas himself saw love as the essence of Christian perfection, facilitated (best) through the fulfillment of vows freely taken in the context of a supporting institution and way of

61 As with "law," the theology of "merit" was beginning to be reconsidered due to just such issues as these questions about which acts or inward dispositions accrued degrees of merit. For the most part the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life were medievals (not Reformers) in that they did not reject a theology of merit, but rather reworked it to fit a reorientation to lay devout communities.

life, the Modern Devout perceived the same context as an environment which often choked out the free exercise of love and prevented the development of authentic Christian maturity.

One way of perceiving the concerns of the Devout would be to see them as a manifestation of the late medieval debates between intellectualists and voluntarists.⁶² John Pupper, for example, clearly falls on the side of the voluntarists (see loc. 5774). His *Dialogue* speaks explicitly about the “Pelagian” error of his times wherein “people recognize interior and exterior acts of faith but impose on the interior (and its liberty) an obligatory vow, claiming that Gospel law cannot be achieved perfectly apart from vows--a pharisaic superstition.” (loc 5597; see also loc. 5788). What is critical in Pupper’s argument is to recognize his distinction between an “obligation of the will,” and an “oblation of the will.” Pupper argued that “Will is the way to God, not the intellect as Thomists say; and humans conform more closely to the divine will the more they act in freedom of the will” (loc. 5611). He does not buy Aquinas’s view of a vow hardening the will toward the good. Pupper sets a “liberty of spirit directed by the yoke of charity” (*libertatem spiritusiugo charitatis dirigatur*) against any “thousand vows” as well as any form of “monastic discipline.” (loc. 5606).

I have summarized here the views of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life with regard to commandments and counsels, since they serve as an excellent case-study in the shifts that were taking place in the fifteenth century. Yet the Modern Devout were not alone in their critique of Aquinas’s understanding of commandments and counsels (or at least of the ways that his understanding was employed by others). As Van Engen summarizes, “From the 1380s onward, however, fundamental objections arose not just to specific practices or institutions (that a medieval constant), but to the very rationale for a separate estate of the religiously perfect” (loc. 5390). Conciliarists, humanists, and heretics all contributed to these objections. We have already mentioned Wyclif and the Lollards, who

62 For a brief summary of the medieval philosophical debate see “Medieval Theories of Free Will” in the Internet Encyclopedia <https://iep.utm.edu/freewi-m/>. While these debates were raging in a technical way among the philosophers, one can notice similar issues raised in popular level critiques of dry intellectualism. We see some of this in Grote’s own resolutions as well as in, for example Modern Devout writer Thomas á Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*.

sought to reform or abandon religious orders in favor of a renewed parish life. Van Engen treats the views of Jean Gerson (1363-1429), Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), and Gabriel Biel (1420-1495). I find similar views in Erasmus (1466-1536).⁶³

Will over intellect. Freedom over form. Interior [Gospel] law merits more than external laws. Availability of holiness to the masses rather than merely an institutional elite. What we can observe, by looking at the approach of the Modern Devout and others to the subject of commandments and counsels, are tiny steps being made through the fifteenth century from medieval into modern. These steps involve a restatement of the nature of religion as such.⁶⁴ As Van Engen observes, “the larger outcome of all this was to provoke, alongside Wycliffite and Hussite challenges to the Eucharist and ecclesiology, a wide-open debate about the nature and prerogatives of “religion”” (loc. 4836). On the one hand Augustine—and Aquinas in suit—defined religion as the authentic worship of the Christian God. Geert Grote himself references Augustine’s *True Religion* in his “A Treatise on Four Subjects Suitable for Meditation.”⁶⁵ Yet at the same time it was common (perhaps more common) to speak of “religion” as a *form* of worship, the way of life of a particular religious order. Thus John Van Engen clarifies regarding Pupper’s use of “the Christian religion” stating that, “the immediate point of [Pupper’s] comparison was not “Jewish” religion but “Franciscan” or “Dominican” or “Benedictine”” (loc. 5707). John Pupper, along with Lollards, Friends of God, humanists, and others, were rethinking the very nature of the Christian religion. Heated debates had been heard regarding which order (Clunaic, Cistercian, Franciscan, Dominican) was the best expression of “true religion.” Were these

63 See, for example, The Religious Pilgrimage” in *Colloquies* and in his letter to Lambert Grunnius (cf. Calvin, *Institutes* IV. Xiii. 8 fn 11). For further treatment of Gerson, see Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 186-88.

64 For a select survey of material on “true religion” in the medieval period and today see my “Medieval Evangelicalism: A Discussion of “True Religion” in the Western Church of the Middle Ages and Today.” available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/medieval-evangelicalism-a-discussion-of-true-religion-in-the-western-church-of-the-middle-ages-and-today/>, accessed September 23, 2020. Though I think the basic thesis of the piece stands, I did not consider Augustine or Aquinas sufficiently. Today I think that I would see dual notions of religion (authentic worship, monastic tradition) in use and tension during the late middle ages rather than my earlier presentation of the domination of a single use (monastic tradition) which then receives critique from various quarters. Some much depends [and I think depended] on from where you were viewing things.

65 *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 103.

debates even asking the right question? Was religion defined by ways of life distinguished by embodiment in formal religious orders? Was lay “religion” simply a faithful use of the sacraments provided by the Church? Whom does God invite? To what? And why? Perhaps “religion” was less a matter of institutional affiliation and more about personal, interior development.

Zerbolt, in his *Spiritual Ascents*, encourages his readers who wish to conquer tedium in the Christian life to “break yourself through constant exercise of good works” (notice the use of externals [good works] for the sake of interiority [break yourself]). The step of ascent that flows from this kind of exercise is that, “you will not only do what is necessary for salvation but with full and fervent affection and the tedium partly conquered you will begin to do all the things of God, become zealous to do them, and even fulfill the counsels.”⁶⁶ Zerbolt’s manual of lay devotion envisions a readership who, without taking vows or joining a particular order, progress step by step, fulfilling both commandments and counsels, until they have reached full maturity in Christian love for God and others. This is religion available to all. It is the vision of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life.

One final matter regarding the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life deserves attention before we move to explore the views of the Reformation era. That matter is the tension (or perhaps the ambiguity) one notices when observing the whole of the Modern Devotion expression(s). On the one hand, the practice of the Modern Devout communities was one of living a strict observance of the counsels. This is what they wanted: to foster environments wherein laity could renounce private possessions, marital relationships, worldly occupations, to submit themselves to leadership and thus to have the freedom to devote themselves to a life of whole-hearted devotion. We have seen this all along in our review of the Modern Devout. Yet at times in their defense of the practice, in their efforts to give room for the application of the counsels to all believers, they periodically “spiritualized” the counsels.

66 *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 303. See also Thomas á Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*

In Pupper's *Gospel Law and Freedom of Religion*, we hear the counsels redefined as commandments themselves, necessary for all, each Christian obligated to observe them "according to their time and place." In my own reading of this material I find little Devout treatment of the call of the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19:21. While they instituted communities of the literal practice of the counsels, they strove to understand the significance of the counsels not in the mere performance of the acts (this is why vows were not meritorious), but rather in the interior sincerity of the will expressed in their devoted life. As we shall see, whereas the Modern Devout fostered a strict practice in order to facilitate interior devotion, the Magisterial Reformers—perhaps akin to Wycliffe—promoted interior devotion to the point where they regarded strict practice (particularly in the context of the formal institutions of religious life known to them) as a dangerous hindrance to authentic Christian devotion.

Chapter 3: Modern Europe

By the end of the sixteenth century one could identify three approaches to commandments and counsels, approaches we see today. Each answered the questions, “What does God expect?” “Of whom?” and “Why?” differently. The Roman Catholic way developed the the framework of Thomas Aquinas, institutionalizing the distinction between laity who followed the commandments and religious who were bound to the counsels. The Magisterial Protestant way sought to erase this distinction by dissolving religious communities and interpreting “counsels” (however this was understood) as commandments meant for universal application. The Anabaptist way periodically formed communities who sought to live more strictly the counsels of poverty and obedience, giving the appearance of a monastic institution. These different ways of being developed in the context of great changes. After providing a sketch of the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century contexts I will summarize each approach, beginning with the Magisterial Protestants, then covering Anabaptists and concluding with the Roman Catholic way.

The background to all this development is the fifteenth century: a century of regression and reform, decline and development. Consider the status of the laity.⁶⁷ The twelfth and thirteenth centuries opened doors for lay piety. Through participation in Crusades, through imitation of the apostolic life, through affiliation with lay religious organizations, through personal devotional practices, common

67 See, for example, Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 69-102; Robert M. Stewart, "De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam" *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991), 90-134; Gert Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), 186-205; and André Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*, translated by Margery J. Schneider (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

Christians gained a measure of access to the life of Christ by the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, much was lost in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As André Vauchez concludes in his treatment of medieval laity, “we must recognize that, torn as it was between a Church in the process of clericalization and a society just beginning to become secularized, late medieval culture proved unable to define a peculiarly Christian usage of the world for those living in it.”⁶⁸ The condition of the priesthood in the fifteenth century was mixed. On the one hand, new churches were being established. On the other hand, the critique of clericalism was reaching a high point. The attempts at priestly reform were simply insufficient. Thus Kenan Osborne, in his history of the ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church (and quoting S. Harrison Thomson), concludes that “If any of the reform endeavors—for example, those of the councils, the mystics, certain progressive popes or cardinals, the reformers within the orders, the reform-minded laymen, or the humanist reformers—had succeeded, the Protestant Reformation would probably not have occurred, or at least it would have been postponed for a long time.”⁶⁹ When we consider the failure of the medieval church to equip the diocesan ministry for service to the people or to provide adequate place for devout laity we can begin to understand Steven Ozment’s explanation of the context of the Protestant reform: “the road to the Reformation was paved both by unprecedented abuse and a long-unsatisfied popular religious yearning.”⁷⁰

Two other aspects of the context of the sixteenth century deserve mention. First, we must say a word about the steps toward the reform of religious life in the fifteenth century. While the entire history of religious life can be interpreted as a complex series of cycles of revival, stability, and decline,⁷¹ members of religious orders in the late medieval period—even members of Martin Luther’s own order

68 Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 269.

69 Kenan Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 220.

70 Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 211.

71 This perspective seems to me to be present in such works as Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) and Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*.

of Augustinian hermits—took distinctive steps toward the reform and renewal of their way of life. Pope Benedict XII attempted a thorough reform of religious life—perhaps too thorough—in the fourteenth century. His work failed to produce lasting change. Centuries-long conflicts between factions of Franciscans were finally resolved in 1517 as Pope Leo simply entrusted the election of their Minister General to the faction known as the Observants. Similar disagreements between “Conventuals” and “Observants” also characterized the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine (originally OESA and now OSA, also known as Augustinian friars), shaped by the tensions between the OESA and the Augustinian Canons. Members of OESA struggled to recover the heritage of their icon, Augustine, and to define the appropriate way of life for their members. In response to an attempt by OESA Vicar General Johann Staupitz (1460-1524) to reconcile tensions within the order, the Observant faction sent a delegation to appeal their case to Rome directly. One member of that delegation was the relatively new brother, Martin Luther. Luther was engaged in the question of reform from that point on. As Eric Leland Saak asserts, “It was not the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther but the Augustinian Hermit Brother Martin Luther, who served as the catalyst for what has become known as the Reformation.”⁷²

Finally, we must note a change in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount in fifteenth-century Europe. We have already observed how the use of force (Matthew 5:21-26; 38-42) and the taking of oaths (Matthew 5:33-37) were sometimes identified as “counsels” in light of the fact that those who renounced the life of the world were released from obligations to military and civic service. We have also seen how Thomas Aquinas may have cracked open the doorway to interpret some aspects

72 Eric Leland Saak, "Martin Luther and the Monastic World of the Later Middle Ages" in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Accessed online on October 16 at <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-370>. On Benedict XII see Eric John, editor, *The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, revised edition (Roman Catholic Books, 1994). On the Franciscans see David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); and John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press (1968 Oxford UP; 1988 Franciscan Herald), 441-585. On late medieval monastic reform more generally see Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 298-312; Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 186-204.

of the Sermon on the Mount (and perhaps other aspects of Christian obedience) as invitations for the few rather than commandments for the many. Exploring further, I have found evidence within the corpus of writings related to Martin Luther to suggest that theologians after Aquinas may have opened this door quite a bit further.

Martin Luther begins his *Preface to the Sermon on the Mount* (1532) by condemning recent interpretations of Matthew 5, bemoaning that this chapter “has fallen into the hands of vulgar pigs and asses.” He states that instead of treating Jesus’s instructions as commandments the interpreters regard much of this chapter “merely as advice to those who want to become perfect,” as “evangelical counsels.” In the following paragraph Luther names one source of this teaching, citing “the jackasses in Paris” who argue that “Christian teaching would have much too hard of a time of it if it were loaded down with things like this.”⁷³ The footnote following this citation in the English edition of Luther’s works makes reference to the April 15, 1521 *Condemnation by the Theologians in Paris of the Teaching of Doctor Luther*. This document was an outcome of the 1519 debate in Leipzig against John Eck. In a section of this *Condemnation* the theologians of Paris speak directly to the issue of evangelical counsels.⁷⁴ Whereas Luther argues that the instructions in Matthew 5:39 and Romans 12:19 regarding retribution should be seen as commandments (*gepot - Gebot*) rather than counsels (*redte – Räte*), the theologians of Paris reply that Luther’s view is “false and burdens the Christian law too far [or weighs Christian law down too much] and is against a right understanding of the Holy Scriptures.”⁷⁵ It is possible that Luther’s comments in his *Preface to the Sermon on the Mount* are referring directly to this statement.

73 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Volume 21: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and the Magnificat*, Jaroslav Pelikan editor (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 3-4.

74 See *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 8. Band (Weimar, 1889) [WA], 284. accessible from archive.org.

75 Ibid. This is my own translation with help from Mike O’Leary and John Mark Shorack. See also WA 9.733, along with *Luther’s Works* 34.306.

In the *Preface* Luther identifies twelve “evangelical counsels” that were “commonly taught”: “do not requite wrongdoing! Do not avenge yourself! . . . Lend to him who borrows! Do good to those who hate! . . .” If indeed these admonitions from the Sermon on the Mount were viewed as counsels, and if the theologians of Paris considered Luther to be in error by considering resistance to retribution to be a commandment and not a counsel, then it is reasonable to assume that some had opened Aquinas’s interpretive door much wider, further dividing those elements that were intended for all believers and those that were simply invitations for those who through the taking of vows had entered into “the state of perfection.” As we shall see, this item of hermeneutical history supplies an important piece of the context behind Martin Luther and John Calvin’s treatment of counsels and commandments.

