It will be the task of our generation, not to "seek great things," but to save and promote our souls out of the chaos, and to realize that it is the only thing we can carry as a "prize" from the burning building. . . . We shall have to keep our lives rather than shape them, to hope rather than plan, to hold out rather than march forward. . . . It will not be difficult for us to renounce privileges, recognizing the justice of history.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Book of Common Prayer
Contents

Preface ix
Introduction xiv

Part 1 The Focus of Christian Ethics: Three Accounts

1. John Cassian’s Ethic of Individual Sanctification 3
2. Walter Rauschenbusch’s Ethic of Social Redemption 19
3. John Howard Yoder’s Ethic of Communal Witness 38

Part 2 A Prismatic Case: The Epistle to the Ephesians

4. The Goal and Basis of Life Together in Christ: A Reading of the Epistle to the Ephesians (Part One) 61
5. The Character of Life Together in Christ: A Reading of the Epistle to the Ephesians (Part Two) 77

Part 3 Possible Exceptions

6. Possible Exceptions: The Self 107
7. Possible Exceptions: Society 125

Part 4 The Shape of an Ecclesial Ethic

8. The Goal, Basis, and Character of an Ecclesial Ethic 153
9. The Ecclesial Setting of a Devout and Holy Life 176
Contents

10. An Ecclesial View of Life in Civil Society  198
11. An Ecclesial View of Life within Political Society  
   \textit{(Part One)}  218
12. An Ecclesial View of Life within Political Society  
   \textit{(Part Two)}  245

Afterword  267
Bibliography  270
Scripture Index  277
Author Index  283
Subject Index  285
This book has taken shape over the last decade, but its origin lies even further back in time. From 1961 to 1971 I served as a missionary of the Episcopal Church assigned to the Church of Uganda. During that time I spent a year in the bush learning to speak one of the twenty-eight languages found within Uganda’s borders. I taught for several years in a Church of Uganda seminary located in a little village near the capital, Kampala. I took a year out to study social anthropology at Oxford University and returned to teach in the Department of Religious Studies at Makerere University. During this decade, I worked closely with the African leadership that came into office with Uganda’s independence. In particular, I came to know Archbishop Janani Luwum, who was killed by Idi Amin. My many conversations with him and my experience of the life of the Church of Uganda led me to change my view of the calling of the church and the nature of its relation to society.

In my case the change was marked. A seminary professor of mine once said of me, “Where you come from [in my case Virginia], being an Episcopalian is something that happens in certain families.” His observation was on the mark. I was born into a family whose members had been Episcopalian since colonial times. I went to an Episcopal school, and the Episcopal Church financed my graduate education.

The church into which I was born and in which I grew up prided itself on its cultural position, its influence, and its openness to new learning. It understood its mission as being the religious and moral tutor of an educated and Christian society. The school I attended taught my fellow students and me that our privilege carried with it a responsibility to serve society and live an exemplary life. The Episcopal Church was part of a far wider coalition of liberal Protestant churches that saw their mission in much the same way. They
were to encourage tolerance and justice in society and provide its religious foundation.

That is my background, but I lived outside of the United States for a decade—from 1961 to 1971. I missed the 1960s in America, but I observed my country from afar, and I came to realize that the world in which I had been raised was passing away. More importantly, I came to realize that the churches in the United States were being pushed to the social margins in a manner similar to the way in which the churches in Europe in an earlier period had lost their dominant social position. I came to believe that the churches in the United States were addressing their changed circumstances in exactly the wrong way. They were expending enormous energies to maintain their social position, and in so doing they failed to realize the extent to which their previous attachment to social position and cultural relevance had actually compromised their integrity. I came to believe that the most immediate calling of the churches is to form a culture in which Christ is taking form rather than to transform a culture.

These perceptions came about in part because I was immersed in the life of a church that was as different from mine as night is different from day. To be sure, the Church of Uganda was not without its own social ambitions. It had been the church of the colonial power that made Uganda a protectorate. The Church Missionary Society, whose successes were not unrelated to the British Raj, had evangelized it. The Church of Uganda had benefited from a close association not only with the ruling colonial power but also with Uganda’s ruling class. It is not surprising that, following the lead of the Church of England, it somewhat pretentiously took the name “the Church of Uganda.”

That said, it was not the lay and clerical leadership that supplied the dynamism of the Church of Uganda. The East African Revival supplied the energy. Its members stressed the importance of sudden and dramatic conversion, and they placed great emphasis on the marked changes in “lifestyle” that were to accompany conversion. They also stressed the necessity of public witness on the part of every Christian. They required participation in “fellowship meetings,” at which sins were publically confessed, backsliders challenged, and people in doubt counseled.

The ways of this church were strange to me—even a little off-putting. Personal testimony was frowned upon within Episcopal circles, and what appeared to me a harsh moralism frequently surfaced within the attitudes and actions of “the brethren” (as they termed themselves). Nevertheless, I could not get away from the fact that the common life of the Church of Uganda lay far closer to that of the church of the New Testament than did that of the Episcopal Church (and for that matter most of the other churches in the United States). Over time I was compelled to ask if I did not have something
of great importance to learn from this church—something about the calling
of the church and the character of its common life that was missing in the
churches I knew about in North America.

The reason for my change of mind and heart can best be explained by
recounting an experience I had one Friday afternoon in 1962. On that day, I
attended the “fellowship meeting” held by the brethren who worked for or
lived near the tea estate on which I was living. On that day, a young couple
asked the members of the fellowship to help them with what appeared to them
to be an irresolvable conflict between their newly found faith and the advice
they were getting from the husband’s fellow employees at Texaco (where he
had recently been employed). His new employment meant that he would have
to move from the countryside into the city of Kampala. There, he had been
told, he would need to take out an insurance policy on his property because
of the rampant thievery present in the city. He was also told that he would
need to procure a watchdog that was willing to attack because the thieves were
violent and often killed their victims.

These two suggestions seemed contrary to the couple’s newfound belief
and way of life. Had not Jesus commanded his disciples to take no thought
for the morrow, and had he not told them, when attacked, to turn the other
cheek? It seemed to them that an insurance policy hardly presented the world
with people who took no thought for the morrow, and a watchdog hardly
seemed a way of turning the other cheek. They wondered if their newfound
faith allowed for them to take this new and quite lucrative job. They asked the
fellowship for advice that might set their conscience at rest.

As might be expected, the discussion of these issues among the brethren soon
surfaced a “pro-watchdog party” and an “anti-watchdog party.” Similar divi-
sions appeared when it came to buying insurance. After a lengthy discussion,
the elders told the rest of us to pray while they withdrew to seek the Lord’s
will. About a half an hour later, they returned and rendered their judgment.
That judgment literally stunned me. They said that the couple could take out
an insurance policy because, should they be robbed, they would no longer be
living among the people who would take care of them. On the other hand,
they should not procure a watchdog because Christ died for his enemies. To
defend themselves with a watchdog trained to attack would compromise their
witness to Christ’s death for his enemies. The congregation accepted this
judgment, sang a hymn, and went home.

I say the judgment of the elders stunned me because it seemed then, and
still seems, a judgment of remarkable depth—one that I could not imagine a
congregation I knew in America capable of. Permission to buy an insurance
policy was based on a fact of this congregation’s common life. Among them
there was no needy person. That was their assumption, and it controlled what they said about the possible losses of the couple. On the other hand, procurement of a dangerous watchdog was forbidden because acceptance of death at the hands of his enemies was central to Christ’s work of reconciliation. To arm themselves was, in the mind of this congregation, a betrayal of the gospel.

