The Attraction of Monastic Asceticism: Some Issues to Face

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An evangelical Protestant aiming to evaluate the history of monastic practice does not take up this task as a neutral observer. The entire Protestant movement in general and the evangelical Protestant heritage in particular represent a kind of verdict against monastic history. And yet, the examination of monastic history can prove disarming. The writer can recall that while a Puritan-leaning evangelical postgraduate, he developed a surprising kinship with St. Bernard and the austerity-loving Cistercians. Only later did he learn of the major theological debt John Calvin owed to Bernard (1090-1153), a second-generation Cistercian.[1]

Admitting to this admiration is a helpful starting point from which to assemble a critical and biblical framework for thinking about monasticism and the ascetic practices we have come to associate with it. Such evaluation is highly necessary at the present time as we witness growing curiosity in the monastic past.[2] As evangelical Protestants we should want a critical framework that honours the supremacy of Holy Scripture and privileges it to be the judge of all important questions of faith and life. Here then are several guardrails to keep our explorations of monastic asceticism from veering off the main road of biblical Christianity.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTAINS NO MORE THAN THE SEEDS OF A CONCEPT OF ASCETICISM

The NT contains what might be called allusions to the idea of 'training', 'exertion', or 'practice' in holy living. But for this purpose, it employs words already in circulation in the Graeco-Roman world. The sole NT occurrence of the verb '*askéo*' (from which our term 'asceticism' is derived) is found in Acts 24:16, where the Apostle Paul speaks of his '*striving* to

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1 These dependencies have been explored by W. Stanford Reid, 'Bernard of Clairvaux in the Thought of John Calvin', *Westminster Theological Journal* 41.1 (1978), 127-145, and Anthony N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), chaps. 4, 5.

2 This fascination is illustrated by the attention paid to Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2017). Within evangelicalism, the trend is illustrated by the reception given to the writings of Greg Peters, *Reforming the Monastery* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013) and *The Story of Monasticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015). The first volume is especially illuminating.

keep his conscience clear'. Using an athletic metaphor, he speaks of the Christian's need for 'strict training' as in training for competitive games; this requires bodily control. The verb is '*hupopiazo*' (1 Cor. 9:25-27).[3] A parallel concept of 'training' appears in 1 Timothy 4:7, where Timothy is exhorted by Paul, 'train yourself to be godly'. The verb is '*gumnazéo*'. Worthy of consideration alongside these Pauline statements is that of the writer to the Hebrews (12:1-2) who urges readers to 'run with perseverance'. The verb is '*trecho*', suggesting exertion. We need to ask the question 'what are the things most conducive to this training?' We consider *four* possible avenues which have been recurring in monastic history.

a) Will training in godliness have to do with Terrain?

In the New Testament, we read of the rigorous style of life associated with the wilderness ministry of desert-dweller John the Baptist: 'In the wilderness of Judea…John's clothes were made of camel hair and he had a leather belt around his waist; his food was locusts and wild honey' (Matt. 3:1-4). By contrast, we need to allow that Jesus endured an extended temptation in the wilderness which was at the same time *preparatory* to the commencement of his public ministry (Matt. 4:1-11). We cannot say that Jesus' own earthly life was characterized by what could be called a withdrawal from society. Admittedly, his own communion with God was sometimes carried out in solitary places (Luke 4:42) and he did some of his training of the twelve in just such locales, where they would be undisturbed (Mark 6:31, 32); but He and they were most often in towns and cities. And unlike John the Baptist, neither Jesus or the disciples shunned the Jerusalem temple or local synagogues. Apostolic Christianity was to be lived out in society (Matt 28:19-20) and so is the life of the believer (1 Cor. 5:9).

b) Will training in godliness have to do with Residence?