A. *The Magisterial Protestant Reformation*

We begin with Martin Luther, and I can only comment here on his treatment of commandments and counsels.⁷⁶ Luther’s most thorough treatment of commandments and counsels appears in his *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, written in 1521 and published in 1522.⁷⁷ He presents, in this treatise, five reasons why he is against monastic vows as currently practiced. The first of these is that “Vows Do Not Rest on the Word of God: They Run Counter to the Word of God.” At the start of this first argument Luther summarizes the basic ideas of those who take vows, and the first of these basic ideas is that “the gospel is not common to all, but is divided into counsels and precepts. Their

76 On Luther’s relationship with monasticism more generally, see Heinz Bluhm, “Martin Luther and the Idea of Monasticism” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXIV/10 (October 1963), 594-603; Michael von Brück, “In Search of an Authentic Christian Life: Luther and Monasticism” *Bangalore Theological Forum* XV/3 (1983), 218-236; Heiko A. Oberman, “Martin Luther Contra Medieval Monasticism: A Friar in the Lion’s Den,” in *Ad Fontes Lutheri: Toward the Recovery of the Real Luther: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Hagen’s Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Timothy Maschke, Franz Posset, and Joan Skocir (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 183-213; Dortehea Wendebourg, “Luther on Monasticism” *Lutheran Quarterly* XIX (2005), 125-52; Saak, “Martin Luther and the Monastic World,” Greg Peters, *Reforming the Monastery: Protestant Theologies of the Religious Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 19-37.

77 Found in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works Vol 44: The Christian in Society*, James Atkinson editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 245-400. References to Luther’s *On Monastic Vows* in this section will be indicated by page number in parentheses (for example Vows, 298).

monasticism follows the counsels rather than the precepts. The precepts are meant for ordinary men” (256). Luther mentions Matthew 5, 6 and 7. He identifies *counsels*, as the monastic institutions or theologians define it, as “for the most part those things which Christ teaches in Matthew 6 [5:25, 39-44], that is, not to take revenge, not to return evil for evil, not to go to litigation in court, . . . to turn the other cheek To sell everything, to leave everything, and follow Christ; to submit oneself to all men, even the most unworthy. To these add virginity and continence” (257). Luther summarizes his perception of the current notion of counsels primarily with their interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, although he does mention the three traditional vows. His concern here is that those who take vows are interpreting passages that ought to be considered commandments for all (the Sermon on the Mount) as mere advice, obligatory only for some. By doing this those who take vows “abolish divine commands,” “deny the truth of God,” and even “blaspheme God” (257).

Luther then develops his interpretation of the Sermon further, condemning again “the insanity of Paris, that Gomorrah, where they have reached the lovely conclusion that the Christian law is too great a burden” (259). He is concerned that the institution of monasticism has falsified the Gospel by failing to encourage the average Christian to a higher life. And this concern is made more grave by his perception that those who take vows themselves woefully fail to live up to the values of their own vows, for example that “these monks are the very people who accumulate everything belonging to everybody else, and have more than everyone else” (260).

Luther then addresses the question of virginity as a counsel. He states regarding virginity, “Clearly Christ did not counsel it, but rather discouraged it,” interpreting Matthew 19:11-12 as spoken by a Jesus who would prefer people to be married. Similarly, he states regarding Paul’s counsel in 1 Corinthians 7:7 that Paul “does not invite anyone to take up celibacy either, he discourages them and deters them” (261). He condemns the division of the Christian life into “states” of perfection and imperfection, assuming that those who take vows measure their state of perfection by counsels and not

by precepts (263). Is this a misunderstanding of Aquinas (who saw perfection in love and the counsels as means to love) or a proper understanding of the way that Aquinas's views had degenerated in popular use over two hundred years?⁷⁸

Luther then shifts his attention to the three traditional vows. "And what is more scandalous," Luther proclaims, "they have selected only three out of all those many things just referred to which they call counsels: obedience, poverty, and chastity. The rest of the counsels they neither vow nor keep. They undertake litigation at will; they avenge themselves; they hate their enemy . . ." (265). He further claims that "their obedience and poverty bear no resemblance to what their counsels say." Luther interprets true obedience as a universal humility taught by the gospel, a command that religious neglect in the context of their vowed obedience to a superior. Similarly, he interprets true poverty as desiring nothing in spirit and serving the good of others freely, a command religious have neglected, for "under this holy vow of poverty they have become the most greedy of men and are rolling in wealth" (267). And finally he criticizes the religious practice of chastity: first, in that it "has no function or purpose in the gospel," and second that for the monks "it is a perverted and godless chastity, almost totally corrupted by lust" (267). His treatment of commandments and counsels in this first part of his treatise is designed in part to explain what those around him mean by vows (and what they mean by commandments and counsels), but in doing this, his aim is also to prove that the practice of taking religious vows runs counter to the Word of God.

After arguing, in Parts II – III, that Vows are Against Faith and Against Evangelical Freedom, Luther argues that vows are Contrary to the Commands of God, demonstrating how the practice of taking vows facilitates the violation of each of the ten commandments. His point is not merely that monks have become corrupt (though he certainly believes this). Luther here is not a reforming monk, wishing to guide monks and nuns to a more authentic practice of religious life. Nor does he wish to

⁷⁸ I owe Greg Peters and Ryan Brandt thanks for helping me to understand the nuances of Reformation interpretation of medieval Christianity.

retrieve the vision of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, ensuring the means by which devout laity can embody poverty, chastity, and obedience in all the literal strictness of a Carthusian monastery. Luther admits that saints in the past have kept the vows and that some sincere saints could live the vows even currently. Rather, he argues, "I am disputing the institution itself" (317).

Luther returns in the Last Part (after Part V: Monasticism is Contrary to Common Sense and Reason), in what he calls "our final assault" (356), to the subject of counsels and commandments. His aim, in this final section is to show that the three traditional vows (poverty, obedience, and chastity) are really matters of free will for all Christians and not matters of vowed obligation for a few. He begins with the vow of poverty, dividing poverty into spiritual and material poverty. The monks sin against spiritual poverty (Matthew 5:3), by claiming poverty for themselves (promoting an unbiblical elitism) and by pretending they are vowing something other than what is implicit in their vow of baptism. Luther argues, regarding material poverty, that sharing goods in common (Acts 2:44) was not and should not be considered poverty. And since their poverty cannot be a matter of needing nothing at all (an impossibility), it has become a dependent irresponsibility which through the legality of vows, enables religious to have "possessed nothing of its own but everything of everyone else" (358). Similarly with regard to obedience: the monks sin against both the spiritual obedience of mutual subjection and the ordinary corporeal subjection that is commanded by God for children, sons, slaves and the like. The elitism fostered through reserving the counsels for themselves prevents the unvowed ordinary believer from perceiving their own life as a freely-willed fulfillment of their baptismal vows. Again, Luther admits that some monks fulfill their vows sincerely. "I grant," Luther writes, "that in their hearts they intend an evangelical obedience. I am not denying this. I likewise grant that in their hearts they intend an evangelical poverty, as was certainly the case of the saints. Yet the institution itself, the very reason for taking vows, runs contrary to the gospel" (363). He then addresses the vow of chastity, arguing that even this vow should be valid for a limited amount of time. He states that "I have

clearly proved that the whole institution of the vow is fictitious both in its first principles and in its most important essentials, namely obedience and poverty” (371). Luther admits, “If the gospel really reigned alone and supreme, and vows were no longer there to ensnare people, there would no longer be any danger, . . . Everyone would know that he should be chaste not because of a vow but on his own volition” (373). Like the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, Luther longs to see the counsels pursued by all Christians as an expression of evangelical freedom.⁷⁹ Yet whereas the Modern Devout only periodically interpret the counsels spiritually and strive to repackage the institutions of monasticism for communities of devout laity, Luther consistently interprets the counsels spiritually and advises that the institutions of monasticism be abandoned.⁸⁰

I think we must comprehend Luther in his early years in terms of the combined influence of his pastoral and educational/theological responsibilities in the context of his broader monastic affiliation. More than likely, Luther witnessed examples of the corruption of religious life and monastic elitism. In his pastoral work he sensed the spiritual longings of the laity. He experienced how the pastoral ministry had been sacramentalized, how a devout pursuit of living the gospel was often kept distant from the average believer through the institutional structures grounded in the distinction between commandments and counsels. His biblical training, along with the interest in Augustinian recovery present in the atmosphere of his own religious order, directed him toward a rediscovery of the interiority of faith. All of these factors contributed to Martin Luther’s approach to monasticism and more specifically to the distinction of commandments and counsels. Luther’s “On Monastic Vows” longs for the day when ordinary believers recognize that the Sermon on the Mount was meant for them.

⁷⁹ Compare John Pupper’s *Gospel Law and the Freedom of the Christian Religion* (completed in 1471) with Luther’s *Freedom of A Christian* (1521).

⁸⁰ True, Luther does concede that vows can be taken in a godly manner (see for example pp. 294-95, 304, 307, 311-12, 341). He also argues that there is (and was) value in monasteries as training centers for youth (see for example pp. 313, 334, 364, 367; John Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 446-47. See also Oberman, “Martin Luther Contra Medieval Monasticism,” 201). Nevertheless, I read these caveats as sincere admissions of mere possibility which must be understood in the context of his own passionate conviction that it was time that monasticism, as an institution, had to end. (see further pp. 305, 308, 310, 312, 313, 321, 327, 328, 336, 345, 351, 362, 367, 377-79, 385).

He dreams of the time when people marry, serving one another in mutual and appropriate obedience: parent and child, ruler and subject. He promotes an economy of abundance and generosity: merchants and laborers finding God in the midst of their work and expressing generosity to those in need not out of a spirit of ecclesial compulsion but from Christian freedom. It is this vision of vocation, I believe, that drives Luther's rejection of monastic vocation and his interpretation of commandments and counsels.⁸¹

Luther was consistent in his rejection of the distinction of commandments and counsels in the works that followed his treatise on vows. In his 1523 treatise "Concerning the Ministry" he decries the way that the church disempowers the priesthood of the laity through their system of ordination. Then he states, "It is just as great an abomination as when the monks vow obedience to "Evangelical Counsels," and at the same time deny the commandments of God."⁸² In his 1529 statement on "War Against the Turks" he argues that the Muslims are little better than the Pope who considers some of the commandments to be too hard (giving the example of Matthew 5). "He interprets them and makes them *concilia*, that is "counsels," which no one is bound to keep unless he desires to do so, as Paris and other universities, schools, and monasteries have brazenly taught."⁸³ I have already mentioned Luther's 1532 *Preface to the Sermon on the Mount*.⁸⁴ Luther acknowledges that saints have lived well within the vows. He mentions Antony, Francis, Bernard. Yet, as Heiko Oberman states, summarizing Luther's thought, "The exceptional survival of these great saints cannot establish a precedent for the Christian life; they are extraordinary, living acts of God." Thus, "The three vows do not lead to a higher but to a hindered Christian life."⁸⁵

81 Wendenbourg ("Luther on Monasticism," 131), makes a similar summary of Luther's position, namely that "the traditional distinction between "commandments" and "counsels" can no longer be sustained."

82 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Volume 20: Church and Ministry II, Conrad Bergendoff, editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 20.

83 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Volume 46: The Christian in Society, Robert C. Schultz, editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 197

84 For further examples, see also Volume 44, pp. 70, 74.

85 Oberman, "Luther Contra Medieval Monasticism," 206, 207.

One thing I sensed in reading Luther's works was how far he was from Ambrose. Gone were the dreams of a fully devoted, undistracted, army of virgins. Gone also was the appreciation for those who voluntarily abandoned worldly possessions and occupations to give themselves wholeheartedly to the kingdom of God. In fact, more specifically, gone (or nearly gone) was any mention of Matthew 19:21, Jesus's invitation to the Rich Young Ruler, the foundation of Ambrose's pioneering treatment of evangelical counsels. For Luther's treatment of this passage we have to explore his lesser-known Wednesday sermons on the gospel of Matthew. David C. Fink describes how "Luther's preaching in these sermons is focused squarely on the question of renunciation: "Should Christians have worldly possessions, or do they have to leave and throw away everything?"⁸⁶ Luther castigates monks, and especially the "barefoot monks" [friars] for claiming that they alone observed the counsel of poverty. Earlier in his sermons Luther had already argued for the normativity of marriage (against the monastic value for celibacy). Here he presents a similar argument for the value of possessions. According to Luther, the rich young ruler was an eager law-keeper. This was his strength, but also his weakness. Thus Jesus, as Luther preaches, rehearses examples from the second table of the law (murder, adultery, theft, lying) with reference to the inward conditions of anger, lust, covetousness and so on. The rich young ruler does not understand the proper interpretation of the law and erroneously proclaims that he has kept the law perfectly. Jesus takes the matter one step further, radicalizing love to the point of giving up all for another. Luther states, "The meaning of this commandment must be understood spiritually (*geistlich*) and interpreted like this: first, that the heart should be separated from possessions, so that you regard God higher and set Him above them; second, that if the need arises, you not only sell everything but also follow Christ and lose life and limb for His sake."⁸⁷ For Luther this passage is aimed not at the rich, or even those who might wrongly put their trust in wealth. For Luther, this

86 David C. Fink, "Un-Reading Renunciation: Luther, Calvin, and the "Rich Young Ruler" *Modern Theology* 32/4 (October 2016), 582. I am drawing largely from Fink in this section.

87 Cited in Fink, "Unreading Renunciation," 585.

passage describes everyone. “Wealth and poverty,” writes Fink, “have become for Luther purely theological categories, with virtually no connection to one’s material conditions.”⁸⁸

Luther's interest in his exposition of this passage is the question of entire renunciation. With this question in mind, Luther is insistent that use of a vow of poverty as practiced by the monasticism of his time must end. It fails to point Christians to the interior heart of the Gospel. It perpetuates a system whereby friars who have "renounced all" increase in wealth and laborers suffer lack while donating to the monastic institutions in an effort to secure eternal salvation. It accentuates a social division between religious elites and the pious laity. Finally, I think it is fair to say that Luther regarded monastic emphasis on the counsel of poverty as an obstacle to the work of eliminating poverty through social reform.⁸⁹ In any case, we see here just how far from Ambrose we have come.

What does God expect? From whom? And why? For Luther, God expects the best a Christian can offer in the freedom of faith. But it must flow out of a freedom of faith, without institutional compulsion or any sense of a righteousness earned through works. And God expects this of every Christian, without any distinction between the few who vow a “higher” standard and the rest who are only obligated to a lower standard. Why? Because for Luther this is the essence of the Gospel, the freedom of the Christian which must—at least at this point in time, or with only very few exceptions—be pursued apart from any institution promoting two distinct ways of life.

The other primary figure associated with what is known as the Magisterial Protestant

Reformation (to simplify this history) is John Calvin (1509-1564). Like Luther, Calvin had concerns

⁸⁸ Fink, “Unreading Renunciation,” 586.