To this day, I do not agree with their judgment about the watchdog, and the body of the text that follows will make clear why. What stunned me was not the decision itself but rather the extent to which this congregation’s understanding of its calling and its common life shaped the pastoral care it provided its members. From that moment, I said to myself, I have to rethink everything I thought I knew. When I returned from Africa, I began the study of Christian ethics. My experience in Africa soon lodged a question in my mind. Do the figures I am studying pay enough attention to the relation between Christian ethics and the common life of the church?

This is how the question that led to this volume came to be. It took me a long time to state my thoughts on this matter with any degree of clarity. There are, however, a few people who have helped me along the way, and I would like to thank them. Sadly, the first of them is now dead. Janani Luwum was shot by Idi Amin in Luzira prison just outside the city limits of Kampala. Archbishop Luwum spoke with me at length about the radical changes that faith in Christ had required of him. He also spoke of the need for the church to present Christ to the world through its way of life. In a way that I have found quite prescient, he also said that he thought that the churches in the West faced an even more difficult challenge. It is more difficult, he said, to present the gospel of Christ to a culture that once honored him than it is to one that has as yet not really heard of him. I have come to believe that his observation was correct.

A few people in this country, too, have helped me enormously during this project. I first must mention John Howard Yoder (sadly now deceased) and Stanley Hauerwas, whose work questions the easy fit between Christian belief and the present culture of liberal democracies. These men call for a change of focus on the part of the churches—one that shifts attention from the formation of a Christian society to the formation of a faithful community. It was their work that first gave me a glimpse of the direction in which my scholarly work had to go.

As this project progressed I turned frequently to three colleagues who talked with me about the project and gave of their time and effort to provide a critical reading of what I had written. The three are Professor Gene Outka of Yale University, Professor Gilbert Meilaender of Valparaiso University, and Professor Timothy Sedgwick of Virginia Theological Seminary. Their encouragement and advice have been invaluable. The errors of this book are
all mine. Its strengths, however, are in no small measure due to their insightful comments, suggestions, and critical reading. I also owe a depth of gratitude to three of my colleagues at the Anglican Communion Institute—Christopher Seitz, Ephraim Radner, and Mark McCall. Christopher Seitz made me aware that my project required a reading of Holy Scripture that relied not on odd quotations but on a coherent reading of its overall sense. Ephraim Radner’s work in ecclesiology made me aware of the central importance of church unity and the role that ethics plays in sustaining that unity and restoring it when it is broken. Mark McCall taught me more than I thought I would ever know about the history of my own church and about the relevance of that history to this project. It is rare to have colleagues with whom one shares so much, and I would like to thank them publicly for their companionship. I also wish to thank Ted Wardlaw, president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, who invited me to deliver the seminary’s MidWinter Lectures on a topic of my choice. I welcomed his invitation for a number of reasons. The invitation gave me an opportunity to test the ideas that had been brewing for some time. It was also the case that H. Richard Niebuhr had delivered the same lectures. They were later published as Christ and Culture, a book with which I was in constant conversation as I thought through what I had to say on a related topic. President Wardlaw’s invitation seemed more than fortuitous.

I would also like to thank the editors of Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology for permission to publish the chapter of this book that treats the work of John Cassian. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Pro Ecclesia under the title of “John Cassian and the Desert Fathers: Sources for Christian Spirituality?”

Finally, I must mention my wife Elizabeth. Many spousal tributes mention patience and long-suffering during the course of a given project. I can certainly testify to patience and long-suffering in abundance, but recognition of these admirable qualities does not capture her real importance. She is an Episcopal priest who is rector of a parish here in Austin, Texas. Watching her lead this congregation anchored what I was trying to say in a living, breathing body of Christians. Time and again she provided a concrete example of what I was searching for.

Austin, Texas
January 28, 2014
Introduction

On one level, the chapters that follow compose a book on the nature and calling of the Christian church. As such, *Christian Ethics and the Church* is a book about the theological subject of ecclesiology. Yet, on another level, these chapters contain arguments both about the significance of what is now called Christian ethics for understanding that nature and calling, and, more broadly, about the relation between Christian theology on the one hand and Christian ethics on the other. Too frequently in this age, theology and ethics, though acknowledged to have overlapping concerns, are treated as separate subjects. Indeed, the separation of these subjects has become so common that one can easily find examples of Christian ethics that have little theological content and even more examples of theological works that have no ethical content whatever. This separation of “faith and morals” has not always been either so distinct or so pervasive, and it is to no small degree the object of this study both to suggest the baleful results of their separation and to map a way toward their reunification.

To follow that way, I believe, requires a shift in understanding—one that focuses Christian moral thought on the common life of the church rather than on the inner life of the believer or the general state of society. Contrary to common opinion, the following argument contends that the first concern of Christian ethics is properly how Christians are to live with one another rather than how they are to progress in personal holiness or how they are to relate to a surrounding social and political order. This is not to say that those who think about the ways in which Christians ought to live should not concern themselves with these personal and/or broadly social questions. These are vital questions that demand attention. I am not asking that they be ignored. I believe, however, that we need to ask
again what the “focus” of Christian moral thought ought to be. I have chosen the word “focus” very carefully. To have a focus does not mean that one has no peripheral vision. It means only that one’s line of sight is centered on a particular spot. Thus, to say that I believe the focus of Christian ethics is properly the common life of the church does not mean that the life of the soul and the life of society are not matters of concern for Christians. It is to say only that what might be called “the originating locus” of Christian ethics lies properly within the interior life of the church rather than in the interior life of the soul or the moral state of society.

In taking this position, I knowingly enter into a conversation with the most influential book in Christian ethics to have appeared in the last century—H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr was presciently aware of the importance of the common life of the churches, and indeed distinguished his concerns from those of his brother, Reinhold Niebuhr. H. Richard Niebuhr insisted that his brother’s project had more to do with the reform of culture, while his own addressed the reformation of the church. Be that as it may, his readers showed more interest in his work *Christ and Culture* than they did in his broad concerns about ecclesiology. His defining legacy was a concern not for reform of the internal life of the church but for the relation of the churches to the society in which they might be located. His five-part typology framed Christian moral discussion in North America for several generations. Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture became the common coin of moral discourse, at least among liberal Protestants. Of the five types, he and his liberal Protestant readers clearly favored the view that Christ is most adequately understood as “the transformer of culture.”

Given the nature of the times, it is not surprising that this position was so widely shared. His was a period in which mainline Protestantism was a vital social force—one that saw the transformation of a society as its mission. The World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, along with the various denominations in America, were taken up with the question of what it was for a nation to be a Christian society. None of these organizations now occupy the social position they once did. It is easy to forget what a different time it was. The mainline denominations were riding high on the bubble of American civil religion. One could choose one’s denominational brand with full confidence that the choice would not place one outside the mainstream of American life.

However, there is increasing recognition that the denominations in America suffered from what can now be recognized as a fatal flaw. America’s civil religion grew out of the soil of the Enlightenment from which emerged a religious settlement that looked something like the following. According to enlightened reason, it is important for a society to have religious foundations, but those foundations ought not to be dogmatically restrictive. The moral fiber of society is to be sustained by religion, but that religion is to be thinly defined with a focus on love of God and love of neighbor rather than on complex and hotly debated matters of doctrine. These matters are thought to have their place, but that place lies within the various denominations. The particularities of belief and practice are to be sustained not by established religions but by individual denominations wherein what can be called a “thick” construal of theology and ethics can be advocated and passed on without causing destructive social conflict. America’s religious culture is to be devotedly pluralistic.