While on the one hand, Jesus stressed that he personally had no place to call home (Matt. 8:19), we are on firm ground in supposing that, prior to the dispersion of the Apostles after the Jerusalem Council (circa 48AD), home ownership such as Peter's (recorded in Mark 1:29) was the custom. The meetings of the first Christians after Pentecost took place in homes as well as in the part of the temple courts known as Solomon's Colonnade (Acts 2:46; 3:11; 12:12). These devout believers continued to maintain personal property and voluntarily liquidated portions of it to meet common needs (Acts 4:36). Maintaining a home of one's own had no stigma attached to it, though Jesus did contemplate at least some of his follow-

[3] Scripture references and quotations are from the *New International Version* (1984).

ers 'leaving home…and family' (Matt. 19:29). Evidently, Paul was such a disciple; he reminded the proud Corinthians that he knew, by experience, what it was to be hungry, thirsty, ragged and homeless (1 Cor. 4:11).

3) Will training in godliness have to do with Diet and Social Life?
Jesus was criticized for his social life. He knew that others described him as 'the Son of Man coming eating and drinking.' In the same passage, he is reportedly accused of being 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt. 11:19). And if his approach to companions was eclectic, so also was it eclectic as regards food. The New Testament teaching on food is not only that the former distinction between clean and unclean food is passé (Mark 7:19, Acts 10:15, 1 Tim. 4:4), but that limiting or restricting food is without merit. The Apostle Paul says (Romans 14:6), 'Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.'

4) Will training in godliness have to do with Marriage and Celibacy?
Jesus was, of course, unmarried. But while he allowed that there would be disciples who were 'eunuchs for the kingdom' (Matt. 19:11), the New Testament records no command or obligation that anyone should make this their choice. It is clear that marriage was not forbidden to the twelve Apostles. Peter had a mother-in-law whom Jesus healed (Mark 1:29); the Apostle Paul, while at least single at the time of writing his first Corinthian letter (1 Cor. 7:8), alludes in the same letter to the fact that *other* apostles (Peter included) are travelling the Mediterranean world *with* their wives (1 Cor. 9:5). The brothers of Jesus (by then travelling preachers in their own right) are similarly described in the same place.

II. THERE WAS ANOTHER ASCETICISM ROOTED IN PLATONIC THOUGHT

In sum, we may say that the 'striving' or 'training' in godliness encouraged in the New Testament is *not* bound up with these things. It is with this framework clarified that we can next consider that in the world of the New Testament, there was another asceticism being advocated that was an outgrowth of Greek philosophical ideas. Plato had supplied the basis for a form of asceticism different from the training of a Christian. The *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* indicates:

> Plato formulated a cosmological dualism between the home of the gods as a realm of ideas, being and perfection and the human world of shadows, becoming and imperfection. Human existence came to be seen as the tempo-

> rary sojourn of the eternal soul (which comes from the realm of ideas), in a material body. The latter in fact imprisons the soul, which properly seeks its proper level…Corporeal nature is transient and only interferes with the soul's quest to become like God.[4]

There is evidence that these ideas were confusing Christian believers in the first century. Thus, Paul's first letter to Timothy warned against those who 'forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving' (1 Tim. 4:3). The same Apostle cautioned his Colossian readers to be wary of the 'false humility' bound up with man-made rules dictating what could be touched or tasted (2:20-23). The New Testament examples of encouragement of abstinence from marriage are urged on Christians because of the perceived nearness of the return of Christ rather than because of disdain for bodily life. 'The time is short,' Paul says. This is the basis for Paul's advice to those not yet married (1 Cor. 7:29). Yet he is quick to add that those who marry do *not* sin.

Some forms of ministry actually assumed married status (1 Tim. 3:2); others required that there be no re-marriage after bereavement (1 Tim. 5:9, 10). We may say that the married state was normal among the Apostles. All this being so, we are left to explain how later Christian ascetic practices—so many of which went counter to this record of the gospel history—took hold. There are so many instances of variance.