⁸⁹ For more on Luther's economic ethics, see Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, "Luther's Economic Ethic of Neighbor-love and It's Implications for Economic Life Today -- A Gift to the World," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 19, no. 3 (June/July 2019), available at <https://elca.org/JLE/Articles/1266>; Michael Borowski, "Economics According to Luther: towards a dialogue between economics and theology," *International Review of Economics* 66 (2019): 265-276; Sean Doherty, "Luther's Moral Theological Method in His Sermon von dem Wucher," chapter one of *Theology and Economic Ethics: Martin Luther and Arthur Rich in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 7-70. Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993) provides a helpful context to the question of poor relief and social reform more generally.

with monasticism: not only with corrupt monks, but with the institution of monasticism as such. Like Luther, Calvin sought to make the practice of the Christian life—even the practice of what he understood to be “counsels”—available to the laity. Yet whereas Luther gave primary emphasis on the application of Christian devotion for family, parish, and state, John Calvin (particularly after his second invitation to contribute to the reform of Geneva after 1541) explored the meaning of Christianity for the life of a city. Thus Matthew Myer Boulton, distinguishing Calvin from the early Christian desert tradition, states that “rather than design an alternative society set off within or apart from “the world” of Geneva, Calvin sets out to remake the city itself.”⁹⁰ As with my treatment of Martin Luther, I will not address Calvin’s approach to monasticism more generally but will only explore a few locations in Calvin’s works where he specifically deals with issues or Biblical passages central to the issue of the relationship between commandments and counsels.⁹¹

We find Calvin’s first significant treatment of counsels and commandments in his third (1543) revision of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In this edition he added a chapter to the fourth Book specifically on vows and monasticism.⁹² Calvin, as Luther, focuses his attention on the question of vows: which are appropriate or not and why.⁹³ Calvin points his readers toward God (not men) as the

90 Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011) Kindle loc. 247.

91 In addition to Boulton, see David C. Steinmetz, “Calvin and the Monastic Ideal” in *Anticlericalism in late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Peter A. Dykema and H. A. Oberman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 605-616; Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 185-96; Greg Peters, *Reforming the Monastery*, 38-48; Hornbeck, “Reforming Authority”; Fink, “Unreading Renunciation”; David N. Power, “Justification, Worship, and Poor Relief in the Sixteenth Century: A Historical Concern of Contemporary Interest,” *Worship* 89/2 (March 2015), 124-46; Alisa J. Tigchelaar, “The Theology of Vocation in Teresa of Ávila’s Reformed Convent through the Lens of ‘Two Very Wicked Heretics’” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 54/2 (Spring 2019), 186-209; and Erik van Alten, ““...they had all things in common”: Calvin’s exposition of the community of goods in some key texts in Acts,” *Studia Historicae Ecclesiasticae* 39/2 (December 2013), 181-96.

92 I will refer to Calvin’s discussion in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill (Louisville, Kentucky: WestminsterJohnKnox Press, 1960), Volume 2, 1254-1276, by section number within parentheses (Thus a reference to Book IV, chapter 13, number 5 will appear IV. Xiii. 5). This section of the *Institutes* is summarized and evaluated in Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 190-92; Peters, *Reforming the Monastery*, 39-47; Boulton, *Life in God* loc 115-212. For a point by point refutation of IV. Xiii. 11-21 see David Armstrong, “Evangelical Counsels & Monasticism (vs. Calvin #33), January 26, 2019, available at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davearmstrong/2019/01/evangelical-counsels-monasticism-vs-calvin-33.html>.

93 I will not here address the complications of treating “vows” and “oaths.” The language for and usage of these terms overlaps and causes difficulties not only for understanding Calvin, but groups in the middle ages and even Scripture itself. For one exploration of these complications see Jonathan Michael Gray, “Vows, Oaths, and the Propagation of a

One to whom we make vows. He reminds those who make vows to consider themselves carefully, for many monks (the central example of this error) have been led into danger for their false boldness in vowing celibacy. Like Luther, Calvin emphasizes the importance of acting from freedom rather than compulsion. While baptism is a worthy vow, any vow made to obtain merit (like pilgrimages and fastings) is a “perverse vow.”

In IV. xiii. 8-10 Calvin begins to treat religious vows: “since monastic vows are held in greater veneration because they seem to be approved by the public judgment of the church, we must speak of them briefly” (IV. xiii. 8). He begins by contrasting the monasticism that he perceives in his own surroundings with his assessment of primitive monasticism. He acknowledges the ascetical rigor and the pedagogical function of the primitive monasteries. He praises their integration within the life of the diocesan church. Then, in IV. xiii. 9, Calvin summarizes his own view of early Augustinian monasticism, citing at length Augustine’s own idealized view presented in *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*.⁹⁴ He identifies this summary of Augustinian religious life as “the early form of monasticism,” perhaps unaware of the wide variety of forms of religious life extant in the fourth century or of the varied expressions even within Augustine’s own circle of influence. He identifies this early Augustinian monasticism as a kind of monasticism which “is but an aid to those duties of piety enjoined upon all Christians” (IV. xiii. 10), drawing attention to the religious life as an instrumental means to the acquisition of a universally available holiness, a point which Thomas Aquinas made explicitly in his treatment of perfection and the role of the counsels. Following a common Protestant pattern, Calvin interprets the development of monasticism as a consistent degeneration from its early ideal. Calvin acknowledges his awareness of Aquinas’s distinction between perfection and the means of perfection in the following section (he calls it a “dodge”), declaring that it does not prevent the

Subversive Discourse” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41/3 (Fall, 2010)731-56.

94 For a fuller treatment of Augustine on religious life see Adolar Zumkeller, *Augustine’s Ideal of the Religious Life*, trans. By Edmund Colledge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

populous from considering “the monastic life alone angelic, perfect, and purged of all fault” (IV. xiii. 11).

Then, in IV. xiii. 12 Calvin speaks of the evangelical counsels directly. He mentions them in connection with keeping the commands of the fifth chapter of Matthew regarding loving enemies, vengeance, swearing and so on, commandments which Calvin sees are incumbent upon all Christians. Calvin refers to his treatment earlier (Book II. viii. 56f.) where he condemns the transformation of key Gospel passages (the Sermon on the Mount): commandments which have been “turned by the Schoolmen into ‘counsels,’ which we are free either to obey or not to obey” and setting the obedience of these commandments upon the monks. Calvin is insistent in II. viii. 57 that the command to love one’s enemy is for everybody (without any reference to military contexts). His conclusion is that “present-day monasticism is founded upon the very opinion which all pious folk ought by right to abhor.” Calvin's concern is that this distinction of "counsels" fosters the assumption that "a more perfect rule of life can be devised than the common one committed by God to the whole church" (IV. xiii. 12).

After he addresses the interpretation of Matthew 19:21 (which I will come to soon), Calvin condemns the sectarianism of the monasticism of his day. He proclaims that “nothing was more remote from the thought of the fathers than to establish the kind of perfection afterward fabricated by these hooded Sophists so as to set up a double Christianity.” Calvin must have been unaware of the struggles of early Christianity to maintain an appropriate treatment (permitting a double Christianity) of this question of elitism.⁹⁵ Here I find Calvin making a distinctive point, with an emphasis that I do not see in Luther's treatment. For Calvin, a primary concern is not merely that the institution of monasticism creates a spiritual elite, but also that monasticism--at least as he perceived it practiced in his own time--

95 On this see Evan B. Howard, "Spiritual Formation and Elitism: Reflections on Early Councils and Contemporary Practice" available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/spiritual-formation-elitism-reflections-early-councils-contemporary-practice/>.

was wrongly separated from the ongoing life of the church. He expresses his concerns even about the monasticism which Augustine described, arguing that while "it was a beautiful thing to forsake all possessions and be without earthly care," God "prefers devoted care in ruling a household, where the devoted householder, clear and free of all greed, ambition, and other lusts of the flesh, keeps before him the purpose of serving God in a definite calling" (IV. xiii. 16). Calvin contends that the passage in 1 Timothy (5:12) which some use to defend the orders of nuns is misunderstood. Thus, considering that whatever monks and nuns vow "is abominable in God's sight" (IV. xiii. 17), Calvin argues that it is not only permissible but advisable for many who have taken these vows and joined religious orders to consider themselves released and abandon the monastic life.

Calvin's treatment of the evangelical counsels in his *Institutes* is quite similar to that of Luther. Passages and practices that had been set aside for vowed religious must be made available for the ordinary believer (Boulton, and Peters, following him? speak of a "monkhood of all believers"⁹⁶). The institutionalization of the counsels functioned as a hindrance to the Gospel. How then does Calvin treat the New Testament passages regarding "poverty"?⁹⁷ Calvin, like Luther, spiritualizes Jesus's words to the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:21). Both in the *Institutes* and in his 1555 *Harmony of the Three Gospels*, Calvin argues that the command of renunciation "must be interpreted allegorically, as a figure elucidating the *sensus interior* of the law."⁹⁸ Though Calvin draws from the passage a warning to the rich against inordinate desires for wealth, he still finds the core meaning in its penetration to the self-centered heart of the young ruler. Similarly, with regard to his interpretation the passages describing the early Jerusalem sharing of possessions (Acts 2:40-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-6), Calvin rejects the idea that these

96 Boulton, *Life in God*, loc. 213. See Greg Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers: The Monastic Foundation of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerAcademic: 2018).

97 For Calvin see, for example, Fink, "Unreading Renunciation," 586-591; Power, "Justification, Worship, and Poor Relief," 130-135; van Alten, ". . . they had all things in common"; Barbara Nelson Gingerich, "Property and the Gospel: Two Reformation Perspectives" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 59, no. 3 (1985): 248-267; Evan B. Howard, "Word Studies in Calvin's Economic Ethic," 1981, unpublished paper.

98 Fink, "Unreading Renunciation," 588. See also Gingerich, "Property and the Gospel," 262-63.

passages provide any sort of literal norm for the people of God. Threading a needle between monks, Anabaptists, the rich and poor of Geneva, Calvin argues that these passages both support the principle of private ownership and demand a self-availability that offers one's possessions willingly as others have need. "Calvin believed that this passage [Acts 2:40-47] delineated not one but four marks of the true and genuine church--and community of goods was not among them."⁹⁹ John Calvin read Scripture with a principle of moderation in mind. Thus, while economic practices and social reform were important to Calvin,¹⁰⁰ his focus was upon the virtues which were to shape the practice of an individual or community.¹⁰¹

In their own distinct ways and in the context of their own distinct settings,¹⁰² Luther and Calvin sought to eliminate the distinction between counsels and commandments and to apply the whole of the Gospel for all believers. These reformers placed their attention on the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount for everyone. The Pauline "counsel" to chastity, along with Jesus's invitation to the rich young ruler (critical passages for Ambrose), were often spiritualized, set aside from their use as support for an expression of consecrated life. Luther promoted the dissolution of monasteries throughout his sphere of influence. In 1535, just prior to Calvin's first residency, the Genevan council took possession of the convent of the Poor Clares, along with all other church property. John Calvin never sought to reinstitute any form of religious life in Geneva, considering that his work in Geneva was indeed the establishing of true religion in the city. The Church of England began a formal dissolution of their monasteries in the same year. The Magisterial expressions of sixteenth-century reform spread throughout much of Europe and in doing so promoted a rejection of the dominant medieval approach to counsels and

99 Gingerich, "Property and the Gospel," 263. The four marks Calvin named were apostolic doctrine, fellowship (especially alms), celebration of the Lord's Supper and prayer.

100 Alten's article (Alten, ". . . they had all things in common") is an exploration of Calvin's treatment of the Acts passages in light of a meeting of the Genevan pastors establishing their own form of life with regard to their use of properties. See also Power, 132.

101 See Alten, 191-94; Howard, "Word Studies."

102 Compare, for example, Fink "Unreading Renunciation" and Doherty, "Luther's Moral Theological Method" regarding Luther and Calvin's understanding of the uses of the law.

commandments (and of the two-tiered ecclesiology built upon this approach). Their views challenged the Roman Catholic sense of the Church and became a viable alternative from that point to the present.

B. The “Anabaptist” Movements

It might seem odd to treat, in a paper dealing with approaches to counsels and commandments, a movement which never spoke of evangelical counsels.¹⁰³ Yet some groups included in the category often labeled "Anabaptist" exhibited sufficient similarities to monastic communities that sixteenth-century Magisterial Reformers who derided them and twenty-first century "new monastics" who appreciate them both associate Anabaptist groups with monasticism, communities who chose to live the evangelical counsels of the Christian faith.¹⁰⁴ Peter Erb, in his summary of Anabaptist spirituality, writes of the connection between Anabaptism and monasticism: "The Anabaptist movement had much in common with this monastic ideal. They too upheld the ideal of community, required obedience to the brotherhood, and spoke of entrance into it as a second (re)baptism."¹⁰⁵ Given these similarities--and the kind of silence regarding the topic of counsels and commandments is itself of interest--it seems

103 After an initial review of standard primary and secondary sources on Anabaptists and the Radical Reformation regarding their views on counsels and commandments, I asked a few Anabaptist specialists. Email conversations with Jamie Pitts (email, October 21, 2020. see Jamie Pitts, "Historical Anabaptist-Mennonite Pneumatology: A Review of Confessional, Catechetical, and Devotional Materials, 1525-1963" *Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 24-53) and Arnold Snyder (email October 27, 2020. see Arnold Snyder, "The Monastic Origins of Swiss Anabaptist Sectarianism." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57, no. 1 (January, 1983): 5-26"; and his "Michael Sattler, Benedictine: Dennis Martin's Objections Reconsidered." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 3 (July, 1983): 262-279) supported my suspicions. As Arnold Snyder replied to my inquiry, "To my knowledge, none of the sixteenth century Anabaptist folks directly engaged monasticism." I also performed a word search for "counsels" in selected volumes of the *Classics of the Radical Reformation* series [the volumes containing the works of Pilgram Marpeck, Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier, Peter Reidemann's Hutterite *Confession of Faith*, and the collection in *Anabaptism in Outline*] and explored the indexes of the works of Menno Simons and Thomas Müntzer. I found no discussion of counsels and commandments in these works.

104 An example of the contemporary appreciative association, with mention of the sixteenth-century derisive association can be found in Timothy Troutner, "'The New Monkeny': Michael Sattler and the Benedictine Roots of Anabaptism" *Plough* (September 16, 2020); available at <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/anabaptists/the-new-monkeny>, accessed November 15, 2020. I will speak more of Sattler below.

105 Peter C. Erb, "Anabaptist Spirituality," in Frank C. Senn, ed. *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986): 87.

appropriate to explore aspects of Anabaptist traditions regarding the Sermon on the Mount, chastity, community economics, and other related matters.