What has happened, however, is that the broad umbrella of civil religion has not, as intended, protected the particularities of doctrine. Rather, these thick construals of Christian belief and practice have been sucked into the bath of pluralist culture and diluted so as to fit the minimalist dogmatic pattern of civil religion. The result within the denominations is pervasive theological and ethical vacuity. The decline of the social position of the denominations has been accompanied by, perhaps even occasioned by, the evisceration of robust accounts of Christian theology and ethics.

In a cultural situation like that described above, ethics moves in one of two directions, and on occasion in both directions at the same time. On the one hand, Christian ethics becomes a charter myth for equal access to coveted social goods, and its moral vocabulary shrinks to that of “rights.” On the other hand, Christian ethics moves inward toward “spirituality.” Spirituality is the inward expression of what is outwardly sought by the struggle for equal rights. That is, as one struggles outwardly for the social recognition of one’s identity group, so also one struggles inwardly to find one’s own personal identity.

It is in this context that I have posed the question of the focus of Christian ethics. Ought we to focus, as did the readers of H. Richard Niebuhr, on the transformation of culture; or do we go inward toward the realm of personal meaning in a way traced by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in Habits of the Heart? Or do John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas have it right when they insist that we turn our attention to the common life of the church?

These are the three options (the life of the soul, the life of society, or the life of the church) that have appeared not only within the religious history of America but in fact throughout the course of Christian history. Accordingly, I have begun this study by analyzing an example of each possible focus. I have sought to display the particular focus of each example by posing three diagnostic questions: What is the goal of life in Christ? What is the basis of life in Christ? What is the character or shape of life in Christ? These questions can be posed in any order. No matter what the order chosen, however, the answers given clarify the focus of any given account of Christian living.

I have posed these questions to three authors—John Cassian, a central figure in Western monasticism; Walter Rauschenbusch, the great advocate in America of the social gospel; and John Howard Yoder, who, along with Stanley Hauerwas, in recent years has called the churches to form what Hauerwas has called “a community of character.” The analysis of each option is reasonably lengthy because I have wanted to show how fruitful these questions can be not only in identifying the focus of any given account of the Christian life but also in providing a full and critical presentation of what a given writer might have to say. In asking these questions as a means of identifying the focus of a given account of Christian living, I have also had a methodological concern. I have not only desired to identify the focus of any account of the Christian life; I have also wanted to find a method of analysis that puts on display the full scope and adequacy of that account.

Finding the right example of each type has proved a taxing assignment because I wanted to locate not only a helpful example of each but also examples that come from various periods in the intellectual and social history of the churches of the West. In the end, I decided upon what at first might seem an odd assortment. The first example, John Cassian, is decidedly premodern. Cassian was an early monastic heavily influenced by Neoplatonism. As might be expected, his account of the Christian life focuses on the sanctification of the individual soul. A second exemplary figure is Walter Rauschenbusch. His rendition of Christian living is precisely the reverse of that of John Cassian. His account is as modern as Cassian’s is premodern. It reflects the Enlightenment perspectives of both Schleiermacher and Kant and, not unexpectedly, focuses on the redemption of the social order rather than the sanctification of the individual soul. The third example is John Howard Yoder. His ethical writings are thoroughly postmodern, insisting that, in respect to Christian ethics, there is no “scratch,” no sure starting point or foundation—be it in a

heavenly realm of archetypes or in an earthly one of reason and/or experience. He insists that Christian living is grounded in the particulars of the person and work of Christ. Christian ethics are first a matter of witness by means of the imitation of Jesus’s life on the part of a faithful community firmly located within the course of history.

Admittedly, these three figures have been chosen merely as examples of three options or types. Use of isolated examples, separated as these are by both time and circumstance, in no way captures the subtle differences that appear in more extended historical studies. However, these examples do serve well to display both major foci of Christian ethics and the differing intellectual and social climates in which these accounts appeared.

Whether I have chosen wisely will become apparent only over time. Whatever the case may be, however, these studies have led me to believe that the proper focus for an account of life in Christ is the common life of the church. I have also come to believe that the current move toward “spirituality” represents a pervasive form of narcissism that seeks to treat the primary disease of an overly individualistic culture not by the production of antibodies but by massive injections of the sickness from which it suffers. I believe also that Robert Wilken’s criticism of H. Richard Niebuhr’s ethic of cultural transformation is essentially correct. Wilkin charges that the transformation of culture is more an idea than an incarnated reality. Niebuhr and his latter-day followers have never addressed the basic question. That question is not how Christ transforms culture but how Christ forms a culture and how that “Christianly” formed culture penetrates the wider culture in the first place.

If one asks this question, it becomes apparent that Christ is present in the church in a way that forms a culture that in some ways is quite distinct from the larger one in which it is taking root. If the issue is posed in this way, the first question becomes how Christ forms a culture, and only then how that culture is to relate to the one in which it has taken root. If the formation of a culture “in Christ” is the first issue, the relation between those who live in Christ and their host culture becomes a derivative one. The question becomes, how does a body that has a culture (and so also an ethic) sort out the relation between its common life and that of its host culture?

How then will this argument about the nature and calling of the church and the focus of Christian ethics be developed? If one is to make a convincing case for holding that ecclesiology is an aspect of theology as well as ethics, one must at least show that such linkages accord with the way in which the Bible presents the nature and calling of the church. Failing this, if such a view

does not accord with the biblical witness, Christians at least must ask if there are other reasons for holding it.

Accordingly, the argument that follows finds its center in its second part. That part contains an extended reading of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The reading I have presented is intended (by means of a single yet, one hopes, well-chosen example) to establish a link between the nature and calling of the church and the way of life that is to be lived therein. In the course of making this case, it will become apparent that I believe it to be a mistake to view the nature of the church as it exists in the course of history in purely essentialist terms such as “the body of Christ” or the “communion of saints.” Venerable, common, and indeed necessary as these terms may be, they do not, on their own and apart from a larger narrative context, do justice to the fact that the church may, like ancient Israel, exist in a state of defection as well as obedience. Accordingly, in the course of history, the nature of the church as a “communion” or as a “body” does not appear in a steady state but as a reality that comes to be in the midst of conflict and disobedience under the providence of God. To put the matter another way, the nature of the church as “the body of Christ” or as a “communion of saints” becomes manifest in the midst of conflict with forces within its own life that are directly contrary to such a nature. For this reason, it is important to grasp that any essential qualities that might belong to the church do not exist as a possession of the church per se but as aspects of God’s sovereign administration of the church’s life. In the course of that administration, these qualities may well be punctual and partial in respect to their appearance within the actual life of the church. To put the matter in yet another way, it is as important to think of the church as a fractured body that may well find itself subject to divine judgment as it is to think of it as the body of Christ or the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

It is in large measure because the nature of the church within history is conflicted as well as peaceful, unfaithful as well as faithful, that ethics is best considered in the first instance as an aspect of theology in general and of ecclesiology in particular. It is in fact in the very midst of these conflicts and defections that the significance of Christian ethics is displayed most vividly, not as an addendum to theology. It is also in the midst of these conflicts that the importance of ethics for the present search for “Christian identity” on the part of the denominations is best understood. Indeed, America’s denominations are in search of identity, and in this respect, their position is not unlike those of the Western church at the end of the first period of Christian history. Robert Markus says this of the church at what he calls “the end of ancient Christianity”: “Very early in its history the Christian community was forced
to ask itself what it was.”5 Changes in circumstance forced the church to ask some very difficult questions. Chief among them was, “What was essential to Christianity, and what was indifferent, merely linked with the particular form of the society in which it was embodied?”6

The change in social location of the churches in America has pressed questions like this one upon them. They have been sent in search of an understanding of their nature and calling that makes sense in these altered circumstances. It is not surprising that the doctrine of the church has become a topic of intense interest among the clerical and lay leadership of America’s denominations. Since the mainline Protestant churches no longer enjoy the social charter that once was theirs, and since it is unlikely that a similar charter will in any foreseeable future be conferred on any other denomination or group of denominations, the question of how Christians ought to view the nature and calling of their various denominations becomes urgent. In part, the chapters that follow constitute an attempt to answer this question—by calling the denominations away from concerns about their loss of social position and “market share” and toward a common vision of their calling under God.