III. THE GROWTH OF THESE ASCETIC PRACTICES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY REQUIRES EXPLANATION AND ASSESSMENT

While the NT contains what might be called rudimentary indications of the training of the Christian, the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era show a proliferation of strategies and practices which were assumed to advance holiness of life. If these developments would be deemed to be questionable, how is their emergence to be explained? It is time to call on some historians of monasticism. They suggest:

a) The absorption of Platonic notions which denigrate the body and promote the ideal of celibacy

We begin to see traces of this in the heretic, Marcion, who had been exposed to Gnostic teaching. Marcion will not accept the incarnation of the Son because he accepts that the human body (in this case, that of

[4] s.v. 'Asceticism' in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. by Everett F. Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. 104, 105.

Mary), being physical matter, is tainted.[5] There are also traces also of this among the Montanists, who prescribed long fasts, utterly forbade remarriage, and dictated the length of veils to be worn by women.[6] Alexandria, Egypt—a great centre of Greek education and culture , as well as early Christian theology—was, along with these, a depot for the spread of sub-Christian ideas about the neglect of and disregard for the human body. Manicheism (which ensnared the young Augustine) also exhibited these traits. There were strict dietary regulations including abstention from meat and wine; they renounced all material goods. Here, there is the clear possibility of the passing on of traits to monasticism.[7]

b) The third century alarm at the worldliness of the Church

It ought to strike us as odd that when the revered Antony of Egypt (251-356) first heard the call of Jesus to give up all that he had and to come and follow him (as Matt. 19:21 was read in church) his first thought was of leaving the church.[8] The year was about 270 A.D. The great Decian persecution had come and gone. In the lulls between state-sponsored persecutions, the church in the Roman world experienced significant growth. And yet many thoughtful Christians did not like what they observed unfolding in the church. Antony first found a 'holy man' at village-edge. Evidently, such semi-withdrawn holy men were common in the third century.[9] Only later did Antony join with hermits and monastic communities already established in the desert. Evidently, earnest Christians like Antony no longer looked on the church as the 'locale' where the Spirit of God was doing His best transformative work. Why settle for the church when you could join yourself to a community of the committed in the wilderness? This explanation for monasticism's origin (the sagging of church vigour through the influx of nominal believers, rather than persecution) is supported by monastic historians H.B. Workman, David Knowles, and Christopher Brooke.[10] The first of these insisted, 'The rise of monasticism coincided, roughly speaking, with the loss of the church in the world.'

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5 s.v. 'Antony of Egypt' in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. by Ferguson, p. 569.

6 s.v. 'Montanism' in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. by Ferguson, pp. 622, 623.

7 William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 437-439.

8 Athanasius, *Life of St. Antony*, ed. and trans. by Robert P. Meyer (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), p. 20.

9 Harmless, *Desert Christians*, p. 419.

10 H.B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal* (1913; reprinted Boston, MA: Beacon, 1962). David Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (London: Wei-

Knowles added that the earliest monks had 'a conception of the Christian life as lived at different power, so to say, by recognized groups or classes'. Christopher Brooke put it this way: 'Antony and his colleagues and followers fled into the desert to escape both popular religion and persecution. In the late third century, the crowd must have seemed the greater menace.'[11]

The undoubted industry, self-reliance and discipline of the desert fathers (as they were called) do not, in and of themselves, deflect attention away from certain nagging defects in their way of life. Of these deficiencies, we can name three in particular:

a) The neglect or slighting of the human body through excessive fasting, extended exposure to the elements and insects, and sleep deprivation represent a Platonic rather than a biblical mindset.