First, we must identify the Anabaptists themselves. Both Magisterial reformers and contemporary historians have inadequately employed a single term and concept (*Weidertäufer*, Anabaptist) to describe a very diverse situation. In one sense, what some identify as "Anabaptists" might be best understood as a category of Reformation movements labeled *other*. Those groups, movements, figures and so on that were not formally recognized either by the Lutheran circle, the Reformed circle (Zwingli, Calvin), or the English circle, have often been named "Anabaptists," in light of the belief of many (but not all in that period) that people should be baptized as adults. But, as anyone who has read the literature of the sixteenth century knows, the better portrait is not one of a cohesive entity but rather of an array of diverse experiments, some of which survived and others did not. A few scholars speak of "the left wing" of the Reformation to refer to this diverse grouping. The phrase "Radical Reformation" is more often used currently. In the mid-twentieth century, historian George Williams explored various means of categorizing these groups and on the basis of his work we often use terms like "Revolutionaries," "Anabaptists," "Mystical Spiritualists," and "Rationalists" to refer to subcategories of Radical Reformation movements.¹⁰⁶ Yet even these categories are inadequate to describe the situation, for there was a great deal of interaction between and diversity within the groupings. It was a period where individuals and emerging communities were both discovering themselves and distinguishing themselves from others through the process of dialogues with those they encountered. Yet with all the diversity it is still possible to identify, as does Ivan Kauffman, two features that characterized Radical Reformation movements. "The first is that they were based on the personal commitments of the individuals who joined them, and the second it that they insisted on the

¹⁰⁶ See Williams' Introduction to Williams, George H., Angel M. Mergal eds. *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 19-38 and his *Radical Reformation*, 3rd edition (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1995). See also Peter C. Erb, "Anabaptist Spirituality," in Frank C. Senn, ed. *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 82.

right to form independent congregations, free from both civil and ecclesiastical control."¹⁰⁷ In this paper, I will use the phrase "Radical Reformation" to refer to the wider range of movements outside the Magisterial Reformation and the term "Anabaptist" to refer to those Radical Reformation groups who emphasized the importance of adult baptism. Since my concern in this paper is to examine Radical Reformation approaches to the theme of counsels and commandments, and since the groups that are most relevant to this examination are those groups who emphasized adult baptism (some of which formed intentional communities and promoted a practice of sharing goods in common) I will primarily be discussing Anabaptist life here.

The first point to establish here is that Anabaptist communities formed in part as a complete break with medieval Catholicism, monasticism included. An early document (1522) warns the then pre-Anabaptist Conrad Grebel and his companions to stop speaking against the monks.¹⁰⁸ Pre-Anabaptist Wölfl (Wolfgang), who influenced the development of the early movement in Tyrol (Austria), summarized this complete rejection of Roman religiosity when he declared to his interrogators, that "pope, monks, and clergy [*Pfaffen*] are the Antichrist who mislead Christ's people." a sentiment which was common among the Radical Reformation.¹⁰⁹ The attitude among Radical Reformers was not a desire to reappropriate elements of medieval religion, but rather a conviction that the Magisterial Reformers had not gone far enough in rejecting medieval religion. Conrad Grebel wrote in a 1524 letter to Thomas Müntzer:

107 Kauffman, Ivan J. *"Follow Me": A History of Christian Intentionality* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), 168.

108 Eberhard Arnold, "The Early Anabaptists Part II: Anabaptism in the Reformation" published online in 2014 by Plough and available in <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/anabaptists/early-anabaptists-2>.

109 Werner O Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments Firing the Reformation* (John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 180. For other examples of this use of "monk" joined with "priest," "bishop," or other similar words to identify the entire--and rejected--Roman religious institution see for example, John Howard Yoder, trans., *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*. Classics of the Radical Reformation (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, Kindle edition, 2019), 74 (responses #4 and 7); Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*. Classics of the Radical Reformation (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, Kindle edition, 2019), loc. 4133, 5391; H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, trans. and ed., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*. Classics of the Radical Reformation (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, Kindle edition, 2019), 176, 259-261, 292.

Just as our forebears fell away from the true God and from the one, true, common, divine Word, from divine institutions, from Christian love and life, and lived without God's law and gospel in human, useless, unchristian customs and ceremonies, and expected to attain salvation therein, yet fell far short of it, as the evangelical preachers declared, and to some extent are still declaring, so today every man wants to be saved by superficial faith, without fruits of faith, without baptism of trial and probation, without love and hope, without right Christian practices, and wants to persist in all the old manner of personal vices, and in the common ritualistic and anti-Christian customs of baptism and of the Lord's Supper, in disrespect for the divine Word and in respect for the word of the pope and of the antipapal preachers, which yet is not equal to the divine Word nor in harmony with it.¹¹⁰

The pioneers of Anabaptist sentiment were convinced by their examination of Scripture--often within the context of local conversations around biblical texts--to reject not only Roman Catholic religion, but also fundamental beliefs and practices of the Magisterial Reformers themselves as being over-ceremonialized additions to primitive faith.¹¹¹ It is interesting to note that Menno Simons, himself trained in monastic educational environment, never sought--after the 1535 tragedy of the Old Cloister in Bolsward in which his own brother died--to advocate for a restored monastic community at the cloister. Rather this event served as a stimulus for Simons to come out as an Anabaptist and risk his own life in rejection of the Catholic [and Magisterial and Münsterite] forms of religion. It was this "conversion" that marks the beginning of the "Mennonite" tradition.¹¹²

110 Conrad Grebel, "Letters to Thomas Müntzer," reprinted in George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 74. Similarly, however we might identify the "false brethren" in the *Schletheim Confession*, it is clear that the primary distinction emphasized in this influential document is between the new "Anabaptist" group identifying with the *Confession* and the [rejected] Magisterial Reformation model of church. See Yoder, *Legacy*, 32-45.

111 For a good review of this process in the early Swiss developments, see Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 15-32.

112 See Harold Bender, "A Brief Biography of Menno Simons," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*. Trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1956, 1984), 10-13.

Some twentieth-century interpreters of Anabaptist history have sought, rather than to emphasize the discontinuity of Radical Reformation movements from their past, to explore the measure of continuity that may have influenced the forms of life which developed among Anabaptist communities. Eberhard Arnold, for example (and drawing heavily from Ludwig Keller's 1885 *Die Reformation und die älteren Reformparteien*), draws attention to marginal groups such as the Waldensians, the Beguines, and other similar (note: semi-monastic) expressions. He writes, "If we wish to grasp the significance of the early Anabaptist movement of Reformation times, we must first realize that it was not a new movement that had never previously existed."¹¹³ He writes that these early brotherhoods placed "special attention to the words of Christ, considering them evangelical commandments; the Roman Catholic Church calls the same words the "evangelical counsels."¹¹⁴ Arnold proceeds to argue that "the original Anabaptist movement was closely connected with these earlier movements," arguing that the early conventicles in Zurich which found reason to dispute Zwingli's position on baptism were a renewal of the old brotherhood movement.¹¹⁵ Yet there is little conscious reference in Anabaptist literature to Waldensian, Beguine, or other medieval groups or practices. Direct influence is notoriously difficult to prove. Kenneth Davis, in a landmark 1974 volume, explored the connections between medieval ideas about asceticism and Anabaptist origins.¹¹⁶ Davis succeeded in demonstrating parallel themes between Erasmian humanism, the Modern Devotion, and early Anabaptist thought. Based on his findings, he identified the Radical Reformation (he speaks of a "third genre" or a "third movement") as an expression between the Catholicism of Trent and the Magisterial Reformation. I quote his conclusion at length:

113 Eberhard Arnold, "The Early Anabaptists Part I: Forerunners" published online in 2014 by Plough and available in <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/anabaptists/early-anabaptists-1>.

114 Arnold, "Early Anabaptists Part I."

115 Arnold, "Early Anabaptists Part II."

116 Davis, Kenneth Ronald, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1974).

On the one hand there was the scholastic sacramental-sacerdotal system of Roman Catholicism, reasserted and reformed at Trent, on the other, the Protestantized, Augustinian theology of Luther and Calvin. But between these two, and quite distinctive, existed a third genre, an internalizing, personalizing, devotional, laicised, ascetic and biblical reform movement related to the ideals of Franciscanism and the *Devotio Moderna*. This third movement expressed itself largely through two distinct, but closely related, reforming forces: a moderately ascetic, Catholic reformation, associated largely with Erasmianism, and an ascetic Protestantized version of the same, expressed primarily by Anabaptism. Thus Anabaptism emerges as a unique, independent Reformation movement, a Protestant adaptation of a Christian ascetic tradition, more akin to Erasmus than to Luther, more right-wing than left, more conservative than radical, unless the last term is used with reference to a radical Erasmianism. Whereas, in one sense Luther's and Calvin's Reformation may be considered a Protestantization of Augustine of Hippo, so Anabaptism is a Protestantization of Francis of Assisi, Gerhard Groote [from the Modern Devotion], and perhaps even more, a Protestantization of Erasmus."¹¹⁷

While I find Davis's work valuable in showing similarity of ideas between Anabaptism and the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, I find it (as with Eberhard Arnold's argument's regarding early brotherhood movements) to be unconvincing when it comes to documenting the direct influence of monastic writings or practices on early Anabaptist figures. Still other scholars of Anabaptist history have drawn attention to the influence of peasant movements upon the developing Anabaptist communities.¹¹⁸

A series of writings, largely published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* during the 1980s explored the "monastic origins" of Anabaptism. Arnold Snyder posed the question in 1983 and 1984, arguing that "the intellectual tap root of Swiss Anabaptist sectarianism reaches past the Reformation in

¹¹⁷ Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism*, 297.

¹¹⁸ The history of this line of interpretation is reviewed in Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 1-14.

Zurich and the peasant uprisings and is found firmly lodged in Benedictine monasticism."¹¹⁹ The discussion that developed between Snyder and Dennis Martin introduced a number of valuable themes that I will address periodically through the remainder of this paper.¹²⁰ After reviewing this discussion, I find it reasonable to conclude that (1) little direct influence can be documented for Anabaptist appropriation of monastic concepts or practices, (2) one important Anabaptist figure (Michael Sattler) more than likely did employ themes as an Anabaptist that were introduced through his own personal monastic experience, and (3) parallel themes and practices between medieval monasticism and Anabaptist practice are easily identifiable.

The precise blend of factors influencing the emergence of the Radical Reformation--peasant hostility, humanist sentiment, return to Scripture, semi-monastic experimentation, Magisterial Reformation theology, late medieval practice and experience--is difficult to establish, even within the life and works of key individuals. Yet it seems fair to summarize the Radical Reformation as a movement which rejected wholesale the institution of Roman Catholic religion. I think this logically prior rejection offers some explanation why we find no significant Anabaptist interaction with monastic sources or ideas (like counsels and commandments).

And yet Magisterial Reformer Martin Bucer labeled Sattler a leader in the "*baptism order*," a term used by Magisterial Reformers to deride the Anabaptists as monks. Magisterial Reformers repeatedly applied the monastic label to Radical Reformers. Why? While some think this is due to a doctrine of works, or the fact that some lived in community, I find a better path to clarity through

119 Arnold Snyder, "The Monastic Origins of Swiss Anabaptist Sectarianism." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57, no. 1 (January, 1983): 5. This thesis is more fully developed in Snyder's *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1984).

120 See Dennis D. Martin, "Monks, Mendicants, and Anabaptists: Michael Sattler and the Benedictines Reconsidered." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60, no 2 (April, 1986): 139-164; Arnold Snyder, "Michael Sattler, Benedictine: Dennis Martin's Objections Reconsidered." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 3 (July, 1987): 262-279; and Dennis D. Martin, "Catholic Spirituality and Anabaptist and Mennonite Discipleship." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 62, no. 1 (January, 1988): 5-25 [which is a reworking of a piece he had written as a companion to "Monks, Mendicants, and Anabaptists"]. Martin summarizes this research in his contribution on "monasticism" to the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (<https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Monasticism>).

examining the appearance of religious life and Anabaptist expressions more generally.¹²¹ Thus, having now established my first point, that Anabaptism must be understood in the context of their break with Roman Catholic life (and monasticism), I now make my second point, that Anabaptist communities often expressed values and encouraged practices that closely resembled [and resemble today] historic monastic, or at least semi-monastic life.

When I teach classes on monasticism(s) old and new I often identify "monasticism" not in terms of the institution (late medieval and beyond) associated with vows, authority structures (abbess/abbot and hierarchical recognition), and established Rules but rather in terms of a family of features that more or less are present in different groups and can offer meaning to a variety of forms of life through history which are often identified as monastic or semi-monastic. These features are (1) a devout interest in formation or maturity in Christ, (2) a desire to express serious commitment to shared values, (3) a common way or form of life that characterizes the community of the committed, one which often (4) exhibits a rhythm of activity and prayer. This way of life is often expressed (5) in some kind of formal covenant or Rule of Life. Finally (6) a sense of oneself as an alternative culture, either with relation to the "world" or to the parish framework of "churches."¹²² My conviction is that while the Radical Reformation consciously separated itself from the institutions of Roman Catholic monasticism, some Anabaptist expressions exhibit significant similarity to each of these features of monasticism. I will treat each feature in turn.

Anabaptist communities perceived themselves, even in the early years of self discovery, as a people who were concerned not merely about right belief but about right *formation*. While, with the Magisterial Reformers, they rejected any Roman Catholic association of salvation with religious ceremony or meritorious activities, they placed a stronger emphasis than the Magisterial Reformers

121 Dennis D. Martin explored a few general parallels in his "Catholic Spirituality and Anabaptist and Mennonite Discipleship."

122 See my video lecture "What is Monasticism?" available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWOXQXtpUA&t=2s>, accessed Dec 16, 2020.

upon the transformed life that ought to characterize Christian conversion. Conrad Grebel makes this very point in his 1524 letter to Thomas Müntzer: just as the Roman Catholics have failed by seeking salvation through "unchristian customs and ceremonies," so today [in Protestant circles] people seek to be saved "by superficial faith, without fruits of faith . . ." ¹²³ Michael Sattler expresses a similar sentiment when he delineates, in a letter to Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito, "(6) that as the head [of the Body, Christ] is minded, so must its members also be, (7) . . . believers shall be conformed to the image of Christ, . . . (18) they are the true Christians who practice in deed the teaching of Christ." ¹²⁴

Emphasis on formation, on following the teaching of Christ (often referred to as *Nachfolge* or the imitation of Christ) endowed the Sermon on the Mount with a special significance for Anabaptists. Like the Magisterial Reformers, Anabaptists saw the Sermon on the Mount not as a collection of counsels reserved for the monastic elite but rather as a set of commands for the entire church. Yet unlike the Magisterial Reformers--and similar to monastic practice--they interpreted the particulars of the Sermon literally. Ian Boxall, in his *Matthew Through the Centuries*, describes how Luther attacks both Catholic and Anabaptist readings of the Sermon. Boxall recounts how "Luther critiques the 'new monasticism' of the Anabaptists, whose radical interpretation of the Sermon 'viewed the Sermon as providing the norms for a new kind of Christian society, i.e. to be observed literally by whole communities.'" ¹²⁵ This biblical literalism with regard to the Sermon on the Mount supplies the background for the Schleithem Confession's rejection of the Christian use of violence, of the act of taking oaths, and of employment as a magistrate. The Anabaptist Christian is to be formed into the teachings of Christ, and consequently the core of Christ's teachings--the Sermon on the Mount--provides a literal standard for every Christian and the church as a community. The Anabaptist effort to

¹²³ Grebel, "Letters to Thomas Müntzer," 74.

¹²⁴ In Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 27. Sattler makes the same point in the Schleithem Confession wherein, as Arnold Snyder states, "the sine qua non for salvation is a following after Christ." See Snyder, "Monastic Origins," 11.