At crucial times in Christian history the church has been forced to ask just what it is. We surely exist in such a time. The triumph of Constantine forced the church to reassess its relation to society. In like manner, with the decline of their social position and political strength, the churches are being forced to ask that question again—this time from a position of social weakness rather than social strength. It is my conviction that Christian identity is the question for this time and that the question is being posed more by moral than by theological questions.

By emphasizing Christian identity and in particular the way in which Christian ethics, as an aspect of the interior life of the church, plays a central role in forging that identity, I have no intention of presenting a “sectarian” ecclesiology. I do not believe that Christians ought to think of themselves and their common life as being entirely “over against” the cultures into which they are born and in the midst of which they are socialized. A project of this sort would prove both impossible and destructive. Neither do I believe the primary calling of the churches is to become a vanguard for social reform. By contending that the originating focus of Christian ethics is in fact the common life of the church rather than personal holiness or social reform, I speak only of a focus and not of an exclusive concern. My contention is only that

6. Ibid.
the churches will once more discover their identity and calling under God, not in a retreat to pietism and spirituality, nor in attempts to recover general social influence, but in the reconstitution of their common life. I believe also that an undertaking of this sort will provide not only a basis for growth in personal holiness that escapes the narcissism of the presently fashionable interest in “spirituality” but also an alternative to current social opinion and practice that will have profound effects upon the social matrix in which the churches exist.

What then will it take to make a project of this sort credible? To do so, three additional questions will have to be answered. First, is the focus of Christian ethics present in the Epistle to the Ephesians, and so central to this argument, idiosyncratic, or supported by other books of the Bible? Second, if the Bible does indeed focus its account of life in Christ on the common life of the church, what is the overall shape of this account of life in Christ? That is, what account is to be given of the basis, goal, and character of such an ethic? Third, if America’s denominations were to shift the focus of their attention to the common life of the church, what account might be given of the life of the soul and the churches’ relationship to the larger societies and political structures of which they are a part?

Finally, I feel called upon to comment on three matters of great importance—one concerns terminology, and the other two are important subjects that do not receive adequate treatment in this book. In respect to terminology, the account of the character or the identifying marks of Christian ethics I have given includes a discussion of both moral virtues (like patience or kindness) and moral practices (like marriage or sharing wealth). In respect to “virtues,” I have chosen to use the term “graces” rather than “virtues.” I have done so in order to make clear that these powers of soul and capacities for action, though certainly in part the products of human instruction and discipline, are best understood within Christian ethics as gifts of Christ. Through the Spirit he subjects or orders them to love of God and neighbor and so toward the fulfillment of God’s purposes for the world.

The first matter not discussed is the moral witness of the Old Testament. To adequately establish the ecclesial focus of the biblical account of Christian living, it would be necessary to show that the various writings contained in the Old Testament have the same focus on the common life of God’s people as do those of the New Testament. I have not undertaken this task, necessary as it is, for the simple reason that the present project would have become too long and too diffuse. I believe, however, that it is simply the case that the moral focus of the Law and the Prophets is on the common life of Israel both as a testimony to God’s graciousness to his people and as a witness to the nations.
Introduction

Given the constraints of the present project, I will have to let that statement stand and make its way on its own.

The second matter not discussed is church governance. If the focus of Christian ethics is properly the common life of the church, and if that common life manifests throughout time a conflict between what God intends for it to be and its own defections from God’s will and purpose, then church governance must become an aspect of Christian ethics. If the common life of the church, even if imperfectly, is to manifest the unity to which God calls his creation and for which he brought it into being, then one must ask how Christians are to order their life together so as to encourage peace, manage conflict, and maintain order. In short, “polity” must be moved from the fringes of moral concern and be relocated toward its center.

It may seem strange to place the study of church polity and Christian ethics in the same room, but a moment’s thought will show that the move is not strange at all. Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, John Calvin, Richard Hooker, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, to mention but a few, would have thought that the question of governance should never be separated from the question of how we ought to live our lives. Societies find their identity in common purposes and values, and their forms of governance are constructed so as to protect and further those purposes and values. What is true of society in general is true of the church as well. The church has been placed in history to serve a certain goal, proclaim a certain truth, and live a certain sort of life. Given the changes and chances of history, and given its own imperfections, it cannot possibly serve the end for which it exists apart from the graces and practices of its members, but neither can it serve that end by means of a panoply of graces and practices alone. If one is to place the focus of Christian ethics on the common life of the church, the way in which that life is to be maintained and ordered in a less-than-perfect world must, like the graces and practices that mark the character of its members, become a normal aspect of moral discourse. For these reasons, I had originally intended to include a discussion of church governance in this volume, but I soon realized that the issues were sufficiently complex to require a separate treatment. That discussion will have to wait for another time.

This work has been a long time in the making, and I do not wish to delay its appearance further. The struggles of my own denomination to come to terms with its new social location and to find its identity in the midst of change and conflict have again and again taken me away from this particular task. Nevertheless, the delays and detours have only strengthened my original conviction that the mission of the churches in America is no longer to serve as the chaplain to society but as a witness to another form of life that has a
very different goal, basis, and character from that of mainstream America. If that witness is to be made, more than words are required. Another form of life must be on display as well.

For a change of this sort to occur, it will be necessary to change the focus of Christian ethics in ways that move it away from personal holiness and social reform and redirect it toward the reform and renewal of the common life of the churches. As this study makes plain, there will also have to be an accompanying renewal of trinitarian theology. If the focus of Christian living is to center on how Christians live one with another, and from that perspective speak in new ways about the life of the soul and the relation of believers to American culture, then the burning questions before the churches will have to change. It will be necessary to ask theological questions as well as ethical ones. What is the goal of creation set by God the Father? How is that end lived out and brought near by God the Son? And how are we drawn into the end for which the world was made through the Son and in the Spirit? The answer to these questions will lead to ones about how we are to live together, how we are to live a holy life as individuals, and how we as the body of Christ are to live within the various societies and political structures of which we are a part.
PART ONE

The Focus of Christian Ethics

THREE ACCOUNTS

John Cassian,
Walter Rauschenbusch,
and John Howard Yoder
John Cassian’s Ethic of Individual Sanctification

Introduction

John Cassian was one of the founders of Western monasticism. He was born circa 360 CE. His parents were wealthy Christians who provided him with a fine education that rendered him fluent in both Greek and Latin. His theological perspective was shaped by both Evagrius Ponticus and Origen. John Chrysostom ordained him circa 399. Prior to that, sometime between 378 and 380, with his friend Germanus, he entered a monastery near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Soon, he and his friend left for the Egyptian desert to learn from the desert fathers. There, he collected the wisdom of these spiritual guides and later presented their views, along with his own, in two works, The Conferences¹ and The Institutes.² Together these works contain Cassian’s moral theology along with an account of the exercises he believed necessary for spiritual progress. Both concern that form of life known in the ancient world as philosophia. The parallels between these two works and other renditions of spiritual practice common to the period are marked.

Pierre Hadot has argued rightly that, in contrast to modern notions, ancient philosophy was before all else a way of life. Spiritual exercises lay at the heart of the practice of philosophy, and their goal was self-improvement that moved the practitioner toward the perfection of human nature and eudaimonia, a form of well-being in which “unhappy disquiet” is overcome and a whole new way of life undertaken. People often overlook the fact that Christian theologians like Cassian, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Origen thought of the way in which they lived in Christ as philosophia. By this term they meant more than philosophical argument and speculation. They had in mind a way of life in which thought and spiritual practice are part of a single enterprise, the end of which is knowledge of God and human fulfillment.

