

CHRISTIAN ASCETICS
IN THE THEOLOGICAL CURRICULUM:
AN APOLOGIA

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Two reasons stand out among others when one seeks a warrant for considering in a theological curriculum the practices of Christian piety. The first is that so many of God's people are either in doubt, or defensive, or indifferent about such practices. Enveloped by the fog induced through terms like "fundamentalism," "neopentecostalism," "revivalism" and "pietism," God's people are apt to lose their bearings and, fearing injury, tend to come to a stop on the side of the *Via Pietatis*. The second reason, directly related to the calling of the minister of the Word, is mentioned by the apostles when the Seven were set apart in Jerusalem: ". . . but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:4) If seminary educators purpose primarily to train apostolic successors for today's church, surely a course in Christian ascetics deserves a place next to one in homiletics.

In explaining that branch of theological study we are calling "Christian ascetics," we will consider first the background of asceticism, then make some observations about the study of Christian ascetics, and finally suggest directions for the program and agenda of Christian ascetics in a theological curriculum.

I

To describe the content of Christian ascetics it is necessary to open a path to definitional clarity. What terms are relevant to this discussion, and what do they signify? Leaving aside colloquial terminology and usage (most of which assigns negative connotations to words like "ascetic," "pious," "abstinence," etc.) we should try to locate these terms in the history of theology and the church.

The term *ascetic* comes from a Greek verb, *askeoo*, meaning *exercise, practice, train*. Applied initially to both athlete and soldier,

the term's constitutive elements of self-denial and abstinence from certain comforts and pleasures come to receive a religious cast.¹ Such exercises are said to be associated in Scripture with certain practices (fasting) and offices (priests, Nazirites). Although the word *askeoo* appears only once in the NT (Acts 24:16: "This being so, I myself always strive [*askoo*] to have a conscience without offense toward God and men." NKJV), both the Pharisees and the Lord Jesus encouraged their disciples in discipline and self-denial (Mt 4:2; Lk 2:37; Acts 13:2). The apostle Paul called himself a Christian in training (1 Cor 9:24-27; 1 Tim 4:7f).

The historian Philip Schaff called asceticism "a rigid outward self-discipline, by which the spirit strives after full dominion over the flesh, and a superior grade of virtue."² Though not unique to the Christian religion, the "ascetic principle" governed all piety and morality in the early and medieval church. Part of asceticism's philosophical justification lay in the belief that man is or becomes partially divine. Either man's soul, seen as something opposed to his body, shares in God's being (dualism), or man is but a lower form of Divine Spirit (monism).³ Ascetic practices were designed to elevate man, to assist his ascent to Being, or Spirit. Purification from creaturely pleasures, desires and comforts, *and* religious pursuit of union with the divine, constituted the aims of renunciation and engagement. Extremism characterized asceticism from its earliest days; both extreme renunciation and extreme licentiousness were rooted in views of the relationship between body and soul, between matter and spirit. The church suffered the dualistic Manichaeans and the monistic Stoics; Plato and Paul were partners, not opponents.

In his *Stromata* (IV.22) Clement of Alexandria characterized the entire Christian life as *askeesis*, or exercise. This development involved the shift from mere exercise to a spiritual exercise, extending further to the practices of voluntary renunciation of permissible natural enjoyments. Asceticism entailed not the bearing of burdens born by all humans, nor bearing the added burdens shouldered by Christians, but performing those voluntary, non-required acts of pure love for Christ. Nor was it exhausted by practices of private piety; its socio-cultural impact in the early and medieval church shaped institutions that still survive. Basil of Caesarea, called the father of monasticism, exercised formative influence on asceticism by maintaining its connection with the church under the bishops, and by retaining its social usefulness. Under his direction hospitals

and leper settlements, relief distribution and education were organized.⁴

Nevertheless, asceticism tended toward social and moral isolation. Withdrawing from the congregation and the village, ascetics took refuge from "the world" by dwelling in desert settlements and monastery cloisters. Christian morality was of two kinds: the counsels of perfection (voluntary renunciation of marriage, property, etc.) formed the agenda for the few, while the rest followed the precepts of ordinary Christian living.