b) The evading of oversight by the church (about whose health the early monks were sceptical), by geographical separation. It took centuries for the church to assert its authority over the monastery. This concern goes hand in hand with a third:

c) The promotion of the avoidance of society as if it were a good thing in itself. Desert monasticism, whether of the hermit or communal type, used the desert experience *not* as a preparation-ground for public ministry in society (which might have been said to characterize the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles), but as a destination. The promotion of this life as if it were modelled on apostolic life was deeply flawed; it shunned public ministry in favour of sequestered devotion. Basil of Caesarea (330-379), having gone to observe the desert monks at first hand, returned home with the conviction that something was amiss. 'If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?' he asked.[12] Basil's monastery would serve an adjacent orphanage, a hospital and a workshop for the unemployed.[13] For the monks of Egypt and Sinai, the social and societal horizon was being

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denfeld and Nicolson, 1969). Christopher Brooke, *The Age of the Cloister: The Story of Monastic Life in the Middle Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003).

11 Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Idea*, p. 6. Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, p. 10. Brooke, *The Age of the Cloister*, p. 29. C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 3rd edn (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001), like Brooke acknowledges two factors motivating monastic recruits. In addition to persecution, he mentions (p. 1) 'a reaction by finer spirits against the laxer standards and the careerism that crept into the church'.

12 *Regulae Fusius Tractatae, Interrogatio* vii, PG 31, 394, translated in W.K. Lowther Clarke, *The Ascetical Works of St. Basil* (1925) as quoted in C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 3rd edn (Harlow, U.K.; Pearson Educational, 2001), p. 9.

13 Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, p. 22.

eclipsed by the personal quest for holiness. This last consideration leads us to a concern implicit in what has just been said.

IV. THE STEADY MODIFICATION OF MONASTIC LIFE INDICATES NOT ONLY ADAPTATION BUT CRITIQUE OF EARLIER FORMS

It is a commonplace to observe that as monasticism is transported from Egypt and Sinai to Syria, Cappadocia and points further west, it adapts to new climates (where seasonal changes are more pronounced) and new social conditions (with monasteries now often being nearer to towns and cities). The *Rule* of Benedict is symbolic of these adaptations; the Benedictine regime is also more moderate when it comes to diet, clothing, and dormitories. Benedictine monasteries will, at least initially, function as working farms. Meanwhile, the priest-monks supervised by Augustine of Hippo (termed 'canons' because they live by a Rule) take urban ministry very seriously. By contrast, the Irish monks of the era of the barbarian invasions combine features of the Egyptian desert, marked by disdain for the body (hence the unheated, unlit, windowless beehive-like stone cells of the west of Ireland) with itinerant evangelism. There is the same expectation (evangelization) laid on the monks who accompany Augustine of Canterbury, sent from Rome to England in 597 as well as those who cross from Ireland to Scotland and the Continent. These developments represent critique as well as adaptation. The adaptation and critique are ongoing. What is most obvious is that the notion of holiness as requiring utter removal from the world has been challenged. It is coming to be accepted that Christian monks have obligations to reach the world at large.

As well, it is becoming more clear with the passage of time that monastic life is not for men of peasant stock, but for young men from families of means. Monastic recruits generally come from good families and bring with them some net worth to contribute to the life of the monastery. In the era of Charlemagne (crowned 800 AD), western monasteries are coming more and more under the jurisdiction and protection of wealthy landowners, who site monasteries on their own lands and function as patrons over them. These are now called 'proprietary' monasteries. Such monasteries and convents soon become havens for younger sons (who cannot inherit family assets under laws of primogeniture) and for unmarried daughters of the wealthy (who now may find an honourable position in a convent as an abbess). Monastic life is growing more comfortable, and monasteries are themselves well-endowed in consequence of their readiness to accept bequests intended to ensure prayers for the departed. The earlier Benedictine emphasis on monastic physical labour as the counterpart to prayer (*ora et labora*) gives way to the employment

of substitute 'lay brothers' who undertake the sweaty toil necessary to feed and to support the monastic community. Benedictine monks spend more and more hours of the day in chapel services. This domestication of monasticism in the West calls forth a reaction.