The extraordinary parallels between the accounts these men gave of life in Christ and the prescriptions for living espoused by the various philosophical schools are often overlooked. Nevertheless, these parallels, once mentioned, are apparent. The goal of philosophia was escape from what Pierre Hadot has nicely termed “a state of unhappy disquiet” in which one is overwhelmed by worry and torn by passions that lead to a way of life that, in the end, proves contrary to both reason and human nature. The goal of philosophia also was to learn a new form of life that conforms not to human prejudices and social conventions (which are in fact products of the passions) but to the demands of reason and the basic nature of humankind. All schools believed in the power of reason and the will to overcome ignorance and the power of the passions to distort one’s view of life.

The practices advocated by the philosophical schools all have their parallels in the writings of Cassian and other church fathers. Like the philosophers of the schools, the early fathers saw life in Christ as a form of exercise analogous to the physical exercises of athletes. Like the exercises of the philosophers, those advocated by the church fathers involved constant meditation, close attention to oneself, and triumph over the passions with a view to living life as nature intends or as God wills.

Into these exercises, however, Cassian and others introduced certain particularly Christian elements. In this respect, what the fathers had to say about what is now called “sexuality” is of particular importance. Peter Brown has noted that in their presentation of ascetical practices, the early fathers of the church gave considerable attention to the renunciation of sexual activity.

4. Ibid., 101.
Control of sexual desire was also a concern of the schools, but for reasons other than those that concerned the fathers of the church. In contrast to the thought and practice of the schools, the issue for the fathers was not a balanced life in which the appetites are controlled and moderated by reason. Their concern was rather purity of heart and body that signaled the fact that Christians belong entirely to another realm of being. Sexual purity was in fact a trope for an utterly different form of life. Thus, Christian ascesis did not seek the successful control of daily social life. Rather, it sought to transfer the practitioner into a heavenly world and, in so doing, cut altogether his or her ties with the normal mechanisms of daily living.

Another important difference between the fathers and the schools appears in the common admonition to imitate a paradigmatic life. All the schools of philosophy emphasized imitation of figures who had gone before. One finds the same focus in the writings of the fathers. Christians are urged to take Christ as their model. Nevertheless, in undertaking to imitate Christ, a significant difference between the thought and practice of the fathers and that of the schools appears. According to the fathers, will and intellect alone are inadequate to the imitative task. Successful imitation is dependent to one degree or another upon grace; because of this dependence, humility, patience, and obedience are essential companions of self-knowledge and self-control. The significance attached to human weakness and the consequent valorization of the virtues of humility and patience give a distinctive profile to the accounts of philosophia advocated by the fathers and John Cassian.

The Goal and Basis of Life in Christ according to John Cassian

*The Goal of Life Together in Christ*

The best way to identify the focus of any account of life in Christ is to ask first of all how the goal of that life is construed. How, in his philosophia, does John Cassian portray that goal? In the first book of *The Conferences*, Abba Moses remarks: “All the arts and disciplines have a certain scopos or goal, and a telos, which is the end that is proper to them, on which the lover of any art sets his gaze and for which he calmly and gladly endures every labor and danger and expense.” He then goes on to say: “The end or telos of our profession . . . is the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven; but the goal or scopos is purity of heart, without which it is impossible for anyone to reach that end.”

6. C 1.2.1.
7. C 1.4.3.
Though Aristotle used the terms telos and scopos interchangeably, the Stoics made a distinction between the two that one sees present in the remarks of Abba Moses. According to the Stoics, the telos refers to an agent doing or obtaining something and it is expressed by verbs. On the other hand, scopos refers to the thing done or obtained, and is expressed by nouns. The Stoic Arius distinguished the difference in this way: “A scopos is the target to be hit, like a shield for archers; a telos is the hitting of the target.”\(^8\) Put another way, the scopos is the end aimed at and the telos is the act of obtaining that particular end.

For Cassian the end to be aimed at (scopos) is purity of heart or “perfection.”\(^9\) Perfection is (negatively) a state in which one is free from the distorting thoughts that take the mind and heart away from God and (positively) a state in which one’s mind and heart are focused without interruption upon God. This is the target at which one is to aim and to which one is to direct all attention and effort. The telos, that which is obtained when the target is hit, is living in the kingdom of God, or enjoying eternal life.\(^10\) The point Cassian wishes to make is that by fixing one’s eyes upon the proper scopos, one reaches the telos of a practice in the quickest way. Thus, all one’s effort is to be directed to obtaining purity of heart that will, in turn, allow one to contemplate and enjoy God without interruption.

It is this scopos and this telos that are to claim all one’s attention and energy. In a word, they are to “trump” any other concerns or obligations. Good works, for example, are of secondary importance to “theoria,” or divine contemplation.\(^11\) The story of Mary and Martha shows “that the Lord considered the chief good to reside in theoria alone—that is in divine contemplation.”\(^12\) All other virtues, though necessary and good, are secondary. Even good works, necessary though they may be, are so only because people have taken for their own what God meant to be shared by all. There are poor people in the world because of the presence of avarice, but one day God will rid the world of both vice and poverty. Thus, in the kingdom of heaven, good works will no longer be needed. Only contemplation will remain.\(^13\)

The monk thus seeks to take heaven by storm. For those who search for knowledge, good deeds are but necessary interruptions in a more interior task.

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10. C 1.5.2.
12. C 1.8.1, emphasis added.
13. C 1.10.4–5.
The overwhelming priority of seeking purity of heart and the kingdom of heaven is perhaps best illustrated by Cassian’s treatment of broken promises. The issue arose because, when leaving the monks in Bethlehem for those of Egypt, Cassian and his friend Germanus promised to return. They became convinced, however, that remaining in Egypt served better to promote their quest for perfection.

The Seventeenth Conference with Abba Joseph is best understood as Cassian’s attempt to resolve the moral issue of his broken promise. Thus, Abba Joseph remarks that one is justified in breaking a promise if it serves the greater good of purity of heart. It is, he holds, the inner aspect of the act rather than the act itself that has moral weight. In this case, the inner aspect served to promote purity of heart, and for this reason the broken promise was not morally culpable. In this account of Christian living, the moral character of any action or event is determined univocally by whether or not it “leads us by sincere faith to divine realities and makes us cling unceasingly to the unchangeable good.”

_The Basis of Life Together in Christ_

The same relentless focus on individual sanctification is apparent also in the basis Cassian provides for life in Christ, and it can be seen particularly in the ruthless quality of this version of Christian ethics. To be sure, ruthlessness is a quality that is not without support in the writings of the New Testament. Both Matthew and Luke report that Christ told his disciples that loyalty to him was to take precedence even over obligations to one’s own family (Matt. 10:35; Luke 12:53; 14:26). Cassian and other monastic writers might admit that there is a certain degree of ruthlessness about their prescriptions. Nevertheless, they would insist that such ruthlessness has its basis in Christ’s own life and teaching. They would point first of all to Christ’s command in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:48)—namely, that those who would follow him must be “perfect” as their heavenly Father is “perfect.”

As rendered by John Cassian, the basis of his account of life in Christ is, in an almost univocal sense, the teaching and example of Jesus himself. One does not find in his writings the broader trinitarian basis for Christian living that appears, for example, in Paul and the Gospels. As we shall see, for these New Testament authors, holy living is rooted in the original will of God the Father, made manifest in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son, and revealed and established through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

There are echoes of this trinitarian base in the writings of Cassian, but they are faint. The demand of Christ to be perfect overshadows all else, and this demand is interpreted through a narrowly focused lens—in the first instance through Christ’s sacrificial death.