This ascetic isolation participated in the broader shift away from Biblical piety reflected in the progressive separation of liturgy from life, of worship from work. This shift to what James B. Jordan calls "mysteriological" piety—a trust in the sanctifying power of the cult(us)—replaced joyous worship with legalistic technique as various ceremonies and features were added to worship, features that had no organic relationship to divine design for life in creation.⁵

If the goal of Christian asceticism in the ancient and medieval church was perfection, the Reformation's resounding rejection of synergism required an entirely new foundation for the practices of *askeesis*. Sin is a matter of the heart, not the flesh; monasticism had ignored both the call to be in the world and the presence of the world in the monastery. Luther's teaching about calling (*vocatio*) led Protestants to view daily life as the practice of piety, and Calvin's focus on obedience to the Law of God in everyday life contradicted the moral and social isolation of asceticism. Notice Calvin's title for the first edition of his *Institutes: The Institute of the Christian Religion, Containing almost the Whole Sum of Piety A Work Very Well Worth Reading by All Persons Zealous for Piety, . . .*⁶ Indeed, *pietas* (piety) covered much of what we today understand by ethics. But there was more to *pietas* (suggesting perhaps that there should be more to our understanding of ethics!); someone has defined *pietas* as

the personal confidence in, reverence for, and fear of God that conduces to true worship of and devotion to God. Thus, piety, together with devotion (*cultus*) constitutes true religion (*religio*).⁷

Accordingly, in contrast to the *Summum theologica* of Thomas, Calvin offered the world his *Summum pietatis* for the re-formation of Christian piety gone astray!

Those recommending modern asceticism empty the term of

many of its historical and radical connotations. George Maloney, for example, urges upon us an asceticism consisting of "any conscious self-control and systematic exercise of the Christian life in the light of obtaining the goal." (Cf. Phil 3:13-15) Virtually any practice would qualify as ascetic which assisted in overcoming obstacles to love of God and neighbor.⁸ Concluding her historical analysis of ancient and medieval asceticism with specific recommendations for modern practices, Margaret Miles insists that the inseparability and integrality of body and soul must set the ascetic agenda. Practices perennially beneficial include fasting (also from the mass media!), meditation and prayer, physical exercise, temporary periods of celibacy (?), solitude, concentration and silence. The goals of modern asceticism, appropriately culturized in twentieth century garb, "include self-understanding, overcoming of habituation and addiction, gathering and focusing of energy, ability to change our cultural conditioning, and the intensification or expansion of consciousness."⁹

II

We wish to distinguish the study of *Christian ascetics* from the study of historical or theological aspects of Christian asceticism. (Perhaps a terminological parallel might be found in "Christian ethics.") The study of Christian ascetics has indeed been a part of the theological curriculum in the past. Termed by some "ascetical theology," this branch of study dealt with "the ordinary means of Christian perfection—e.g., the disciplined renunciation of personal desires, the imitation of Christ, and the pursuit of charity."¹⁰ Ascetical theology received developed attention in Roman Catholic thought, and was divided by Thomas Aquinas into: 1) the purgative way (stressing cleansing the soul from sin); 2) the unitive way (focusing on union with God); and 3) the illuminative way (emphasizing the practice of positive Christian virtue). In its broadest sense, ascetical theology covered the study of Christian discipline and the spiritual life, presuming as it did that the Christian life is inherently a *struggle*.

The matter of Christian ascetics is not foreign to Reformed theology. Gisbert Voetius (1589-1676) understood ascetics to involve that theological teaching or that part of theology treating the method and description of the exercises of piety.¹¹ In his 1664 publication *Ta Asketika sive Exercitia Pietatis*, Voetius expounded in detail on the practices of prayer, meditation, contrition, fasting, silence, and more. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) accorded Chris-

tian ascetics a place under Dogmatics, more particularly, Theological Ethics. In his view,

Ascetics belongs to the pedagogical section of theological ethics, the part dealing with the *mediae iustitiae* [tools for righteousness] for the regenerated. For in the measure that the child of God devotes himself, aside from particular moral obligations, to generally equipping himself better against Satan, the world and his own flesh, and to dwelling more in the Tent of the Lord, to that degree the path he has to travel to reach that goal can properly constitute an object of investigation, and thus form a distinct subject called *Ascetics*.¹²

Another continental theologian, W. Geesink (1854-1929), devoted considerable discussion to this subject in his *Gereformeerde Ethiek*. Christian ascetics he defined as "the teaching concerning the means which a Christian has to employ for the forming of his own Christian character."¹³ The *need* for the practices of Christian piety he found succinctly expressed in the Canons of Dort, V, 2:

Therefore daily sins of weakness spring up and defects cling to even the best works of God's people. These sins and defects are for them a constant reason for humbling themselves before God, for fleeing to the crucified Christ, for putting the flesh to death more and more through the Spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of godliness [*sancta pietatis exercitia*], and for panting after the goal of perfection, until at last, delivered from this body of death, they reign with the Lamb of God in heaven.¹⁴

The practice of Christian ascetics is not an end in itself, but a means to another goal: performance of the Christian's moral duty to his fellowman according to God's will. Christian ascetics is characterized positively as exercise, spiritual-psychological gymnastics, and negatively as abstinence and renunciation. But both are for the goal of victory. Geesink roots this discussion in Lord's Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which speaks of the twofold nature of Christian conversion as *mortificatio* and *vivificatio*.

