



SANCTIFICATION IN THE TRADITION OF DESERT FATHERS: A METHODIST PERSPECTIVE

ROBERTA C. BONDI

What I want to do for you today is something in the style of old time Methodists: I want to give my testimony concerning the question of Christian perfection and the tradition of the Desert Fathers.

Long ago, when I was a child growing up in New York City, every summer my mother, my two little brothers and I would leave my father to go to visit my grandmother and grandfather, my aunts and uncles on their farms in rural western Kentucky. There in the country I would experience all sorts of things that were very different from my life at home. Some were interesting, like churning milk into butter; some, like cleaning chicken carcasses, were disgusting. Most of them, were simply boring. Of all the many things that characterized these country visits, however, none was so significant to me as going with my grandparents year after year to their little rural Baptist church for the week of special summer preaching services that constituted what was known as the Revival.

These services provided an ambivalent experience that was to mark my life from that point on. Certainly, Revival services were never boring. It was a fine thing to go out at night to the old white frame building. I liked sitting in a clean, starched dress with my great aunts, and I enjoyed singing hymns the little congregation would sing with the battered old piano.

The preaching, on the other hand, was difficult to endure. Brother Smith would

Roberta C. Bondi is professor of church history at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL
FALL 1995, VOL. 50, NO. 2
SPRING 1996, VOL. 51, NO. 1

always begin the message of the evening by announcing God's coming judgment. "Sinners!" Brother Smith would shout. "You are all sinners! You know your Heavenly Father is perfect, and Jesus tells you to be perfect just like him. But are you perfect? No! You are not perfect! You are sinners, rotten sinners, and your sin is so terrible the holy God himself cannot bear to look upon it. Are you prepared to spend eternity in hell?"

Then, after Brother Smith had preached in this vein a while, he would shift gears and begin to preach John 3:16. "Yes," he would say, "you are a disobedient sinner," his voice dropping to a whisper, "but your heavenly father loves you in spite of your sin. He loves you enough to send his son to die for your sins. If you would flee the torments of hell, have faith; believe he loves you. Only believe, only believe God loves you, or he'll send you to hell forever!" Every night I would leave the service, trying to believe God did love me, in spite of my inability to be perfect, but I never could believe it.

After a few days, the Revival would be over and I would return to New York, where I would have terrible nightmares about my disobedience, my sinfulness, the Last Judgment, and my inability to believe God loved me.

The source of these nightmares was to tell the difference between what Brother Smith told me that God the Father expected of me, and what my human father asked of me. My basic assumption was that of most children, namely, that God the Father was like my human father, only more so.

My human father was a remarkable man, brilliant, charming, funny, and full of life. I loved him passionately. At the same time, as a young man he valued achievement above all, and he tolerated no imperfections or weaknesses in his children. He expected immediate perfection in all things, and when I constantly failed, he was furious with me. Then, my inability to answer his fury would fill me with a secret, hidden, rage and guilt.

There is no doubt that all of this was hard to live with; I was not a successful child. What was hardest, however, was that I knew even if I could have succeeded in some things, in one basic way I could never be perfect because I was a girl. This was because the entire world I lived in both shared in and helped pass on to me the cultural assumptions of the time about the relative value of girls and boys, of "weak," "silly," "emotional" women and "strong," "responsible," "intelligent" men. Because I was a girl, I believed I was doomed forever to be imperfect in my father's eyes, and everything that I learned in school and certainly in church, too, seemed to confirm that God himself viewed my femaleness in the same way.

So, my childhood was governed by three religious convictions that I thought were at the heart of Christianity. One was that, as my human father demanded excellence at all times and was very angry when he did not get it, even more so God must expect excellence and be enraged at my human sins and failures. Second, I was convinced that in so far as God did love human beings, God could not love us for who we actually are, but rather, in spite of who we are, and in my case, in spite of being female. Three, it seemed to me that for Christians, salvation depended upon being able to believe, "to have faith in" all sorts of things, like God's love for me, that my experience told me were impossible.

As I grew older these convictions hurt me. When I was twelve years old, my family became Methodist and I was unable to lay them aside. And by the time I turned eighteen, I resolved to keep as far away as possible from the judging, implacable Christian God

who had taken up residence in my heart and for whose love I longed.