It is not the details of Christ’s life (as, say, in the case of Ignatius Loyola) that most interest Cassian. It is the overall pattern of that life. For the monk, imitation of this pattern requires the sacrifice of everything in pursuit of the *scopos* and *telos* of life in Christ. Above all else, Christ’s life displays a pattern of “renunciation,” and this pattern is to be imitated by anyone seeking perfection. Thus, in *The Institutes* renunciation is the first step a monk is to take. The matter is stated with clarity in chapter 34 of book 4 of *The Institutes*, where Cassian notes for the benefit of prospective monks, “Renunciation is nothing else than a manifestation of the cross and of a dying. Therefore you should know that on this day you have died to the world and to its deeds and desires and that, according to the Apostle, you have been crucified to this world and this world to you.” He concludes, “We ourselves then must pass our time in this life with the deportment and aspect of him who hung upon the gibbet for us.” Abba Paphnutius is recorded as saying that no one understands this call to renunciation that has not seen life through the eyes of their teacher, Christ. It is Christ who turns the eyes of his followers away from present things so that those things are seen as already over—indeed as dissolving into nothing.15

The pattern of Christ’s renunciation is indeed total. Furthermore, the pattern of renunciation is to be a matter of constant meditation, to such an extent that it makes one blind and deaf to anything that deflects from the march toward perfection. The pattern of Christ’s renunciation is to shield monks against all things that divert them from the *scopos* and *telos* of their calling. Abba Pinufius advises that one who seeks perfection should “set out as one who is deaf and mute and blind, so that, apart from looking upon him whom you have chosen to imitate by reason of his perfection, whatever you might see that is less than edifying you will not see.”16

The importance of Christ’s life is, in a word, rooted in the example he provides, an example of renunciation that calls one away from ordinary life and shows the way toward another form of life that takes place in an entirely different realm—the kingdom of heaven, wherein the contemplation of God is one’s sole activity and *eudaimonia* is one’s only state of being.17 The parallel between the *philosophia* of Cassian and that of the schools could not be clearer.

15. C 3.7.4.
17. See especially the discussion of sinlessness in C 23, wherein *theoria* is depicted as the chief good in the light of which all other goods and virtues grow pale.
than in the central importance both assign to the imitation of a life. As Arnold Davidson notes, the importance of “biography” (perhaps better, hagiography) for the schools lay in its capacity to display the superiority of a way of life.\(^{18}\)

So for Cassian, Christ above all else shows a superior form of life. Christ is important because he teaches a pattern of life that leads from one form to another. Contemplation of the form of life manifest in Christ is to be a constant occupation. Through contemplation and imitation the monk unites his life with that of Christ. To depart from these activities for a moment is “fornication.” It is further to place one’s soul in danger, because only contemplation of the cross will give one understanding of the various temptations that assault one seeking to follow Christ. One is called upon to weigh or assess the various thoughts that cross one’s mind, and the cross of Christ—his renunciation of all worldly goods—is to guide the mind as it makes judgments in respect to good and evil.\(^{19}\) Thus, as Henry Chadwick notes, contemplation of the life of Christ “leads through temptation, teaches the way of prayer, guides the judgment of elders, restrains and conquers the demons, bestows continual grace.”\(^{20}\)

The primary emphasis in Cassian’s account of the basis of life in Christ is most certainly “imitation.” Christ provides the pattern the Christian is to follow toward purity of heart and the kingdom of heaven. However, Cassian also presents Christ as one who enables the believer to emerge victorious from the struggle for perfection. As one grows in holiness, the assaults of the demons become more terrible. One cannot prevail in this struggle without the aid of Christ, who is, on occasion, presented not only as a model but also as a companion along the way. So Cassian notes that, as the struggle for perfection intensifies, one would not be able to prevail “were it not for the fact that Christ, the most merciful arbiter and the overseer who presides over our struggle, balances out the strength of the contestants, repels and restrains their fierce attacks, and with the trial provides a way out, so that we are able to endure.”\(^{21}\)

The basis of life in Christ is first the pattern of Christ’s renunciation, and second, to a lesser extent, the help of Christ as “arbiter and overseer” of the struggle to follow that pattern. Cassian’s account of the grace provided by Christ in the midst of the struggle for perfection is not, however, the radical one offered by St. Augustine, and perhaps for this reason he has little to say about the work of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, in the famous Thirteenth Conference with Abba Chaeremon, “On God’s Protection,” Cassian insists upon the importance of prevenient grace and of what might be called “assisting

19. C 1.33.2.
grace.” One can make no progress along the road to perfection without them. The necessity of grace is given even stronger emphasis in book 12 of *The Institutes*. There God himself gives the victory over the vices that infect the soul. Cassian writes,

For no affliction of this body and no contrition of heart could be sufficient to lay hold of the true chastity of the inner man so as to be able to acquire by bare human effort—that is, without God’s help—the great virtue of purity, which is natural to angels alone and native to heaven, since the accomplishment of every good thing comes from the grace of the one who, out of his manifold generosity, has bestowed everlasting blessedness and immeasurable glory on our slender willing and our brief and paltry running.22

Human willing may, as he says, be “slender” and human running “paltry,” but in his account of the process of sanctification, the operations of grace are insistently brought into relation both with human effort and with a natural goodness that sin may have weakened but not destroyed.23 It is in his treatment of grace and freedom that Cassian separates himself from Augustine. Grace in all its forms is an aid to human will and the residual goodness that may be weakened and distorted but never destroyed. Cassian’s soteriology, in contrast to that of St. Augustine, is without question a form of synergism. Christ as exemplar and helper lies at the base of Cassian’s account of life in Christ. So also does the figure of Adam—the original embodiment of created human nature. Given the residual importance that human will and created nature have for life in Christ, it is not surprising that the figure of Adam hovers, if not in the foreground, then certainly in the background of Cassian’s account. Christ’s victory over temptation is pictured as a reversal of the fall of Adam.24 Thus, like Adam, Christ is tempted by gluttony, vainglory, and pride, and he overcomes these temptations not in the garden but in the wilderness. He does not have to face the temptations offered by the other vices because these are attendant upon the original ones. They were not part of the original temptation in the garden. Christ is then a second Adam who reverses the fall and returns human nature to its pristine state. In keeping with this line of thought, the ascetic practices of the desert fathers (particularly that of fasting) were intended to undo the sin of Adam (he saw that the fruit of the tree was good to eat) and return the body to a pristine state.25 For Cassian, the pristine

22. I 12.11.
23. I 12.11.
24. C 5.5.1–3.
state of Adam included the virtues. These were the original inhabitants of the soul, but invading vices dislodged them. Abba Serapion, in his discussion of the eight principle vices, says this:

For the will of the Lord did not assign by nature the possession of our heart to the vices but to the virtues. After the fall of Adam they were thrust out of their own region by the vices that had grown insolent—that is, by the Canaanite peoples; and when they have been restored to it by the grace of God and by our diligence and effort, they must be believed not so much to have occupied foreign territory as to have received back their own.26

There is, to be sure, a good deal of rhetorical overstatement in this passage. Cassian cannot without inconsistency insist both that the virtues have been entirely driven out and that they are to be restored with the cooperation of human effort. The very notion of effective human effort implies the presence of some degree of virtue. The matter of importance at this juncture, however, is not the quarrel between Augustine and Cassian but the belief on Cassian’s part that life in Christ serves, through imitation, to undo Adam’s fall and return human nature to its original goodness. In other words, the pattern of Christ’s life charts the way to an original state—a state that is to be found in Christ’s own life and that, as a result, forms an aspect of the basis of the life to which believers are called.