Ascetics has to point out the *adminicula* [aids] for the mortification of this old man and the vivification of the new, both in the area of active holiness and in that of self-purification; the former affects the inner and the latter touches the external lifestyle and walk.¹⁵

These aids to virtue (*adminicula virtutis*) Geesink identifies at great length. Generally speaking, we may consider God's providential leading as an aid to virtue; it implies a *path* along which we are per-

sonally led, with a beginning, an end, and a direction. God's personalized leading in terms of our occupation, personal talents and qualities, familial status, and so forth, seeks to form and shape our character. Careful, Scripture-guided reflection on this leading is a necessary means toward self-cultivation and self-improvement.

Geesink proceeds from his theological-confessional starting point to describe two kinds of helps: *cathartic* (negative) and *gymnastic* (positive). The former involve the exercise of self-purification through temporary abstaining from natural pleasures and things of life (cf. 2 Cor 7:1; 1 Cor 5:7; Rom 8:13). These voluntary practices include fasting (he refers in this connection to the Heidelberg Catechism, QA 109; Mt 6:24; 1 Cor 6:12; 7:5; 9:27) and wakefulness.¹⁶ The gymnastic aids (cf. 1 Tim 4:7) include oratio, meditatio and temptatio (the latter means "self-examination"; cf. 2 Cor 13:5a; Prov 5:23). These cathartic and gymnastic helps must never be separated from one another; the proximate goal of both is what Scripture calls sobriety and watchfulness (1 Thess 5:6). Watchfulness, "the uninterrupted focus of the soul on the highest good," and sobriety, "abstinence from enjoyments which would obstruct the sovereignty of the highest good," characterize the Christian lifestyle necessary for victory.

III

Because the study of Christian ascetics tends to "fall between the cracks" of most modern theological programs, one might simply rejoice at its inclusion *anywhere* in the curriculum—in church history or biblical-theological courses, even "practical" courses in "ministry." Moreover, Christian ascetics is the kind of subject that is related to virtually every department of theological study. It has an historical feature, a doctrinal aspect, a biblical foundation and a pastoral aim.

There appear to be three possible approaches available to us for programming Christian ascetics into a theological curriculum:

Inter-disciplinary approach: treat Christian ascetics as a component of each course in the curriculum.

Departmental approach: following the pattern of "missiology," one could create a separate department for teaching Christian ascetics (eventually with special degree programs and institutes).

Focal approach: assign Christian ascetics to an existing department of theological study; this approach would not exclude con-

siderations germane to other departments of study, but would proceed from a starting point within one department. There is in Reformed theology a strong historical argument for the focal approach, for placing it within Christian ethics. Viewing Christian ethics broadly as "reflection on the responsible activity of man toward God and his neighbor,"¹⁷ we would describe Christian ascetics generally as *reflection on man's responsible action toward God according to the First Table of the Decalogue*. Although love for one's neighbor can also be construed as love for God, insofar as it accords with His commandments, nevertheless, to indicate that portion of Christian piety directed principally and supremely to the reverential devotion to and fellowship with God, we include in our definition a reference to the First Table of the Law. After all, our moral responsibility *to God* may not be swallowed up into the performance of our duty *to man*! This was recognized by John Calvin when, commenting on Luke 2:25 ("Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, . . ." RSV), he suggests that "*Devotion and Righteousness* related to the two tables of the law, and are the two parts of which an upright life consists."¹⁸ Our general definition seeks to identify the *subject* (responsible man), the *essence* (responsible action towards God), and the *norm* of Christian ascetics (the First Table of the Law).