Then, in the autumn of 1965, when I was twenty-five years old, I encountered monasticism for the first time in an alley in the city of Oxford, England. Why was I in the alley? It was because I couldn't bear to meet any human beings on the street, and I didn't want to meet them because I was afraid. Only six weeks before I had left the seminary at Southern Methodist University in the States to begin graduate work in Semitic languages at Oxford. In the seminary, I had studied Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and I had avoided classes in church history and theology. The only exception had been the classes taught by Albert Outler, the great historian of the theology of John Wesley, which I had taken, not because they were about Wesley, but only because Professor Outler was such good entertainment.

Earlier on the afternoon of my walk down the Oxford alley I had met my Hebrew tutor the first time, and there, I had discovered first, that my training in Semitic languages in the States might not be adequate to my needs in Oxford, and second, that for the other Semitic language required for my degree, I would have to study Syriac, a language whose surviving texts were almost all from the early church.

Now, my spirits were very low. I could not imagine how I, as a woman, was going to have to do what I needed to do. I had never even seen a woman doing what I was trying to do, and I was filled with despair. I wondered how I could ever have attempted to become a woman scholar in a man's world.

Resentfully and fearfully, I brooded over my despair as I walked down the alley that day. I was hardly aware of the sunlight, the blue sky or the tidy back gardens I was passing, full as they were of late blooming roses and the tall blue stalks of Brussels sprouts. Then, for an instant, the sun went behind a cloud, and I looked up. Beside me was a high, red brick wall, perhaps eight feet tall, and it stretched before me and behind me for a long way. Suddenly, I was seized with curiosity, I had to know what was behind the wall. It took only a minute to find a toe and finger hold in the crumbling mortar of the brick, and in a few more minutes, I was nearly up. I paused for a moment to gather my courage, then I lifted myself far enough to peer over the top.

When my eyes lit on what was on the other side, I was so astonished I nearly fell off the wall. What was I seeing? I seemed to be looking into a medieval miniature, into a picture of an emerald green garden full of a profusion of flowers. Among the flowers, on benches and on lawn chairs sat five or six women of every age, gracefully dressed in long brown robes, and holding books in their laps. Perhaps it was my sudden intake of breath; perhaps the sound of my scabbling hands in the loose stones at the top of the wall, but all together the women looked up from their books and saw me. In the embarrassment and shame of my discovery I slid down the whole length of the wall. Examining my skinned hands and knees at the bottom, I knew I had seen what I had only read about before: monastic women. Pondering in my heart what I had seen, I went home to my little flat, only to tuck away the memory of the convent garden with other incomprehensible memories that worked in my imagination. Over the next two years I completed my first degree in Semitic languages, I began work on my D. Phil., and I continued to wrestle with my painful attraction to and repulsion from Christianity and its God.

My struggles with Christianity and what I believed to be its demanding, vengeful god

continued until the day in my graduate work I first began to encounter a different God, a different understanding of myself, and a different understanding of what that God required of me, in the life-giving tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early church. It happened like this.

As I have mentioned, though I had avoided Christianity through my first two years in Oxford, for my Semitic language degree I had done Syriac as my second language. Now through a series of unlikely circumstances, I found myself in the Bodley library, unhappily searching for a dissertation topic through piles of hated Christian Syriac texts. Day after day as I read these early Christian books, each lay as heavy on my heart as Brother Smith's revival sermons.

Then, one chilly autumn morning, surrounded by stacks of patristic texts, I picked up and opened to the middle of one entitled *The Thirteen Ascetical Homilies of Philoxenus of Mabbug*. Though it had been composed by a Syriac-speaking monophysite bishop of the sixth century, it was a collection of ascetical homilies written in the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt. Though I knew nothing of those Egyptian monks at the time, I can remind you now that they were a puzzling group of people, Christians who were heroes of the ancient world, at the same time they challenged everything their world stood for. By their own lives and teaching they offered radical Christian alternatives to the ordinary life patterns of their culture, alternatives to the social order, to gender expectations and family, to the uses of money and power, dominance and submission, which the rest of the world took for granted. God's love for humankind was the foundation of their radical Christian vision; our perfect love for God and neighbor was its goal. Of course, I knew nothing of all this at the time, confronted in the library by the *Thirteen Ascetical Homilies*.

Nevertheless, unknown to me as the monks were, at the very moment my eyes fell on the page, content of the books began to open my heart to an entirely different reality, in which I would learn that God was very different from the one I had thought God to be, and that both God's love and God's expectations of me in terms of perfection were very different from what I had thought they were.

So what did I read that day that began this process of healing of the heart? It was a homily exhorting monks not to criticize or judge each other, but rather, to treat each other with the gentleness and kindness of God, who always loves us, and who always makes far more allowances for us and our failings than human beings do, because God alone understands our circumstances, the depths of our temptations, and the extent of our sufferings.