¹²⁵ Ian Boxall, *Matthew Through the Centuries* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 104.

follow Christ's teachings to the letter in individual and community life gives Anabaptism a certain "ascetic" or even "monastic" character, noted by many scholars.¹²⁶

Monasticism (religious life) is also characterized by the practice of making serious *commitments* to shared values. This practice is particularly embodied in the process of taking vows. Vow-taking is preceded by a period of conscious exploration (postulancy, novitiate), perceived as a time of discerning one's vocation or divine calling. Discerning exploration resolves in a commitment to ongoing formation in the context of a community, involving a willing submission to the support and correction of the community. The commitment is expressed in a public ceremony, often associated with images of marriage or martyrdom.

Like the Magisterial Reformers, Anabaptists saw baptism as the defining (and only legitimate) vow of the Christian faith. Yet Anabaptists had difficulty making sense of the Magisterial Reformers' interpretation of this vow in the context of infant baptism. In what way could a person fulfil a vow he or she never consciously made? What kind of commitment to ongoing growth in Christ is expressed in infant baptism? Didn't Jesus and the early apostles baptize adults as a confirmation of their willing submission to the Gospel of Christ? Ultimately, the Anabaptists affirmed adult baptism not only as the gateway into Christian life, but also as the single vow through which commitment to the shared values of a community were expressed and interpreted. Consequently, the Anabaptist practice of baptism exhibited significant similarity to the monastic practice of vow-taking.

First, Anabaptist baptism expressed a commitment to ongoing formation. Balthasar Hubmaier, in his 1525 "The Sum of a Christian Life" declares that the one being baptized not only gives witness to their forgiveness and justification through Christ, but also "has committed himself and decided to live from now on according to the word and commandment of Christ."¹²⁷ This commitment is formally

126 See, for example Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism*; Nelson Kraybill, "Seeking the Headwaters of Mennonite Spirituality," *Vision* 1/1 (Fall 2000): 6; Snyder, *Life and Thought*.

127 cited in Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, loc 2667

expressed in Hubmaier's "Form for Water Baptism," an outline of the baptismal ceremony. The officiant at this ceremony asks the one being baptized, "Will you henceforth lead your life and walk according to the Word of Christ, as he gives you grace: So speak:" to which the baptizand answers, "I will."¹²⁸ The commitment of baptism is not only a commitment to formation, but is also seen as a response to God's grace, a reply to God's call, a vocational commitment. Thus Walter Klaassen summarizes the Anabaptist perspective on baptism, stating that "It was assumed by all that man had the capacity to respond to God's call."¹²⁹

Anabaptists also saw baptism as an entrance into the community of Christ. Whereas Magisterial Reformation advocacy for infant baptism emphasized incorporation into the people of God through parallels with circumcision, Anabaptists saw baptism as the expression of a voluntary joining with and submission to the local community of faith. I cite at length a section of Hubmaier's summary of water baptism in "A Christian Catechism":

Thereupon [in baptism] one also has himself outwardly enrolled, inscribed, and by water baptism incorporated into the fellowship of the church according to the institution of Christ, before which church the person also publically and orally vows to God and agrees in the strength of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that he will henceforth believe and live according to his divine Word. And if he should trespass herein he will accept brotherly admonition, according to Christ's order, Matt. 18:15f. This is precisely the true baptismal vow, which we have lost for a thousand years; meanwhile Satan has forced his way in with his monastic vows and priestly vows and established them in the holy place."¹³⁰

Similarly Hubmaier states elsewhere regarding the person being baptized, "In the power of his confession he has submitted himself to the sisters, the brethren, and the church, so that they now have

128 *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian*, 329.

129 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, loc 2597.

130 *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian*, 297-98.

the authority to admonish him if he errs, to discipline, to ban, and to readmit him. . . . Whence *comes* this authority if not from the baptismal vow?"¹³¹

Furthermore, Anabaptist stressed that the act of baptism must be a commitment made as the result of a free, conscious, rational evaluation. This is the point of *adult* baptism. Thus Melchior Hoffman, in his "The Ordinance of God" writes of baptism, "It is the sign of the covenant of God, instituted solely for the old, the mature, and the rational, who can receive, assimilate, and understand the teaching and preaching of the Lord, and not for the immature, uncomprehending, and unreasonable, who cannot receive, learn, or understand the teaching of the apostolic emissaries."¹³² This reasoned commitment is then expressed publically, so that others can witness, support, and hold accountable the one making the commitment.¹³³

Finally, just as monastic vow-taking is often associated with martyrdom and bridal imagery, so Anabaptists employed the themes of martyrdom and marriage in their own treatment of the practice of baptism. Hans Hut and others described three types of baptism: of spirit, of water, and of blood (martyrdom) a trope that was repeated again and again in Anabaptist writings.¹³⁴ Willing acceptance of suffering and martyrdom for one's faith is central to Anabaptist experience. The use of wedding imagery for baptism is also common in Anabaptist works. Bernhard Rothmann describes baptism as "like a betrothal of the believer to Christ" in his 1533 "Confession of Faith."¹³⁵ Melchior Hofmann's "The Ordinance of God," simply gushes with bridal imagery. Thus: "When now the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ has given herself over to the the Bridegroom in baptism, which is a sign of the covenant, and has betrothed herself and yielded herself to him of her own free will and has thus in very truth accepted

131 cited in Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, loc 2699.

132 cited in Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 192. Note as well that this point is emphasized in the Schleithem Confession's first Article on Baptism. See Yoder, *The Schleithem Confession*, 10.

133 See, for example, Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, loc 2647, 2699, 2776.

134 See, for example, Hubmaier and Hans Hut in Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 2667, 2718; and Leonhard Schiemer in Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 95-96.

135 cited in Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, loc 2843.

him and taken him unto herself, thereupon the Bridegroom and exalted Lord Jesus Christ comes by his hand . . . takes bread, and gives himself to his bride . . ."136

My aim here is simply to demonstrate the similarities of the Anabaptist practice of baptism with the practice of monastic vow-taking. In my mind, it would be hard to have observed Anabaptist practice--unique in its context and time--and not notice these similarities. Anabaptism would appear like a form of monasticism.

But there is more. Just as entrance into monasticism was entrance into a kind of "total institution,"¹³⁷ wherein the committed community determined the character of many key areas of life (like the ownership and use of wealth, relationships of marriage and singleness, arrangement of hierarchy and authority, use of clothing, and so on), so--with variation--Anabaptist groups behaved similarly, providing the framework within which individuals would find their identity. Anabaptist communities provided a common *way of life*. It would be hard to overstate the importance of the Anabaptist sense of local community. This was not mere theory but a deep sense of "being" (the term here understood as a verb), embedded within a local people. Key elements of Anabaptist sentiment emerged in the midst of Bible study groups perceiving themselves as a "hermetic community."¹³⁸ Key Anabaptist leader Menno Simons devoted much of his energies to defining the life of the community. Obedient submission to the community (whatever authority structure was established) was central to Anabaptist identity. Kenneth Davis writes of Anabaptist submission,

This demand for submission to brotherly discipline and correction according to a "rule" bears a strong resemblance to the cenobitic, ascetic tradition which also required a perfecting submission to some "rule." The Anabaptists use the same type of terminology over and over with but the one singular change: it is no longer the rule of some specific monastic order, but

136 cited in Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 193-94.

137 on "total institutions" see Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961).

138 See Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 17-26; 30-32.

directly the rule and ordinances of Christ from the Word which must be followed; the procedure is taken from Matthew 18, and the regulations from the evangelical "counsels" of the New Testament."¹³⁹

We have already seen in the treatment of baptism that Anabaptists saw commitment to Christ as a commitment to the Body of Christ. This theme also shapes the Anabaptist approach to the Lord's Supper. Whereas Roman Catholics might emphasize the transformation of the Eucharistic bread and Magisterial Reformers might emphasize the doctrine of presence or symbol reflected in Communion, Anabaptists understood the Supper to be "an expression of fellowship" which requires "that we are and wish to be true brothers with one another."¹⁴⁰

Whereas Anabaptist commitment to obedience in the context of community resembles monastic practice, their approach to family was completely opposed. Zwingli, in his 1525 "Concerning the Office of Preaching" distinguished among prophets, evangelists, and apostles. He suggested that since "apostles and evangelists were itinerants, it was best for them to be single and without possessions. Prophets, bishops, or pastors, by contrast, should be resident, married, good managers of their own households, and owners of property."¹⁴¹ Is this an early Magisterial affirmation of some form of functional religious life? I have seen no development of this idea elsewhere, and it deserves exploration. What is clear, however, is that the early Anabaptist communities saw themselves not as collectives of uniquely consecrated celibates, but rather as a concrete expression of Christ's church as a community of families given over to following Christ in their ordinary domestic lives.¹⁴²

Perhaps more significant for the appearance of Anabaptist communities as monastic communities are their practices regarding wealth and the community of goods. Though different

139 Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism*, 183-84.

140 Conrad Grebel, "Letters to Thomas Muntzer," 76.

141 Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 23.

142 On Anabaptist approaches to marriage and family, see Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 755-798.

expressions of the Radical Reformation managed their resources variously,¹⁴³ critics have and continue to stereotype Anabaptist culture as a collection of "communes." Erik van Alten notes the common Magisterial stereotype of Anabaptist diversity when he cites Calvin's 1544 treatise against the Anabaptists. "Calvin remarks," van Alten writes, "that it is the aim of these people [Anabaptists] to bring everything into disorder by establishing a community of goods."¹⁴⁴ Despite the inaccurate stereotype, the significant fact is that some Anabaptists *did* establish intentional communities and explored common possession of property. This interest began early. The Anabaptist regulatory document identified as the "Swiss Order" (perhaps 1527), for example, declares: "Of all the brothers and sisters of this congregation none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor, according as each will have need, and as in the apostles time permit no brother to be in need."¹⁴⁵ The desire of early Anabaptist groups to recover the life of the early church, the crisis of constant displacement due to persecution, and the mutual self-discovery of those on the margins through intentional and unintentional connections, led to the foundation of a number of communitarian experiments, especially in the Austria and Moravia (since they were able to live in peace there for important seasons).

Hutterite and Amish communities have survived to the present and often symbolize the Anabaptist communitarian vision. Early Hutterite leader Peter Walpot distilled this vision in his "True Yieldedness and the Christian Community of Goods," Part Three of "The Great Article Book" (1577). Walpot, defending the practice of a full common purse (where the community holds basically all possessions in common), employs the medieval spiritual notion of "yieldedness" (*Gelassenheit*) to the

143 Warner Packull carefully traces the diversity and the development of early Anabaptist approaches to property in *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments During the Reformation*.

144 Erik van Alten, ". . . they had all things in common": Calvin's exposition of the community of goods in some key texts in Acts" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39/2 (December 2013), 184.

145 Yoder, *Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 46.

question of Christian economic practice. He refers directly to Matthew 19, the story of the Rich Young Ruler, arguing much as Thomas Aquinas and other monastic theologians have:

The rich young ruler asked what he must do to be saved. To this Christ said, "You have fulfilled all the commands of the Law, but you lack one thing. To be perfect, go and sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven. Then come and follow me." So it is part of perfection to sell all and give to the poor. For love (which this young man lacked) is a bond of perfection (Colossians 3). Love brings about perfect yieldedness and community, not just in part or half but wholly and perfectly.

Therefore it is clear that those who hold onto their wealth--unable to renounce their possessions and place them before the spiritually poor for the common use--are not able to become disciples and followers of Christ.¹⁴⁶

So much can (and should) be noticed here in light of all we have seen thus far in this paper regarding treatments of this passage. Walpot, like the monastics, understands Jesus's invitation as a call to literal economic renunciation. Also like monastic readings, Walpot ties this renunciation to the idea of perfection. Furthermore (though I have not developed the theme in this paper), Walpot identifies the recipients of renunciation as the "spiritually" poor, the leaders of the religious community. Like Aquinas, Walpot identifies love as the center of perfection. Yet unlike Aquinas, Walpot interprets economic renunciation not as the means to the perfection of love but rather as the expression of that love: Love "brings about" perfect yieldedness and community. Also unlike monastic understanding--unlike even the approach of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life yet in agreement with the Magisterial Reformers (although the invitation is interpreted literally and not spiritually)--Walpot understands Jesus's words to be not an invitation to a few vowed elite, but rather a call to the whole church, a condition of following Christ (Matthew 19:21).

¹⁴⁶ Peter Walpot, "True Yieldedness and the Christian Community of Goods." (1577) in Daniel Liechty, editor, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 150.

Walpot's treatise is a manifesto for the observance of community of goods, an observance that was rejected by many Anabaptists, but only strictly practiced by few. Walter Klaassen, summarizing Anabaptist views on economics, states, "the majority of Anabaptists believed that property could be held privately, but that it could never be absolutely private."¹⁴⁷ Notice that this summary is quite similar to the approach of John Calvin himself [who misunderstood the bulk of Anabaptists], who argued that "There was therefore no indiscriminate selling of goods as some Anabaptist groups required, but it was rather a wise and discreet assessing the needs of the poor and a faithful reaction to those needs."¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the visibility of the few strict communities along with the high regard, more generally, for economic sharing, added to the Anabaptist appearance of something like monasticism.

One further note -- Packull, in his *Hutterite Beginnings*, describes the emergence of an Swiss Anabaptist community in St. Gall. He documents the attire of this community, "that expressed itself in the wearing of clothes made from coarse material and the wearing of broad-rimmed felt hats."¹⁴⁹ An Anabaptist habit?

What we see in early Anabaptist movements is a concern to apply the Gospel of Christ seriously (and often literally) with regard to key areas of life: relationship to possessions, submission to authority, even one's clothing (yet without following Jesus's invitation for some to become eunuchs or Paul's "counsel" to celibacy). In all of these cases, and with regard to the Anabaptist way of life more generally, we can recognize a significant similarity to medieval communities of religious life. As we shall see further in this essay, I do not believe these similarities are superficial, accidental, or merely "external."

Furthermore, the Anabaptist way(s) of life exhibited a *rhythm* of common worship, an order that was sometimes expressed in the form of a formal *rule*. The early *Swiss Order* begins with an

¹⁴⁷ Klaassen, Introduction to Chapter XI of *Anabaptism in Outline* on "Economics." (loc 3751).

¹⁴⁸ van Alten, ". . . they had all things in common," 194.

¹⁴⁹ Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 44.

exhortation: "The brothers and sisters should meet at least three or four times a week, to exercise themselves in the teaching of Christ and His apostles and heartily to exhort one another to remain faithful to the Lord as they have pledged."¹⁵⁰ The Lord's Supper was celebrated as often as they gathered. Conrad Grebel provided a framework for celebrating the Lord's Supper in his 1524 letter to Thomas Müntzer. Though Grebel himself argued against the practice of singing, many Anabaptists enjoyed singing as a part of their worship and a number of Anabaptist hymns have survived to this day, as have a number of composed prayers.¹⁵¹

Anabaptist forms of life were often articulated in *Ordnungen*, or "orders": foundational documents which summarized the primary values and practices of a given community. Packull's *Hutterite Beginnings* devotes a full chapter to sorting out some of the oldest Anabaptist Congregational Orders, distinguishing *The Swiss Order* [1527?], *The Discipline* [1529], and *The Schnarschlager Order* (or *A Church Order*) [1540]. Along with these three documents, another, *The Schleithem Confession* [1527] has been regarded as a highly influential summary of common commitment. These orders address such topics as how the community is to gather and worship, authority and the nurture/correction of one another, the possession and use of property including care for the poor, eating meals, and common values and practices to live by. These topics, and these rhythms, treated as they are in formal documents bear a distinct resemblance to the Rules of Life and such developed within monastic and semi-monastic circles.¹⁵²

Finally, just as monastic groups have perceived themselves consistently through history as expressions of *alternative culture*, so Anabaptist networks perceived themselves as the Gospel

150 Yoder, *Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 45.

151 See Grebel, "Letters to Thomas Müntzer," 75-79. For the development of singing among early Philipite communities see Packull, 89-98. For samples of Anabaptist hymns, see Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, 41-63. For sample prayers see Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, 109-111.

