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The Ascetic Ideal and the New Testament



Reflections on the Critique of the Theology of the Reformation

by Father George Florovsky


If the monastic ideal is union with God through prayer, through humility, through obedience, through constant recognition of one's sins, voluntary or involuntary, through a renunciation of the values of this world, through poverty, through chastity, through love for mankind and love for God, then is such an ideal Christian? For some the very raising of such a question may appear strange and foreign. But the history of Christianity, especially the new theological attitude that obtained as a result of the Reformation, forces such a question and demands a serious answer. If the monastic ideal is to attain a creative spiritual freedom, if the monastic ideal realizes that freedom is attainable only in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and if the monastic ideal asserts that to become a slave to God is ontologically and existentially the path to becoming free, the path in which humanity fully becomes human precisely because the created existence of humanity is contingent upon God, is by itself bordered on both sides by non-existence, then is such an ideal Christian? Is such an ideal Biblical—New Testamental? Or is this monastic ideal, as its opponents have claimed, a distortion of authentic Christianity, a slavery to mechanical "monkish" "works righteousness"?

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DESERT

When our Lord was about to begin his ministry, he went into the *desert*. Our Lord had options but he selected—or rather, "was lead by the Spirit," into the desert. It is obviously not a meaningless action, not a selection of type of place without significance. And there—in the desert—our Lord engages in spiritual combat, for he "fasted forty days and forty nights." The *Gospel of St. Mark* adds that our Lord "was with the *wild beasts*." Our Lord, the God-Man, was truly God and truly man. Exclusive of our Lord's redemptive work, unique to our Lord alone, he calls us *to follow him*. "Following" our Lord is not exclusionary; it is not selecting certain psychologically pleasing aspects of our Lord's life and teachings to follow. Rather it is all-embracing. We are to follow our Lord in every way possible. "To go into the desert" is "to follow" our Lord. It is interesting that our Lord returns to the desert after the death of St. John the Baptist. There is an obvious reason for this. "And hearing [of John the Baptist's death] Jesus departed from there in a ship to a *desert place* privately" When St. Antony goes to the desert, he is "following" the example of