In the hill country of north Italy, Romuald of Ravenna (950-1027) left a comfortable Cluniac monastery to establish at Camaldoli 'the solitude and severity of Egyptian monasticism.'[14] Romuald also established a strict Benedictine monastery as the 'prep school' of that Egypt-style hermitage which was set at a higher mountain elevation. The Carthusian movement, begun near Grenoble in 1176 similarly promoted mountain hermit life. The Cistercian movement, led by Stephen Harding (1060-1134) is simply the best-known of the several reactions against the too-comfortable existence of the Benedictines (exemplified by Cluny) and the too-intrusive arm of the secular power which had adversely affected monasticism in the west since Charlemagne. Their monastic houses would not be built close to existing towns and cities, but in waste places. The monks themselves would labour and perspire to support the life of the community. And they did so with remarkable results.

Within a century these Cistercian 'white monks' had grown affluent and comfortable by the strength of their own physical labour. The Cistercians of what is today's coastal Belgium were soon so rich that they maintained a fleet of their own sea-going vessels to transport their super-abundant supplies of wool to markets. The Cisterican order itself had to forbid these ships from carrying any cargo other than that produced by the monks themselves.[15] The Cistercians soon had lay-brothers helping with the chores, just as the Benedictines had done. This order, originally embodying a primitive impulse, had become the Cistercian Corporation LLC!

The growth of urbanization in western Europe after the year 1200 called for a further adaptation and critique. The rural population began to be depleted as working people gravitated to the towns and cities in search of employment in manufacturing and trade.[16] Recognizing both that Europe's existing urban churches could not cope with this influx of population from the countryside and that European clergy were ill-equipped to preach to the masses, Dominican and Franciscan orders arose to address the deficiencies among the European clergy. This is

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14 Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, p. 62.

15 R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 266, 267.

16 Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, p. 77 claims that the population of Europe doubled between 1050 and 1200.

church reform by innovation of ministry. These orders were intentionally urban. They took up itinerant and open-air preaching; they gathered funds for the erecting of new urban churches (which remain to this day in European cities bearing the names 'Franciscan' and 'Dominican'). These orders had put themselves at the service of the papacy for urban ministry, for the refutation of heresy and for the conduct of missionary effort to the East and West. What had this to do with the deserts of Egypt or the wilds of West Ireland? Where was the old aloofness from the institutional church? The monastic idea was being altered and reconfigured for a new and demanding age. And the same, exactly, could be said about the origin of the Society of Jesus in 1534. Here was a strike force, also directly responsible to the Papacy, for the refutation of Protestant error in Europe and the spread of the gospel elsewhere. The earliest monks had kept the institutional church at arm's length. A thousand years later, the new monastic orders are at the beck and call of the church hierarchy.

One is entitled to ask, 'Will the genuine monasticism please stand up?' Is it solitary or corporate? Is it independent of the institutional church or an auxiliary, subject to the same? Is it best sited in rural and wilderness areas or ought it to be proximate to the areas of greatest human need? Must the monastic life be self-sustaining or may it accept endowment, and with that endowment a degree of control by persons outside it?

In passing, it is worth acknowledging that Benedictine monasticism, so often criticized in past centuries for its placidity, its accumulated wealth, and tendency to allow domination from wealthy non-monastic feudal lords, has actually proved to be the most enduring.[17] It has rebounded while some other forms, begun in attempts to return to more primitive and rigorous forms, have dwindled. Were the critiques made of the Benedictines without point then? Or were the Benedictines, like other orders, only approximations, attempts at something which while noble, was elusive?

V. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE MONASTIC LIFE WERE IN DECLINE WELL BEFORE THE AGE OF REFORM

Not only was there strife between the religious orders, as to which of them most nearly approximated Apostolic life, but there is evidence of public dissatisfaction with the vaunted claims of monks in advance of any threatened breach of western Christendom in Luther's time. Pre-Refor-

[17] It is striking how contemporary author, Denis Okholm, drew attention to what could be called the 'comforts' of the Benedictine way in his *Monk Habits for Everyday People* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

mation monasticism, like the pre-Reformation church stood in need of reform on account of a decay of devotion and the interference of secular authorities. Sometimes the initiative for monastic reform was provided by public authorities, who noted the decline.[18]

There were criticisms in print: I mention first the Christian humanist, Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), most famous for his research showing the ancient 'Donation of Constantine' to be fraudulent. In his treatise 'On the Profession of the Religious' (c. 1440), Valla strongly objected to the distinction drawn since the time of Thomas Aquinas, between 'religious' persons (the monastic orders) and rank and file Christians. 'What does it mean to be religious, if not to be a Christian, and indeed a true Christian?' Valla asked.[19] He also held up to critical scrutiny the idea of requiring espousal of religious vows beyond customary Christian teaching. He maintained that ordinary Christians were just as capable of observing poverty, chastity, and obedience as were members of the religious orders.[20] Valla was posing questions overdue for attention since the age of Antony.

Similarly, Erasmus of Rotterdam portrayed the monastic orders unfavourably in his *Colloquies*. In 'The Funeral', a parish priest, a Dominican and a Franciscan are at a dying man's bedside competing with one another as to who will administer the last rites. Then Augustinians and Carmelites arrive and join the fray. It is clear that there is financial gain to be had in administering the last rites and the question at issue was—who was most fit to perform this pastoral duty? The clear implication is that the monks (all under vows of poverty) are intruding in hope of financial gain, in a situation where the pastor's ministries were more than adequate.[21]

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18 Barry Collett, 'Monasticism' in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. by Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), III, p. 79.

19 This treatise remained in hand-written copies only until modern times, first appearing in English translation in 1994. By contrast, his *Falsely-Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine* (1440) was widely circulated and mechanically printed in the wider Renaissance and Reformation period. I consulted it here in the 1994 edition, Lorenzo Valla, *The Profession of the Religious and selections from The Falsely-Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine* (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 1994). See especially pp. 48-49.

20 *Profession of the Religious*, pp. 50-55.

21 *Erasmus: Ten Colloquies*, ed. and trans. by Craig R. Thompson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 90-95. The further irony is that in addition to all the monastic orders being required the taking of vows of poverty; Franciscans were forbidden to ask for or to receive donations. One may find similar

Two such snippets do not make an argument. But they do serve as a caution to us to keep our critical faculties operative. Dewy-eyed evangelicals looking into monastic history are more prone to give blanket approval to what they see than some Roman Catholic eyewitnesses across the centuries.

VI. TAKING PROPER NOTE OF THOSE WHO LEFT MONASTIC LIFE, UNFULFILLED

This acknowledgement that there was Roman Catholic unease about the monastic life in advance of the era of Protestant Reform easily leads us to consider a related concern, i.e. that the ranks of the Protestant Reformers were filled not only with former Roman priests, but also numerous members of Catholic religious orders who had abandoned the cloister. This was true of some orders, more than others. Owen Chadwick has insightfully observed, 'Many leaders of reform were monks or friars. […] More reformers were friars than monks.'[22] He noted that while few Benedictines and Dominicans joined the ranks of the reformers, Franciscans were most likely to do so.[23] All such monks had in common that they had accepted the need for the Scriptural reforms brought in by the Reformation. A few examples will help to make this concrete:

German lands:	Martin Luther, an Augustinian
	Martin Bucer, a Dominican
Netherlands:	Heinrich Moller (Brother Henry): an Augustinian
Switzerland:	Conrad Pelikan, a Franciscan
	Sebastian Münster, a Franciscan
England:	John Hooper, a Cistercian
	Myles Coverdale (Tyndale's continuator), an Augustinian
	Robert Barnes, an Augustinian
Scotland:	John Winram, an Augustinian
	John Willock, a Franciscan
Italy:	Jerome Zanchius, an Augustinian
	Peter Martyr Vermigli, an Augustinian[24]

unfavourable late-medieval finger-pointing at monastic foibles in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Bocaccio's *Decameron*.