152 For a comparative listing of the tables of contents of a number of Rules and such (not including Anabaptist *Ordnungen*!) see "A Collection of Rules, Constitutions, Covenants, and Such" available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/a-collection-of-rules-constitutions-covenants-and-such/>, accessed December 18, 2020.

alternative to an unchristian "world" and "church." This brings us into the complex discussion of Anabaptist "separation."¹⁵³ I can only draw attention to a few points here. And we must understand from the start that the Anabaptist notion and practice of "separation"--just as Anabaptist communalism--emerged from a combination of biblical investigation, dialogue with various kindred (and not so kindred) spirits, and survival necessities in the midst of persecution. The theological, the sociological, and the historical/political forces cannot here--as in all things--be neatly divided.

A first point to note is the novelty of the Anabaptist project. Conrad Grebel, in parting company with Ulrich Zwingli between 1523 and 1525, was also distancing himself from a fundamental perspective of medieval and Magisterial Christianity. Hitherto, much of Christendom organized itself through a "parish" system. Within this parish system churches were authorized by local bishpos who were regionally assigned. The "church" was viewed less in terms of the regular attendees of any gathering, and more in terms of populations that lived within a given district. Magisterial Protestant Reformers retained the same parish concept, but adjusted it somewhat to reflect the greater role of secular authorities within towns and larger regions.

Early in Grebel's pursuit of reform he explored the idea (in league with Zwingli) of electing a fully radical magistrate to oversee a reformed church in Zurich. When this effort failed, and after further attempts at cooperation (with Müntzer and Zwingli), Grebel in the end baptized George Blaurock and established a congregation of believers independent of the parish system, what Arnold Snyder describes as the "territorial 'church'" model.¹⁵⁴ Whereas Zwingli "insisted that the authorization for the prophetic or apostolic office came through existing parish structures,"¹⁵⁵ Grebel founded a congregation of mutually-edifying covenanted believers whose authorization came from their faith and

153 See for example, Snyder, *Monastic Origins*, 7 and his *Life and Legacy of Michael Sattler*; Martin, "Monks, Monastics"; Snyder, "Michael Sattler: Benedictine," 277; and Walter Klaassen, "Anabaptist Understanding of the Separation of the Church." *Church History* 46, no. 4 (Dec, 1977): 421-436.

154 Snyder, "Origins," 7.

155 Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 25.

practice itself and whose government was perceived to be outside the purview of the parish/episcopal system. Ivan Kauffman compares the congregational to the parish systems, stating that, "the congregation by contrast was formed by the personal choices of those who belonged to it. Like a monastery its membership was voluntary, and if no one chose to join there would be no congregation."¹⁵⁶ Zwingli and other Magisterial Reformers themselves were "separatists" in that they sought to identify Christian salvation and ecclesial community outside the dominant structures of the Roman Catholic institution. Anabaptists took the further step--both through choice and pressure--of separating themselves from Protestant institutions and secular authorities.

The notion of "separation" is slippery, as can be observed when reading the secondary literature on this topic. Walter Klaassen, for example, presents "The Anabaptist Understanding of the Separation of the Church."¹⁵⁷ His notion of "separation" is oriented around the question of church unity (versus "schism" or "sect"). Were Anabaptists a sect or not? Klaassen argues that both Magisterial Reformers [he employs the language of *Protestant Reformers* or simply *Reformers*] and Anabaptists each had a concern for unity and boundaries of separation. Magisterial Reformers emphasized national borders, doctrine, and political affiliation. Early Anabaptist movements, which perhaps were not "incurably schismatic" from the beginning, separated from Catholic and Magisterial institutions because of their own emphases: disciplined community, order and liturgy rooted in mutual edification, freedom from the threat of the sword, and finally a sense of the history of the church that stressed restoration rather than succession. The point here is to see how "separation" is employed as a function of one's sense of unity depending on various criteria.

Arnold Snyder offers reflections on Anabaptist "sectarianism," defining the term

"sect/sectarian" as a rejection of a prevailing social environment.¹⁵⁸ On the one hand, he acknowledges

¹⁵⁶ Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 169.

¹⁵⁷ Walter Klaassen, "The Anabaptist Understanding of the Separation of the Church." *Church History* 46, no. 4 (Dec, 1977): 421-436

¹⁵⁸ Snyder, "Origins," 6.

that in one sense Zwingli himself was sectarian in his challenge of the religious status quo. Yet this was not a radical sectarian alienation from society [at least to Snyder's eyes]. Thus, while the early Swiss Anabaptist movement was not "radically sectarian" in its origins, it became so in part through the combination of political pressures and the voice of Michael Sattler, chief author of the Schleitheim Confession. Snyder argues that articles four through seven of the Confession (separation from the sinful world, shepherd elected by the community, nonresistance, and the prohibition of the swearing of oaths), are "explicitly sectarian in the sense that they directly reject the societal structure."¹⁵⁹ Snyder argues, in the remainder of his essay, that the primary source of these more sectarian ideas, likely arose in the context of Sattler's own monastic development.

Dennis Martin, in his response to Snyder, begins with a survey of Christian monasticism. He describes early monks "who did not reject the church's sacraments or authority," an approach that characterized medieval monasticism.¹⁶⁰ Based on this survey Martin distinguishes between "sectarian" and "exemplaristic" models of Christian life. Those who embodied exemplarism "were not cut off from the life of the church; rather they offered the rest of the church the example of Christian perfection."¹⁶¹ Notice here: Snyder identifies "sectarian" as separation from *society*: this is what distinguishes Sattler from Zwingli and Bucer. Martin's distinction between "sectarian" and "exemplaristic" turns on the relation to *ecclesial structures*.

As we can see, the notions of "separation," "sectarianism" and "schism" are slippery. My point in this paper is simply to illustrate how Anabaptist communities saw themselves as an alternative culture, in a sense that would be (and is today) seen to be similar to monastic communities, and yet which expressed this sense of alternative culture in a manner that was distinct from monastic sentiment.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁰ Martin, "Monks, Mendicants," 142. See the pages following.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 143.

First, most basically, Anabaptism, at least through Schleithem, separated itself from both ecclesial and social structures in a way that was different from the approach of the Magisterial Reformers and yet was similar to monasticism as it developed through the Middle Ages. I have had occasion to point out periodically throughout this essay how formal monastic expressions (and informal semi-monastic expressions) secured their undistracted devotion to the things of Christ through renunciation of military and civil service. The point was that monks and nuns consecrated themselves full-time to prayer and the works of faith. Over time these aspects of the renunciation of secular living became identified with the literal obedience of Christ's teachings regarding non-violence and oaths. Abbots and abbesses were (ideally) elected leaders, in contrast with kings and bishops who were appointed. Anabaptists, in their independent election of leaders and their renunciation of military and civil service (articles V-VII of the Schleithem Confession), would appear to their contemporaries similar to the "questionable" movements of earlier centuries: Humiliati, Waldensians and so on: similar to monastic expressions in their practice yet refusing to submit to the larger structures of ecclesial authority.

And yet Anabaptist separation was not merely a functional "withdrawal from" worldly pursuits for the sake of making space for full-time devotion to the things of God. Anabaptist separation involved, as article IV of the Schleithem Confession declared, a "separation that shall take place from the evil and wickedness which the devil has planted in the world."¹⁶² The Confession lists both secular and ecclesial concerns: "popish and repopish works and idolatry, . . . winehouses, guarantees and commitments of unbelief, and other things of the kind, which the world regards highly, and yet are carnal or flatly counter to the command of God, after the pattern of the iniquity which is in the world."¹⁶³ This theme of separation from the (evil) world is not absent from the writings of monasticism. Indeed some have argued that the impulse to restore pure devotion in the face of a post-

¹⁶² Yoder, *Schleithem Confession*, 11.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12.

Constantinian Christendom was a primary motive of fourth-century monastic withdrawal. I, however, do not think this motive was primary.¹⁶⁴ For Anabaptism, separation from those they rejected was primary. As Sattler himself crystalizes the matter in his parting letter to Bucer and Capito, "In sum: There is nothing in common between Christ and Belial."¹⁶⁵

True, the naming of one's identity in distinction from others is a natural part of self-discovery. And perhaps some of this is simply "a natural consequence of an intolerant age."¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, as I read Anabaptist literature in light of the questions "What does God expect? Of whom? and Why?" I perceive different answers than traditional monasticism, even though their forms of life may appear similar. I am simplifying matters here, but as I see it: for the Anabaptist, God expects the the people of Christ to follow the teachings of Christ, no matter how difficult. That is the nature of Christian discipleship, that is the mark of the true church: ever greater conformity to the life and teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, God expects *all* Christians to follow these teachings. There is no distinction between the "committed" who obey the counsels and the "laity" who obey some lesser standard. All believers are obliged to live according to the (literal) command of Christ, for example, with regard to nonviolence. The process of mutual, loving, accountability and correction is the framework within which growth into God's expectations is envisioned. Why? Because Jesus teaches us this way of life, a way which has been hitherto neglected in church and society and is being restored through the believers church today.

I hope it is clear by now why I deemed it necessary to treat the Anabaptists, a collection of networks which never appears to have mentioned "counsels." It is important to realize that

164 For my evaluation of this (and other) arguments regarding monastic withdrawal, see my "Getting Away To It All: The Place of Withdrawal in Fourth-Century Monasticism and Postmodern Christianity," available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/getting-away-to-it-all-the-place-of-withdrawal-in-fourth-century-monasticism-and-postmodern-christianity/>. Accessed December 19, 2020.

165 Yoder, *Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 27. See also the separationist statements cited by Klaassen in "Anabaptist Understanding," 423. In agreement with trends I perceive in Anabaptist studies, I suspect more interaction between the strict "Anabaptists" and the "Spiritualist" and "Revolutionary" streams of the Radical Reformation which in their own ways contributed to a more dualist perspective.

166 Klaassen, "Anabaptist Understanding," 436.

spokespeople for the various Anabaptist circles never consciously engaged with the literature or practices of monasticism. Anabaptists, like Magisterial Reformers, abandoned any thought of conserving, even in a modified form, the institutions of religious life. Also like Luther and Calvin, Anabaptists (unconsciously) sought to transfer the values of monasticism into new structures: for Luther, the family and school; for Calvin, the city; and for the Anabaptists, the congregation. Yet the ways in which Anabaptism re-visioned the church--in the context of an intolerant age--gives them the appearance of a new monasticism, an appearance which Magisterial critic and contemporary historians cannot help but notice. Anabaptists made formation central, even formation to the literally interpreted teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. They consecrated themselves as rational adults to a community of discipleship. They perceived their faith primarily as a way of life, a way which made demands upon their relationships of authority, their economic choices, and even their clothing habits. Their way of life exhibited a communal rhythm and was at times expressed through a formal foundational document. Finally, they saw themselves as an alternative culture: the *true* church in the midst of the followers of Belial.

Yet, though resembling the monastic forms of life meant for the few, early Anabaptist practice was intended for all. Thus Snyder states, summarizing the thought of Sattler: "the salvation of "all true Christians" depends on their following Christ in this way."¹⁶⁷ This gives the Anabaptist approach to the questions of "What does God expect? From whom? and Why?" a different flavor than either the Roman Catholic approach or that of the Magisterial Reformers. When Benedictines sought in the twelfth century to recover the Rule of Benedict in its purity, they established a new order (the Cistercians) within the broader sphere of the people of God. When the followers of Jacob Amman in the early eighteenth century sought to recover the Swiss Order of Anabaptist life in its purity, they were compelled to form not simply a new order within a church (whether visible or invisible), but rather to

¹⁶⁷ Snyder, "Monastic Origins," 25.

form a new sect which shunned their Mennonite parents. Patricia Wittberg in her study of Catholic religious orders writes, "It has been commonly observed that Catholicism has tended to retain its virtuosi within the church by channeling them into religious orders, whereas Protestant virtuosi tend to split off from their present denominations to form new sects."¹⁶⁸ Perhaps overstated, but in light of our explorations, this is a statement worth considering.

Intentional forms of life, not only monastic, but also Anabaptist, have acquired a certain attraction recently.¹⁶⁹ It is therefore important that we assess the framework of their approach to God's expectations for community life with the same attention that we give to Catholic and Magisterial Reformation models.

Early Modern Catholicism and the Council of Trent

For the sake of bringing things up to date, it is worthwhile to summarize developments in Roman Catholic monasticism up through the period of the Magisterial and Radical Reformations. Church history texts often refer to this period of Roman Catholic history as the "Counter-Reformation" or perhaps more correctly the "Catholic Reformation." I have already noted that efforts at monastic reform preceded the sixteenth century. Yet the divisions of the sixteenth century provided extra stimulus for Catholic monasticism to "put their house in order" so to speak. One brief history of monasticism declares, "As Western monasticism became a quickly sinking ship, a beacon of light eventually emerged when the Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and its own Reformation. Strong decrees of reform, centralization, and revitalization helped not only to save

¹⁶⁸ Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders*, 45.

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Leonard Hjalmarson, "Ancient Monasticism and the Anabaptist Future" *Direction* 39/1 (2010): 71-83; Peter Mommsen, "The Church We Need Now: Why the Anabaptist vision matters." *Plough Quarterly Magazine* September 30, 2017, available on <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/anabaptists/the-church-we-need-now>. Accessed December 19, 2020.

monasticism from obliteration, but to provide it with new energy, vitality, and direction."¹⁷⁰ For our purposes in this study I will briefly address three points: the reforms of religious life advocated by the Council of Trent, the maintenance and affirmation of the traditional Roman Catholic model, and the development of new forms of religious life that served to advance the Roman Catholic cause.

Reforms of Religious Life

The Decree "On Regulars and Nuns" (the term "regulars" refers to everyone who lives by a *regula*, or a Rule of Life: monks, friars, canons, and so on) was made on the twenty-fifth and last session of the Council of Trent, December 4 of 1563. It begins with a strict admonition that "all Regulars, as well men, as women, shall order and regulate their lives in accordance with the requirements of the rule which they have professed; and above all that they shall faithfully observe whatsoever belongs to the perfection of their profession, such as the vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, . . ." ¹⁷¹

The Council of Trent sought to confront head-on the lax observance and abuses which had brought disrepute to the institutions of religious life in the Roman Catholic church. Luther complained repeatedly about the wealth of the mendicants. Trent responded by reinforcing the prohibition of private ownership of property among religious. Reforming movements had charged monastic structures with mistreatment of human freedom in their admission of children into religious communities. The Decree restricted entry for youth and prevented the compelling of women into convents. Reformers berated the leaders of convents for their inappropriate demands. The Council clarified procedures for election of superiors. It also set up systems of oversight and visitation (largely managed through the regional episcopal structures) to assure that the relationship between members was in order. All in all

170 History of Monasticism." available at <https://www.monasteries.com/en-GB/history-of-monasticism/>. Accessed December 29, 2020.