To anticipate future development of the argument, it may prove helpful at this point to note how this account of the basis of life in Christ compares to the writings of the New Testament. As with the goal of life in Christ, so also in respect to its basis there appears a narrowing of conception. The full scope of God’s providential history depicted in Holy Scripture has faded into the background. One is not called upon to contemplate the vast scope of divine providence. One is asked instead to focus on the life of a single exemplary figure. This more narrowly focused object of attention is in turn viewed through an even smaller lens than any of those presented in the New Testament. Christ is not so much a redeemer and reconciler who gives his life in obedience to God’s purpose for the creation as he is an example to be followed by individuals who wish to escape the disquiet of their lives and find eudaimonia. A tradition has been brought forward but construed in terms drawn from philosophia. A certain domestication of the biblical witness has occurred—one that confines that witness within the concern for individual salvation that so occupied the minds and hearts of those who inhabited Hellenistic culture. If one asks why this change has occurred, it may well prove

the case that a Platonic division between a heavenly world of changelessness and atemporality and an earthly one of temporality and change has been substituted for a biblical eschatology that sees all creation taken up into a resurrected form of life in which creation and so also time and change are both redeemed and perfected rather than transcended.

The Character of Life in Christ according to John Cassian

A shift in eschatology of this sort may well explain a similar narrowing in Cassian’s depiction of the character of life in Christ. If one is in search of an image that displays most fully Cassian’s characterization of this life, that of an athlete being tested in the Olympic Games comes most readily to mind. Once more, Cassian’s similarity to the philosophical schools emerges. His focus is ever on the training and discipline needed to emerge victorious in a contest with one’s own vices and with the demons that manipulate these weaknesses for their own purposes. Thus, in his discussion of the need to overcome the vice of gluttony, Cassian remarks,

This is our first . . . trial in the Olympic Games—the extinguishing of the belly’s desire to gormandize out of a yearning for perfection. To this end not only must a superfluous appetite for food be trampled upon by the contemplation of virtue, but even what is necessary for nature itself must be eaten with anxious heart, as being contrary to chastity. Only thus is our life’s course to be laid out, so that there is no longer any time wherein we may feel that we are being diverted from spiritual pursuits beyond that which compels us to descend to the necessary care of the body, on account of its fragility.27

In the fourth book of The Institutes, one finds an epitome of the character of the training and testing that one who seeks perfection must undergo.28 At this point, Cassian’s portrayal of the contest takes on a particularly Christian stamp. The process begins with the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. Fear drives one to conversion and the search for perfection. The search requires that one develop contempt for worldly things through renunciation, including family and possessions. Renunciation leads in turn to the virtue of humility, which results in the death of desire, and when desire has died, the vices are uprooted and wither away. With the expulsion of the vices, virtue begins to grow and bear fruit. When virtue is abundant, purity of heart is acquired, and with purity of heart, the kingdom of heaven.

27. 1.5.3.
28. 1.4.39, 1.43.
The importance that renunciation holds for Cassian has been established. Humility, however, is renunciation’s close companion and as such provides the distinguishing mark by which a life in quest of perfection is to be recognized. Humility, Cassian says, can be recognized by its (1) effort to put to death all desires, (2) refusal to conceal anything from the Abba, (3) willingness to leave all judgment to the Abba, (4) obedience and patience, (5) refusal to bring harm to others and unwillingness to be saddened when injury occurs to oneself, (6) refusal to depart from the example of the saints who have gone before, (7) simplicity and sense of unworthiness, (8) willingness to count others as better than oneself, (9) discretion in speech, and (10) sobriety.

Scanning this epitome, one can see that the chief characteristics of life in Christ are the fear of the Lord, renunciation, humility, obedience, and patience. These qualities are those of the crucified Christ and so also of anyone who desires to be crucified with Christ. Their chief fruit is apostolic love, understood primarily as love of God. It is the first rather than the second commandment that dominates this account of sanctification. Love, however, is the fruit of right knowledge. Indeed, right knowledge rather than love dominates Cassian’s account of the character of life in Christ. In the Fourteenth Conference, Abba Nestoros speaks of the nature of spiritual knowledge. It is of two sorts—praktikē and theorētikē. The former (practical knowledge) is essential for the latter (theoretical knowledge); nevertheless, they are not linked in an ascending order as was typical of the time. For Cassian, the two forms of knowledge constantly feed one another. Practical knowledge requires both that one come to understand the working of the vices and that one have a mind formed in accord with the virtues. Theoretical knowledge, like practical knowledge, is also of two sorts. Both pertain to the knowledge of Holy Scripture, but they differ in degrees of complexity and importance. There is, first of all, the literal or historical meaning of the text. This more primitive knowledge opens the door for a second degree of understanding—spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge is of three sorts: allegorical (knowledge that pertains to Christ, the church, and the sacraments), tropological (moral knowledge), and anagogical (knowledge of invisible, eternal, and heavenly matters).

Anagogical knowledge is clearly the goal to which one is to aspire. Meditation on the Holy Scriptures is indispensable for its acquisition, and so meditation on the sacred writings is to be the monk’s constant occupation. Nevertheless, the Holy Scriptures will not yield the spiritual knowledge they mediate apart from praktikē—the work of stilling the passions and acquiring the virtues. Consequently, the character of life in Christ as presented by

29. Markus, End of Ancient Christianity, 184–89.
Cassian has as its most distinguishing feature the virtue of discretion. Citing St. Anthony, Abba Moses says, “Discretion is the begetter, guardian, and moderator of all the virtues.”\(^{30}\) Love of God may indeed be the chief fruit (and mark) of life in Christ, but its character is built neither upon charitable works nor upon what might be called “God intoxication.”\(^{31}\) Rather, love’s character rests upon an intellectual virtue that allows the monk to discern the way in which the demons manipulate the vices that cloud the mind and so prevent true knowledge of God. It may be the case that love of God gives final form to the virtues, but for Cassian, the intellectual virtue of discretion is a mark of character apart from which both the virtues and the love of God remain but a distant hope. Indeed, he elevates discretion above fasts, vigils, contempt of the world, and even love and hospitality, and insists that apart from discretion the good of all these practices and virtues will most certainly be lost.\(^ {32}\) A lack of discretion can ruin all virtues.\(^ {33}\) In his valorization of an intellectual virtue, Cassian places knowledge in the forefront of the practice of \textit{philosophia} and so, at yet another point, links his way of salvation to that of the schools. Right knowledge is the key to perfection, and perfection opens the way for eternal life, which is to be understood through the term \textit{eudaimonia}.