22 Owen Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 151.

23 Ibid.

24 I have verified these monastic linkages using the entries in *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) and in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. by Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

This sampling suggests that for many, monastic life (especially of an Augustinian type) and monastic study opened up inquiries and aspirations which were not fully capable of realization within monastic life. The orientation to biblical and Patristic study and to theology (in all of which monks were frequently more adept than parish clergy) had the effect of catapulting these individuals forward first into Christian humanism and then beyond into Protestant reform.

VII. THE REFORMATION IDEAL WAS NOT ONLY THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS, BUT ALSO FULLER OBSERVANCE BY THOSE BELIEVERS

Reformers such as Luther could take up pen and ink and write against monastic life and vows because they believed it had constituted a 'wrong turn'.[25] The question, early identified in the history of the church, 'what is to be done about the disparate levels of observance and commitment among professed Christians?' had in monasticism received a well-intentioned, but ultimately mistaken answer from the various movements which followed across the centuries. Christian observance, Christian devotion, Christian training, ought to be worked out in the life of the church, rather than away from it. In departing from this principle, monasticism had proved to be an elitist and divisive attempt at addressing a genuine and pressing question.

In the larger frame of Christian history, this pressing question of how to raise the standard of godliness among Christians has been addressed by a number of other strategies. Within Roman Catholicism, this need was eventually addressed by such initiatives as the Brethren of the Common Life (the separate communal life of men and women, living lives of service, yet without formal vows) and in various lay confraternities (voluntary organizations of Catholic believers united to accomplish some identified task, such as poor relief). The advent of the printing press made more widely available Catholic devotional aids such as 'books of hours' which furnished aspiring Christians with Bible readings and prayers for set hours of the day (in imitation of monastic practice). Within Protestantism, the raising of the standard of godliness has variously been addressed by the creation of Pietist 'cells' within mixed congregations,[26]

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[25] Martin Luther, 'On Monastic Vows' (1522) in *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) 44, pp. 251-400.

[26] Such cells appear to have been promoted at Strasbourg in connection with the ministry of Martin Bucer. See James Kittelson, 'Martin Bucer and the Ministry of the Church' in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community,*

'praying societies',[27] and by movements of Christian revival.[28] Modern conceptions of Christian education within the local congregation have aimed at raising the level of Scripture knowledge and Christian living for all who enrol.

The major issue to be faced is that of whether Christian congregations will take this need seriously enough to address it directly. Evidently, in the age of Antony of Egypt, local churches were not meeting this need. Monasticism arose to provide a kind of 'finishing school' for Christians with aspirations for discipleship which were not provided in their local churches. Thus came to prominence the ancient equivalent of what we today term 'parachurch' ministries, i.e. mission-specific organizations that aim to advance evangelism, youth ministry, or discipleship. This essay does not mean to suggest that all such efforts are ill-advised or questionable, for valuable parachurch ministries have been aimed at world evangelism, at Christians in business, at mothers of children, and at fathers—all aiming to help Christian believers to function effectively.[29] But we are today, as ever, obliged to ask whether our churches are adequately accepting responsibility for leading believers as a whole to 'purify (themselves) from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.' (2 Cor. 7:1).

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ed. by David F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 83-94. These were later advocated by Jacob Spener in his *Pia Desideria* (1675).

27 These were common in England and Scotland in the period prior to the Evangelical Revival/Great Awakening of the 1730s. See Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival* (London: Banner, 1971), chap. 4, where the author indicates the prevalence of such gatherings in England and Scotland as well as the Netherlands in the late seventeenth and early eighteenths centuries.

28 The classic in this field is that of Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of the Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979).

29 Here, I refer to such organizations as Operation Mobilization, The Gideons, Christian Businessmen's International, Moms in Prayer International, and Promise Keepers.