171 Waterworth, J., translator. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and OEcumenical Council of Trent*. London: C. Dolman, 1848, 237. available at archive.org. Accessed December 29, 2020.

the aim of the Council was to structure the institutions of religious life in such a way as to prevent the decay of consecrated life and to promote the pursuit of holiness as described by the Rules and Constitutions of the various orders.

Affirmation of Basic Monastic Framework

The Council of Trent passed a number of measures aimed at improving the religious education and spiritual formation of Regulars. Nevertheless, the Council sought not to eliminate the traditional framework of religious life, but rather to bolster it. Whereas sixteenth-century Magisterial Reformers dissolved monasteries with a view toward making the evangelical counsels (often interpreted spiritually) available to all, and whereas sixteenth-century Radical Reformers abandoned the institutions of religious life in an effort to restore the observance of the counsels (often interpreted literally) within the context of independent congregations, sixteenth-century Catholicism re-affirmed the framework that Thomas Aquinas sketched in the thirteenth-century. Notice the phrase in the first paragraph of the Decree on Regulars and Nuns, encouraging religious to "faithfully observe . . . their vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity." The vows that Protestant reformers rejected as illicit, Trent not only affirmed but tightened. Poverty was carefully monitored; lines of obedience were specified; chastity was protected through enforcing the enclosure of women (to the dismay of many women who wished to lead an active religious life¹⁷²).

The point was to empower and administrate the few to become models for the many. Semi-monastic expressions, such as the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life were usually folded into traditional orders. Traditional orders were regulated through renewed commitments to their Rules of Life. By this means a segment of the church was empowered and encouraged to give themselves

172 Rakoczy, Susan. "The Many Reformations of Catholic Religious Women's Life," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 43, no. 2 (1999), available at <https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/download/2689/1999>; accessed December 28, 2020.

whole-heartedly to the things of God, whether through prayer in the contemplative orders, or through service in the active orders. Thus, through this kind of full consecration, religious would not only strive for their own salvation, but would also demonstrate the sanctified life for the church at large.

Advancing the Cause

There is more. Sixteenth-century Catholicism sought not merely to maintain and to exhibit the faith, but also to advance the Catholic faith throughout the world. The reforming and the missional impulses were often joined, often in the personalities of remarkable individuals and movements. Doley Moss writes, "It was not so much the briefs and sanctions, however, that revived religious life as it was the sanctity of men and women whose heroic virtue was not the result of any decrees or definitions."¹⁷³ The late sixteenth century saw the development of the Theatines, the Order of St. Philip of Neri, the Order of the Clerics of the Mother of God, and other influential reforming orders.

But perhaps none was as influential, or as novel an expression, as the Society of Jesus. The Council of Trent itself is explicit in its care to affirm the Jesuits in its sixteenth decree: "By these things, however, the Synod does not intend to make any innovation, or prohibition, so as to hinder the Religious Order of Clerks of the Society of Jesus from being able to serve God and His church, in accordance with their pious institute, approved of by the holy Apostolic See."¹⁷⁴ Whereas the Council desired to shore up the care of religious communities through the enhancement of episcopal oversight, and to make stipulations regarding the formation of novices, it was also careful--uniquely identifying the Society of Jesus by name--to assure that the strictures of the Council would not cripple the work of the Jesuits.

¹⁷³ Doley C. Moss, *Of Cell and Cloister: Catholic Religious Orders Through the Ages* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1957), 153.

¹⁷⁴ *Canons and Decrees*, 247.

The Formulae of the Jesuit order approved in 1540 appeals to those who wish "to serve the Lord alone and his vicar on earth [the pope]." It assumes that its members are making a "solemn vow of perpetual chastity." With this assumption it proclaims the purpose of the society: "to strive especially for the progress of souls in the Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of the faith by the ministry of the word, by spiritual exercises and works of charity, and especially by the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity."¹⁷⁵ Jesuit submission to immediate superiors is supplemented and expanded through a special vow of subjection to the Roman Pontiff, to be available to do whatever and go wherever the pope might declare.¹⁷⁶ The Jesuits were an army of ready servants to advance the cause of Christ at a moment's notice. They were scattered throughout the globe from the moment of their inception as an order.

The Society of Jesus arranged some of the patterns of their order to facilitate their dispersed, missional character (as the Dominicans explored in the thirteenth century). They did not require regular attendance for the recitation of the divine office. Instead they exhorted their members to maintain daily, prayerful, self-examination. Jesuits did not have annual gathered chapter meetings to make decisions, placing greater trust in their elected superiors. Their ascetical practice was mild, adjusted to the needs of the mission. Whereas Anabaptists did not take vows (beyond baptism) yet some appeared much like traditional monastic communities, members of the Society of Jesus did take religious vows yet did not always appear "monastic." Indeed, the Society had a rough go of it receiving formal acceptance as an order because some were concerned about just such matters--not to mention concerns that the church should not be allowing new orders or that Ignatius and his followers might be heretics.¹⁷⁷ But in the end

¹⁷⁵ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 3-4.

¹⁷⁶ See items 2 and 3 of the Formulae

¹⁷⁷ See W. W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 180-81; John O'Malley, John. *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35. My hope is to explore the nature of "dispersed monasticism" further in a paper reflecting on the Society of Jesus and other similar expressions old and new.

the order was approved and became a formidable force for the advancement of the Catholic cause in the sixteenth century and beyond.

Again, the point of this is to show that while sixteenth-century Magisterial and Radical Reformation movements abandoned distinctions between counsels and commandments, Roman Catholics of the same period affirmed and reinforced these distinctions. What does God expect? Of whom? Why? A stereotypical Jesuit would answer that God expects a great deal from one who has consecrated himself to utter availability to Christ and the Roman Pontiff in service. What God expects of a soldier of the Society of Jesus is not at all what God might expect of an unlettered layperson. Why? Because this is the structure of the kingdom of God. Some are called to farm, others to civil service, and still others to propagate the Gospel. The counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience set those of the latter category free to give themselves whole-heartedly to the work of the Lord.

Conclusion to Part One

In these three chapters part I have tried to trace something of the development of the concept of counsels and commandments from the fourth through the sixteenth centuries, illustrating how this notion (even when not explicitly mentioned) has structured the lives of Christians in various settings. I have also tried to indicate how each approach to counsels and commandments is itself an answer to the questions "What does God expect?" "Of whom?" and "Why?" By the end of the sixteenth century three primary approaches prevailed, approaches which continue to influence our views of divine expectations today. The Catholic way assumes that though God asks for the same love of all believers, God expects different things of different groups of people choosing different means to the end of love. Some are called to voluntary poverty, chastity, or other more serious commitments that are inappropriate for ordinary people in ordinary occupations. The Magisterial Reformation way emphasizes that God

expects the same things of all believers and eliminates the distinction between groups of people employing different institutional means. Magisterial Reformers often draw attention to the spiritual meaning of the counsels, suggesting that they are not invitations for some to be taken literally, but rather are commandments regarding the spiritual life of all. The Radical Reformation way often interprets the counsels (the Sermon on the Mount) literally and argues that God expects a more strict observance of these commandments by all the people of God. Indeed this is what it means to be a people of God: to follow the teachings of Jesus.

What, to me, has been left behind is the approach of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life and other semi-monastic expressions. These groups argue, in agreement with the Catholic approach, that God does call some differently from others. There is a value in facilitating complete devotion to the things of God through lifestyles of poverty, chastity, and so on. But, unlike the traditional Catholic approach, these groups do not see the restricted membership, the solemn vows or the monastic orders as required--or even necessarily helpful--institutions toward the end of promoting whole-hearted devotion for many. I hope in future papers to explore how expressions after the sixteenth century, following the lead of the Society of Jesus, may have reopened a semi-monastic way for later generations of Catholic religious.

But we are still left with the questions: "What *does* God expect?" "From *whom*?" and "Why?" As I have explored the historical material I have been struck with the complexity of it all. Reviewing the history and offering relevant reflections is not enough. There are important hermeneutical questions to ask. There are important theological issues to open. There are important sociological and practical matters to consider. What is required to resolve these three questions is nothing less than the articulation of a theology of religious life.

Part Two (and chapter 4): Divine Expectations in Theology and Practice

Section One - Divine Expectations in Christian Theology: Prolegomena to a Theology of Religious Life

Needless to say, I cannot begin to resolve the problems here. Yet I want to give at least a hint, for myself and perhaps for others, about what I think might be required in order to move toward a solution. What does a "theology of religious life" -- and particularly some kind of *Protestant* or ecumenical theology of religious life¹⁷⁸ -- look like, specifically with regard to the topic of commandments and counsels? What should we be doing in order to make some legitimate progress toward such an aim?

First, I think that we must admit that a theology of religious life does not fit neatly into traditional theological categories. On the one hand, we might think that the question "What does God expect?" would simply be a part of Christian ethics. Indeed, it has these elements. But the identification of commandments and counsels, and the distinction of groups of people associated with each, clearly leads us into a discussion of ecclesiology, the nature of the Christian church. Furthermore, underneath the discussion of expectations is the doctrine of salvation. As we have seen, issues of merit,

¹⁷⁸ See, in addition to the resources mentioned in footnote 5 at the start of this essay, with particular interest in a "Protestant" theology of religious life, A. Alchin, "The Theology of the Religious Life: An Anglican Approach" (Fairacres pamphlet, 1971); the developing corpus of Greg Peters (*Reforming the Monastery: Protestant Theologies of the Religious Life; The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality; The Monkhood of All Believers: The Monastic Foundation of Christian Spirituality* and many articles); and the writings of Donald Bloesch (his discussions of religious life are scattered throughout his works - see Peters, *Reforming the Monastery*, 127-140).

faith/works, and sanctification/perfection are simply part of this game. And so on. We must recognize from the start that a theology of religious life will have to incorporate elements of many theological categories in a single ensemble.

Building from this, second, we must also recognize that a theology of religious life must be an interdisciplinary theology drawing from a number of interrelated fields. Clarity regarding theological method is important. In my M.A. and PhD studies I explored the methods of Catholic theologians Bernard Lonergan and Donald Gelpi.¹⁷⁹ As I worked on my *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* I interacted with theological summaries from a variety of perspectives: especially Protestant evangelical, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and I urged that the study of Christian spirituality be an interdisciplinary study.¹⁸⁰ Since then I have tried to listen more attentively to women's voices, black people's voices, global voices. I also insisted More recently, I have been attracted to the constructive theological method of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. I suspect that there is a place of harmony between my own approach to Christian spirituality (now more specifically a theology of religious life) and some kind of conscious, interdisciplinary, constructive theology. The historical, doctrinal, human scientific, and practical must mutually inform each other along the way.

History provides for us language, models and questions that shape our inquiry. Just what do we mean when we speak about a "counsel"? As we have seen, even the definition of the basic concept of our exploration must emerge in the context of a dialogue with the apostle Paul, with Ambrose, with

179 My M.A. thesis at Gonzaga University (1989) was entitled Feeling, Knowing, and Spirituality: The Influence of Approach to Affectivity within Cognitional Theory upon Theoretical Spirituality as Observed in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan. One chapter of my doctoral dissertation (*Affirming the Touch of God: A Psychological and Philosophical Exploration of Christian Discernment* [University Press of America, 2000]) was titled "American Philosophy and Christian Discernment: A Development of the Foundational Theology of Donald Gelpi." I continue to regard these two theologians, recently (2018) presenting a paper at the American Academy of Religion on "The Peircean Theology of Donald Gelpi as Foundation for Understanding Christian Spirituality: A Story of Inquiry and Satisfaction" which summarizes my own appropriation of Gelpi's thought.

180 See Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), 39-71.

Aquinas, with Luther. I hope in the course of this essay to have offered a sample of the kind of historical survey that can service further theological reflection.

Yet history and reflection are not enough. As we have repeatedly seen, much turns on the interpretation of Scripture, indeed, on the interpretation of key particular passages. What do we make of Paul's "counsel" to celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7? Was Jesus's invitation for the rich young ruler to sell all (an invitation to "perfection" in Matthew 19), an invitation for people today to sell all? When Luke records the radical economic redistribution among the earliest believers in Acts 2 and 4, was he providing a model for others to practice? Is it appropriate to think of the Nazarites as a First Testament example of an accepted group who followed a form of life involving something like counsels in distinction to the rest of Israel who lived ordinary lives of devotion apart from this degree of consecration? Is it appropriate to think of the apostolic mission teams or the widows mentioned in 1 Timothy in a similar fashion? What do we make of a "literal" interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount? I hope it is clear that a theology of religious life must have something to say about the meaning of these and other passages. And of course, opening the Bible also opens us to the complexities of hermeneutics: the methods of understanding ancient book, sacred text, and divine word.

A dialogue capable of developing a coherent stance on "commandments and counsels" must move beyond textual interpretation to inquiry that is more properly "theological." It is a matter of the whole as much as the parts. The differences between Aquinas and the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, the differences between Zwingli and Conrad Grebel, involved disputes regarding the relationship of intellect and volition, merit and grace, faith and works. What does God expect? This is a question that can be answered variously using individual passages of Scripture. But when we try to summarize the nature of discipleship, distinct emphases or concerns shape our approaches and this results in different theologies of religious life. Consequently, in order to develop a theology of religious life today we must reconsider the nature of divine command, the character of human agency, the value

of "monastic soteriology," the relationship of ethics to vocation, and the aims of Christian life and maturity.¹⁸¹ In order to answer the "of whom" question we must synthesize our sense of the biblical portrait of church. Is "church" a collection of people equal in all ways? Does God see the church as an amalgam of diverse people with diverse abilities and callings and even divine expectations? These kinds of questions must inform the development of a theology of religious life capable of addressing the issue of commandments and counsels.

As an exploration of *human* embodiment of relationship with God, the study of religious life invites us to explore the insights of the human sciences with regard to our lived relationship with God. Dialogue with the human sciences has been an element of research in Christian spirituality since its inception as a formal field of study. As Christian spirituality has often focused attention upon asceticism or mysticism, this dialogue has frequently been a conversation with aspects of psychological wisdom. Developmental stages, states of consciousness, attachment theories, positive psychological practices and more have all illumined our understanding of the individual's encounter with the divine. The study of monasticism or religious life, however, particularly as an investigation of *groups* of people living according to special commitments, calls us into dialogue with other human sciences, particularly with sociological wisdom. In the dialogue with sociology we ask about stages of group development, elements of community cohesion, the social function of ritual, and so on.¹⁸²

More particularly relevant to the study of counsels and commandments--examining groups of people who consecrate themselves to a level of devotion that is somehow "more" than others--is the study of what sociologists call the "virtuosi." This phenomena was first identified by Max Weber who,

181 on "monastic soteriology" cf. D. D. Martin, "Monks, Mendicants," 148, 158; Snyder, "Michael Sattler: Benedictine," 277 and more generally Snyder, *Life and Thought*.