Our starting point is formed in part by the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 34-38 (First Table of the Decalogue) and 45-52 (the Lord's Prayer). Although these appear in that section of the Catechism dealing with gratitude for *salvation*, gratitude is and always has been relevant to *creation* as well. James Jordan points to the creational, patterning significance of the sabbath/thanksgiving "interruption" in Adam's life, a moment between taking hold of creation (the sixth day) and working with it (the eighth day). Man images his Maker in his use of creation, with one difference: man is to say "thank you" to God as he works. *This* is Christian piety. It is a religious "sense" pervading the work of God's redeemed children in all of creation.¹⁹

Ora est labora, and this characteristic of all piety permits its theological description, analysis and evaluation. Courses in Christian ascetics would integrate Biblical givens, historical analyses, doctrinal considerations and pastoral prescriptions. Christian ascetics engages in systematic reflection aided by exegetical and historical conclusions, informed by liturgical-pastoral consciousness. The theological study of Christian ascetics must expose

dangers in modern piety: not only individualism, technique-ism, casuisticism, but also activism, social moralism, and faddism. But beyond that, it has the rich opportunity to encourage Biblical reflection on the personal, private, devotional application of doctrine to life.

The curricular program would include attention to Scriptural teaching concerning the exercises of Godward obedience, and to their practices, motives and perversions in Christian church history. Theological ethics must consider the implications of creation, fall, redemption and consummation also for the practice of godliness. What is the relationship between personal piety and cultural obedience? Do joining the protest march and joining the prayer group constitute two distinct, but equally valid forms of Christian piety, or are they contradictory testimonies? What is the Fall's effect on man's liturgical piety? How should the doctrine of Creation inform the enjoyment-abstinence dynamic of Christian living? May fasting, meditation, forms of Christian devotion, wakefulness, etc. be prescribed now that Christ has come?

We conclude our brief *apologia* for a theological-curricular consideration of the practices of Christian piety with the hope that this aspect of Christian existence may receive more exegetical and theological analysis among Reformed pastors, theologians and leaders. In our time, as the twentieth century conceives and bears its technological children, nurturing them in impersonal and humanly sterile ways, such attention to meaningful practices of personal fellowship through godliness seems a healthy contribution to cultural morality. After all, what does the Lord require of us in addition to doing justice and loving mercy, but to humbly *walk with our God* (Micah 6:8).

NOTES

¹*Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, s.v. "Asceticism," by Howard Tepker.

²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1:388.

³*The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, s.v. "Asceticism," by Rousas J. Rushdoony. The reader is referred to a thorough analysis of this philosophical-historical aspect of asceticism in *The Library of Christian Classics*, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, . . .), vol. 12; *Western Asceticism*, by Owen Chadwick, ed. Interestingly, Chadwick argues that attributing second century devotion to virginity and celibacy to a depreciation of the physical body is historically inadequate, since a

religion based so crucially on the doctrine of the incarnation could not have generated or survived such a depreciation (15)

⁴See Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, 17, V A Demant, *The Idea of a Natural Order* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1966), 30, Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, The Pelican History of the Church (New York Penguin Books, 1967)

⁵James B Jordan, *Christian Piety Deformed and Reformed* (Geneva Papers [New Series], No 1, September, 1985) This essay is recommended as a stimulating attempt to understand Christian piety within a creation-redemptive-historical framework Copies can be obtained by writing to Geneva Ministries, P O Box 8376, Tyler, TX 75711

⁶*The Library of Christian Classics*, 26 vols (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1960), vol 20 Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "Introduction," by John T McNeill, ed , xxxii

⁷Richard A Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms, Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1985), 228

⁸George A Maloney, *Following Jesus in the Real World Asceticism Today* (Albany, NY Clarity Publishing, Inc , 1979), 6

⁹Margaret R Miles, *Fullness of Life Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1981), 162

¹⁰P H Davids, "Ascetical Theology," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A Elwell, ed (Grand Rapids Baker, 1984), 87

¹¹"Ascetica est Doctrina Theologica, seu pars Theologiae, quae continet methodum ac descriptionem Exercitiorum Pietatis " See J Douma, "Gebed en ascetiek," in *De biddende kerk*, C Trimp, ed (Groningen Vuurbaak, 1979), 90, note 17

¹²Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedie der Godgeleerdheid*, 2nd edition, vol 3 (Kampen Kok, 1909), 435

¹³W Geesink, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, vol 2 (Kampen Kok, 1931), 243

¹⁴Anthony A Hoekema, *A New Translation of the Canons of Dort*, cf W Geesink, *Van s Heeren ordinantien*, 2nd edition, vol 3 (Kok Kampen, n d.), 275ff

¹⁵Geesink, *Ordinantien*, 257

¹⁶Geesink, *Ordinantien*, 264

¹⁷J Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics* (Winnipeg Premier Publishing, n d) , 7

¹⁸John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew Mark, and Luke* trans by William Pringle, vol 1 (Grand Rapids Baker, 1981 [reprint]), 141-142

¹⁹James B Jordan, *Christian Piety*, 4