By tracing what Cassian has to say about the acquisition of discretion (rather than love), one can display the lineaments of his presentation of the character of life in Christ. From his teacher Evagrius, Cassian took over a classification of the eight (not seven) chief vices that infest the soul and cause disquiet.\(^{34}\) These are gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia (anxiety or weariness of heart), vainglory, and pride. These vices present themselves in the form of “thoughts” that trouble the mind.\(^{35}\) Thoughts, however, have three sources—God, the devil, or the self.\(^{36}\) With effort, thoughts can be accepted or rejected as either profitable or unprofitable.\(^{37}\) If one’s relation to thoughts is to be profitable, however, one must weigh them as a moneychanger weighs coins to test for value.\(^{38}\) That is, one must, by the use of “wise discretion,” trace their origin, cause, and authorship so as to

\(^{30}\text{C 2.4.4.}\)


\(^{32}\text{C 2.2.1–4.}\)

\(^{33}\text{C 2.2.4.}\)

\(^{34}\text{For Cassian’s most sustained discussion of the vices, see I 5–12 and C 5.}\)

\(^{35}\text{C 1.17.1.}\)

\(^{36}\text{C 1.19.1.}\)

\(^{37}\text{C 1.17.1.}\)

\(^{38}\text{C 1.20.2.}\)
understand, in the light of who is making the suggestion and what its quality is, how best to approach them.\textsuperscript{39}

How does Cassian understand the nature of discretion? He uses Anthony’s definition that has been summarized by Boniface Ramsey in this way: “Discretion is the judgment whereby a person discerns what is correct and, in particular, avoids excess of any kind, even of the apparent good.”\textsuperscript{40} This summary is adequate only to a point, for discretion as understood by Cassian can be adequately grasped only if linked to three accompanying graces apart from which it cannot be acquired—humility, obedience, and patience.\textsuperscript{41}

Cassian’s ten-point account of the nature of humility suggests the close connection he sees between discretion and these graces. Humility requires not only that one reveal all to one’s Abba but also that one do all he says and live patiently through the trials obedience may require. Beginners obtain discretion only by submission to elders.\textsuperscript{42} They can learn discretion only from one who has walked the path beforehand and learned from the example of forebears. True discretion lies embedded in a tradition of discernment that must be learned from others, hence the importance of obedience. So also patience is important. One learns discretion only over time and in the midst of trial so that one learns both to discern rightly and to wait patiently for the visitation of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{43}

According to Cassian, discretion, humility, obedience, and patience display the chief characteristics of life in Christ. These graces are, however, obtained in the context of certain practices that also give distinctive form to life in Christ. Chief among these practices are fasting, work, meditation upon Holy Scripture, and prayer. Fasting is a necessary first step in the struggle for perfection. Gluttony is the most rudimentary of the vices, and one cannot begin to undertake the struggles of the inner person unless the demands of the belly have been conquered.\textsuperscript{44} Work also serves to turn one from the vices and direct one’s attention to the contemplation of God. When attacked by “thoughts” that depress the spirit and turn one away from God, one should focus on one’s work. One should continue to read the Holy Scriptures as well and meditate upon the example of Christ.

One should also rush to prayer. The mind is naturally light and, if not weighed down by vices, moves naturally toward God.\textsuperscript{45} Ascetic practice is designed to still the vices and give birth to the virtues. Prayer is the central

\textsuperscript{39} C 1.20.1
\textsuperscript{40} Boniface Ramsey, introduction to John Cassian, \textit{The Conferences}, ed. and trans. by Boniface Ramsey, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 78.
\textsuperscript{41} C 4.36.
\textsuperscript{42} C 2.10.1–3.
\textsuperscript{43} C 4.4.1–3.
\textsuperscript{44} I 5.11–16.
\textsuperscript{45} C 7.4.3, 9.4.2.
practice that crushes the weight of vice and liberates the mind. As one struggles toward perfection, prayer takes a variety of forms. The forms may be compared to the rungs of a ladder. Confession of sin and petition for pardon and help constitute the first rung. The second rung is one on which something is offered to God. The third is that of intercession on behalf of loved ones and for the peace of the world. The fourth is that of thanksgiving whereby “the mind, whether recalling God’s past benefits, contemplating his present ones, or foreseeing what great things God has prepared for those who love him, offers to the Lord [thanksgivings] in unspeakable ecstasies.”

There is finally a fifth rung, which Cassian terms “fiery prayer.” Fiery prayer is a state in which all forms of prayer are engaged in simultaneously. Such prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit and comes only to those who are firmly rooted in purity of heart. It takes place in a state of ecstasy wherein one neither knows nor remembers what is said or thought. Fiery prayer is the highest form of prayer, but prayer in all its forms produces a sublime and exalted condition wherein one contemplates God, comes to love him, and learns to speak with him familiarly as “Father.” Fiery prayers thus spring from the scopos of Christian living (purity of heart) and provide a partial realization of its goal (the kingdom of God).

How then does Cassian understand the character of life in Christ? How is it acquired, and what are its features? Life in Christ may be compared to the life of an athlete training for the Olympic Games. The prize to be won is eternal life. The means to the prize is acquisition of purity of heart. To acquire purity of heart, one must learn to imitate Christ, the teacher who shows the way to gain the prize. Imitation begins with renunciation. If renunciation is to produce its desired result, however, one must learn discretion, an intellectual virtue or grace that allows one to discern what is truly good in the midst of countless presentations by the mind. Discretion, however, requires a particular sort of training. One must learn humility, obedience, and patience. These graces allow one to benefit from the wisdom of sages who have walked the path to purity of heart beforehand. Renunciation, discretion, humility, obedience, and patience accompanied by grace allow one to fight off the deceptions of the demons. These deceptions cloud the mind and so both deflect one from the true goal of life and rob one of its rewards.

46. C 9.11.1.
47. C 9.12.1
50. C 9.15.2.
Acquisition of these graces requires single-mindedness. To borrow a phrase from Søren Kierkegaard and to put the matter in a different way, purity of heart requires that one will one thing—to focus completely on the quest for perfection. Such steadiness of attention is aided by certain practices in the midst of which one acquires the graces mentioned above. The chief of these practices are fasting, work, meditation upon Holy Scripture, and prayer. Fasting helps subdue the most primitive vices. Work focuses the mind and wards off the demons. Meditation upon Holy Scripture presents the mind with the truth about God and one’s own life. Prayer places one’s life with all its light and shadow in the presence of God. From this presence one receives aid in the struggle for perfection, and in this presence one anticipates the prize for which one longs.

Concluding Comments

Before moving on to a second and quite contrary example of the focus of Christian ethics, let us pause for a moment and take stock. How is one to evaluate this account of life in Christ? Let it be said first that Cassian’s account along with his borrowings, conscious or unconscious, from the concerns of the philosophical schools of his day, has made a contribution of fundamental importance to what in the present era is often termed “spirituality.” From Cassian comes a full catalog and accurate description of the great enemies of human life, the vices. From him also come disciplines and practices that aid individuals in their life with God. One must not underestimate the significance of this contribution to what Jeremy Taylor later was to call “holy living.” Here, in the works of John Cassian, is solid food for anyone seeking to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

It should be noted, however, that Cassian has narrowed his focus from that found in Holy Scripture. In centering on the sanctification of the individual, Cassian has in fact reduced the scope of the rich account of the character of life in Christ found not only in the Pauline corpus but also in the Gospels and Pastorals. In Cassian’s hands, the battle with forces that preside over a fallen world is reduced to a skirmish in the life of a single pilgrim. As noted previously, just as the goal of the Christian life has shifted from the manifestation of the mystery of God to the entire creation to the perfection of an individual seeker, and just as the basis of life in Christ has shifted from the full economy of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to the example of God’s Son, so now

it is to be noted that the character of that life also has become more narrowly conceived. Though, as Robert Markus notes, in his more mature thought Cassian places the contest in which the monk is engaged more firmly within a community of monks, it remains the case that the community engendering and preserving graces of lowliness, gentleness, patience, forbearance, truthfulness, kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness, and love (to be found, for example, in Ephesians) has been replaced by the self-perfecting graces of renunciation, humility, obedience, and patience. The narrowing of vision one sees in the works of John Cassian appears to be the result of substituting a Platonic worldview for the eschatological vision contained in the full sweep of the biblical narrative and from filtering a full account of the Christian life through the reducing mesh of Hellenism’s search for an escape from disquietude. The result, despite many fundamental insights about holy living, is a diluted and distorted account not only of God’s purpose but also of the scope of Christian obedience.

54. Markus, End of Ancient Christianity, 184–89.