182 for general introductions to the sociology of religion see, for example, Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion* 8th edition (Oxnard, UK: Routledge, 2007); Peter Clarke, editor, *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kevin J. Cristiano, William H. Swatos Jr., Peter Kivisto, *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments*, third edition (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

in the course of describing the social patterns of the main world religions contended "that men are *differently qualified* in a religious way stands at the beginning of the history of religion," that "'herioc' or 'virtuoso' religiosity is opposed to mass religiosity," and that "the status carriers of a virtuoso religion have been . . . the early Christian 'ascetics,' who were expressly recognized in the congregation as a special 'estate' . . ." ¹⁸³ Max Weber identifies "monk communities" as examples of his category of virtuosi in the following page and others have followed him in exploring Christian monasticism in terms of this fundamental sociological distinction between mass religiosity and virtuosi religiosity. ¹⁸⁴ I think we as students of Christian spirituality--and more specifically of religious life and the distinction between commandments and counsels--cannot ignore the significant sociological literature that simply speaks of these distinctions as part of human religious life, perhaps akin to what Walter Capps names "the monastic impulse." ¹⁸⁵

Finally, there are also practical considerations. There are always practical considerations and sometimes our familiarity with (or concerns about) various practices shape the way we treat the topic as a whole (think of the practice of baptism as experienced by sixteenth-century Catholics, Magisterial Reformers, and Anabaptists). Debates about "vows," for example, were not only matters of exegetical and philosophical discussion. The way people viewed vows (or oaths) was connected to practices of baptism, civil government, military conscription and monastic entry that changed significantly through the centuries. Likewise, the idea of commitment in an age of chivalry and our own sense of

183 Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 287. See also Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischhoff, fourth edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 151-183.

184 See, for example, Michael Hill, *The Religious Order: A study of virtuoso religion and its legitimation in the nineteenth-century Church of England* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973); Ilana Friedrich Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Stephen Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions: Virtuosos, Priests, and Popular Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); and Patrica Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall*. For examples of the use of this concept as an interpretive tool in understanding the relationship of Jesus and his followers in the Gospel narratives, see B. J. Capper, "The Judaeon cultural context of community of goods in the early Jesus movement part II." *Qumran Chronicle*, 26 (2018). ISSN 0867-8715; Marius J. Nel, "The Presence of Virtuosi and non-virtuosi in the Matthean Community" *NGTT DEEL* 55, NR 3&4, 2014.

185 Walter Capps, *The Monastic Impulse* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

commitment in the postmodern West provide two very different settings within which one explores the counsels of religious life. How do we interpret what may seem as "elitism" within the context of a worldview and a form-of-life which comprehends the individual predominantly as localized participant in a divinely ordained whole? When do "counsels" become simply inappropriately imposed practices? Our practices--and the problems with our practices--are often either the stimulus or at least an ongoing dialogue partner in the development of a theology of religious life. It is religious *life* after all.

Consider, for example how Sandra Schneiders describes the impact of the second Vatican Council upon the practice and experience of both post-council religious:

Religious life, at least since the thirteenth century, has been defined as a higher life, the life of perfection, a superior vocation not given to all Christians. Religious were those who bound themselves to the observance of the "evangelical counsels" whereas ordinary Christians were bound only to the observance of the commandments. The Council undermined in a definitive way this understanding of religious life and, although the council itself and its implementing documents relapse repeatedly into "superiority" language, post-conciliar religious had to begin to relinquish their self-definition in terms of *de jure* as well as *de facto* superiority in relation to other members of the Church."¹⁸⁶

The point is that our approach to the evangelical counsels is not merely a matter of "doctrine," "history," "sociology," or "spiritual practices," but also probes our very sense of identity as Christians and human beings. The development of some kind of Protestant or ecumenical theology of religious life will have its own effects on these matters. Thus, a theology of religious life today must address both particular practices and the broader existential contexts that shape our own devotion. Our sense of the meaning of this distinction between those who live the commandments and those who live the counsels (whether we accept or reject this distinction) has had profound impact in history, and will

¹⁸⁶ Schneiders, *Wineskins*, 24.

have profound impact today, upon the sense of community and belonging among members of the Body of Christ. Consequently, it is wise for us today to develop an informed and prayerfully considered theology of religious life.

Section Two - Divine Expectations and Christian Practice: A Few Suggestions

What does God expect? From whom? Why? These are the questions I have been exploring throughout this essay. By the end of Part One on history I was able to outline three approaches (and perhaps a fourth) that crystallized in the sixteenth century and have dominated the Christian church's thought and practice since. The Catholic approach assumes that though God asks for the same love of all believers, God invites different people to different callings and each calling has its own set of expectations. Some are called to voluntary poverty, chastity, or other more serious commitments that are inappropriate for ordinary people in ordinary occupations. The Magisterial Reformation approach eliminates fundamental distinctions between callings, emphasizing that God expects the same things of all believers. Magisterial Reformers often draw attention to the spiritual meaning of the counsels, suggesting that they are not invitations for some to be taken "literally," but rather are commandments regarding the spiritual life of all. The Radical Reformation way often interprets the counsels (for example the Sermon on the Mount) more literally and argues that God expects a more strict observance of these commandments by all the people of God. Indeed this is what it means to be a people of God: to follow the teachings of Jesus. And then there are the approaches of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life and other semi-monastic expressions.

I suggested, at the end of Part One and at the start of Part Two, that properly answering these questions requires the development of a theology of religious life, one which incorporates biblical, historical, theological, sociological, and practical reflection in a single integrative synthesis. Needless

to say, I cannot here articulate a fully developed theology of religious life. That is a project for me to work on for perhaps the rest of my life. In the meantime I simply offer a few thoughts along the way. What does God expect? Of whom? Why? I opened the paper with the comment that I kept "bumping into" this question. I still do. And so I must respond even in the midst of my incomplete theologizing.

I spend a fair amount of time talking to groups who have formed--or want to form--intentional Christian communities of one sort or another. One thing that arises when communities form is the development of an organizational culture: a sense of "this is what we do around here."¹⁸⁷ More particularly, organizational culture involves a tacit acknowledgement of how each member fits into the whole, a sense of the mutual expectations of one another.

Notice that word: "expectations."¹⁸⁸ Our life together, in intentional communities or in the Body of Christ more generally, is governed by our understanding of the norms which guide a circle of relationships. At times these norms are subtly communicated, often perceived as assumptions tacitly held about the way people within a circle should act, speak, or even feel. In this sense our question is not one of divine, but rather of *human* expectations. And yet. The fact of the matter is that our own expectations of one another as Christians often reflect our own sense of what *God* expects.

Perhaps I can illustrate this with a story. During the 1970s Reba Place Fellowship (RPF) was an admired intentional Christian Community in the Chicago area. Their creative approaches to housing, hospitality, and worship drew the attention of Christians around the country. Following the lead of other respected communities they chose to organize themselves by "households": subgroups which expected members to conform to pretty high standards of lifestyle, sacrificial service, and mutual

¹⁸⁷ The Wikipedia article on "Organizational Culture" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organizational_culture) provides a nice summary of research on the topic from the perspective of business administration.

¹⁸⁸ Notice how often the word appears in the Wikipedia article on "Organizational Culture."

accountability (a bit "monastic" shall we say?).¹⁸⁹ When the requirement for attendance at one of the regular meetings was relaxed, one member expressed disappointment: "It was a lessening of the common life, and I had given myself totally to the common life; it was my way of giving myself fully to the Kingdom of God."¹⁹⁰ This member perceived their commitment not only as a matter of the expectations of one another, but also of their own sense of calling before God. These were *God's* expectations. But were these the expectations for everybody within the sphere of RPF? This is the "for whom" question. Dynamics of individual choice and group pressure, authority and submission, the need for belonging and the development of personal and family identity became expressed in tense relationships and ultimately gave birth to a community crisis. This crisis, in turn, led them to explore the "Why" question.

In the late 1970s, conscious of the concerns that members of their own and other communities were voicing, the leaders of RPF publically "repented on their knees for their use of excessive authority."¹⁹¹ Yet they also realized that this was not merely an issue of leadership character, but also a challenge for their church/community structure. They could not continue making the same expectations of everyone. But what were they to do, having members and friends with a variety of different levels of commitment? I quote at length Dave and Neta Jackson's summary of their deliberation:

Several options were considered: Reba could quit calling itself a "church" and become a religious order. That had theoretical integrity, but it would have meant sending people away from their home church--something that didn't seem right. Forgetting the communal aspect of Reba's life was another option, but there were many who felt deeply called to that form. Yoking

Reba Place Fellowship with Christ Church of the North Shore (a local Evanston congregation

189 See, for example, Dave and Neta Jackson's documentation of "the weekly schedule that most people living in a household were expected to follow" in their account of the first thirty years of RPF history in Dave and Neta Jackson, *Glimpses of Glory: Thirty Years of Community, The Story of Reba Place Fellowship* (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Press, 1987), 209.

190 Ibid.

191 Jackson, *Glimpses of Glory*, 252.

with which Reba felt much kinship) was another model that was discussed. The two groups would have been considered one church with two forms of participation. This would have clearly eliminated any judgment on the dedication of the "form" of commitment, but uniting with another congregation was too problematic. Finally, the consultation recommended a form that saw community at the center of a local church.¹⁹²

Ultimately RPF chose a dual-level framework. They felt they needed to honor the commitments some had made to the sharing of life together and to serious lifestyle and ministry sacrifices. But at the same time they had to make room for people to associate with Reba Place who did not want to make lifetime decisions to share a common purse or the like. They made institutional space for the virtuosi but tried to eliminate any sense that these kinds of commitments were a divine expectation of the whole.¹⁹³ Notice, the process of addressing their own challenges pressed RPF to think about how they might compare with (or even learn from) "religious orders." I think there is something here for us today.

When people ask me for advice on how to approach these kinds of questions I currently offer four suggestions:

1. Pastor Everyone - As Jesus did, we welcome any and all to follow Christ and we do so in a manner which tries to respect both the standards of the Gospel and the diversity of individuals and groups who join with Christ. I have used the language of "appropriate" formation or a "wisdom" approach to formation to describe this concept.¹⁹⁴ I think Christ invites some, like the rich young ruler, to abandon

¹⁹² Jackson, *Glimpses of Glory*, 268.

¹⁹³ David Janzen provides sage advice regarding membership expectations for people navigating community life in his *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook: For Idealists, Hypocrites, and Wannabe Disciples of Jesus* (Brewster Massachusetts: The Paraclete Press, 2013), 203-212.

¹⁹⁴ See Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2018); James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard, "The Wisdom of Christian Spiritual Formation" *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 13, no. 1 (February 2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790920903841> and accessed January 22, 2021

everything (family, occupation, possessions) for the sake of giving themselves full-time and undistracted to the service of Christ. But I also think Christ advises some, some who even might want to sell all and follow like the Gadarene demoniac, to "go home to your own people" (Mark 5:19). And I think that there are a lot of other options in between. Our job as the church--and as leaders in the church--is to lovingly listen for that call of God's Spirit within groups and individuals, and then to encourage, equip, support, and empower others to live into that call in ever growing maturity.

2. Permit (and empower) the "Experts" - The fact of the matter is, Christ *does* call some to more extreme commitments than others. This does not make them necessarily "better" than others (I will get to that in my next point). But it does mean that we must make space for the monastic impulse, for the religious virtuosi. Jesus did not call everybody to sell all and follow him at close range. But he did call some, and our first step today is simply to permit those who sense this call to exist. We must establish welcoming relationships, small groups of consecrated Christians, and even monasteries of various forms to allow those who hear God's invitation to radical Christian living to explore that calling (and even to fail along the way). Simple permission is the first and most important step. Yet I encourage a second. Not only did Jesus call some to sell all and follow, he also empowered them through close personal investment to follow in his footsteps. Jesus modeled that life with them and then provided an outline--a Rule of Life, shall we say--to guide them as he sent them out to do his work (see Matthew 10:5-15). Our society knows well how to train Olympic gymnasts, virtuoso orchestras, chess masters. I think that the church has generally failed at empowering religious virtuosi. As any chess master or World Cup soccer (football) team knows, we learn excellence through failure. We must not only permit failure, but must equip groups and individuals to transcend failure to become great for the sake of the Gospel.

3. Prevent Elites - Yes, we must permit and empower experts. We must assist some of the Body of Christ to free themselves of the distractions of money, power, career, family and so on, whether this leads to a life of contemplative prayer or missional service. But we must never presume that gifts, training, or form-of-life make one person "better" than another. The temptation is so strong, and I can understand why the Reformers were so animated about elitism. The apostle Paul is equally concerned (see, for example, Colossians 2:16-23). the Holy Spirit has arranged the Body to give the greatest honor to the least presentable parts (1 Corinthians 12:21-26). Yet we do not solve the problem by disempowering the most visible or attractive parts from accomplishing their task. Rather we equip all members of the Body to serve their purpose and to know their place. Yes, we must invest in contemplative monastic communities and sacrificial celibate missionary teams. But we must never permit members of these groups (or those who talk about them) to advance any kind of elitism based on the distinctions. We are all simply members of the Body of Christ.

4. Prohibit Excluders - Finally, this means we must actively prohibit excluders, those whose organizational culture or personal behavior marginalizes others. I have seen this kind of marginalization in three ways. At times in history--or in communities today--one hears that another individual or group is simply not following Christ when they live at a lower standard than we might expect of our group. Yet, I know this is complicated because Jesus himself communicated standards to his followers. I know we must promote the fullness of the Gospel of Christ, even in the midst of a Christian culture who may live these values in a shallow manner. Appropriate formation. Nevertheless I am concerned by some who exclude simple church-goers and simple churches from their circles of fellowship. Early Synods and Councils generally permitted monastic expressions to develop, but they did not permit them to

expect that "true Christianity" is only lived in the context of celibacy or other similar expectations.¹⁹⁵ At the same time, however, I am equally concerned about those who think that any "higher call" is *necessarily* elitist. Just because I may sense a nudge of the Spirit to live at the Federal poverty level, or to choose a focused ministry in the context of lifetime singleness, does not mean that I must think myself as "holier than thou." Monks, like alcoholics, are often very aware of their shortcomings, as any glance at the material for monastic self-examination will reveal.¹⁹⁶ The point is that we must affirm the breadth of the call of Christ's Spirit and condemn those who might exclude some authentically following that call.

Pastor everyone. Permit (and empower) experts. Prevent elitism. Prohibit excluders. If I were to summarize my current "theology of religious life" in ten words, this would be my summary. But like I mentioned earlier, developing a fully developed theology of religious life is the undertaking of a lifetime, and hopefully engaging the partnership of a community of fellow students.

195 See Evan B. Howard, "Spiritual Formation and Elitism."

196 The volumes of the *Philokalia* offer an excellent sample. See G. E. H. Palmen, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, and other editors, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Volumes 1-4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979-1995).