It was an epiphany. I was struck dumb with joy by what I read. I had believed for as long as I could remember that God, before anything else, demanded perfection of me in all things, that God was the one for whom I could never be good enough. But Philoxenus, out of the tradition of the desert, was telling me something very different, that God loves us, not in spite of who we are, but as the very people we truly are, and most important, as the very person I am. I kept on reading. Could it be true that God the Father did not expect as much perfection of me as did my human father? I did not know the answer to this and to many other questions that day, but I knew that somehow, in that moment, through that early monastic tradition, the ancient monks had spoken directly to me out of their own love and out of God's love for me, and my heart had been able to hear.

I left the library that morning resolved to do my dissertation on Philoxenus' monastic theology. Unfortunately, this was not to be, for in the world of American and British theological scholarship of the Sixties, there was a near consensus that serious scholars studied ancient Christian doctrine not ascetic theology.

I began a dissertation, therefore, on Philoxenus' christological teachings, and in the beginning everything went well, and I was soon drawn into the logic of the christological controversies. At the same time, I began to read much more widely in the ascetical texts of the early church, *The Sayings of the Fathers*, the *Macarian Homilies*, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, Origen, Evagrius Ponticus and Athanasius.

I am not sure at what point I realized I was in a crisis. What I do know is that one day I woke up with such severe anxiety I could not work. Day after day, I would sit at my desk and stare at a blank page and wonder what was wrong. Then, little by little it dawned on me. In my heart I still believed that being Christian was about "having faith in," "believing" the right things. I had been drawn into the logic of the christological debates. Now I was terrified that I was about to decide that I could not believe any of the ancient christology I was studying, and if that were to happen, I would have to abandon the God to whom I had already committed myself as unbelievable.

I did not know what to do until one day I talked with a man who was the chaplain at Pusey House in Oxford. He arranged a three-day visit in the guest house of the Anglican Benedictine convent in South Oxford. I was exhausted when I arrived at the front gate of the very same Convent whose back wall I had climbed more than two years earlier. I barely remember being led through the gate and into the guest house by a stout, smiling oblate, dressed in a brown habit. I recall her explaining the rules, though I do remember climbing the stairs to my room and falling instantly asleep on the bed in my coat and hat and mittens.

I also remember well, what happened after that. I was awakened by a knock on the door. Before I could even get up, Mother Jane was in the room. Immediately, her presence overwhelmed me. She was a tall woman, beautiful to me in her brown habit, and even before she spoke I noticed that there was something odd about the way she walked and held herself. There was a freedom in her that I had never seen in any woman or any human being, a freedom I could not have imagined to be possible. This was a woman, a woman radiating intelligence, energy, and kindness, absolutely without fear, and absolutely without apology for who she was.

While I stood there, she walked over to me to give me the kiss of peace, and then I threw my arms around her neck, sobbing. After she had patted me for a few moments, she asked me what was wrong. Somehow, I was able to tell her my fears about my research and the loss of my newly discovered faith, as well as about the hurt I had felt as a woman around the use of my mind my whole life.

The exact words of her answer are not important—it was something like, "it was God who gave you your mind; never be afraid to use what God has given you," but it freed me from my confusion between "believing the right things" about God and knowing the living God. At the same time, because she was a woman who so clearly embodied what she said, she showed me that a human being, and a woman, could live in freedom from fear, full of integrity and joy.

During the days in the convent that followed, I slept and ate and prayed in a state of peace. As an enclosed order of contemplatives, the sisters had no contact with visitors. In the chapel, however, I was able to watch the sisters attentively as they prayed. I saw them look out the window, listen to the birds, fidget, concentrate, or daydream, and I could see for myself that the world the sisters lived in was a world far more real, and far less circumscribed and truncated than the one in which I was trying to live, and they, too, seemed to have the same fearless freedom I had met in Mother Jane. In those modern Benedictine women I could see with my own eyes the living out of the tradition of the great teachers of the ascetic theology of the early church of the east, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, the author of the Macarian Homilies, Philoxenus, and the Abbas and Ammas of the Egyptian desert.

When I left at the end of my stay, there was much in me that was unchanged. I still had my dissertation to complete; I still wrestled with all the pain associated with being female in a Christian tradition and a world that did not seem to value women. I still struggled with an unbearable sense of unmeetable expectation from myself that I be perfect in everything I do.

At the same time, my stay confirmed the lifechanging experience of the loving and gentle nature of God I had encountered in the early monastic texts, and I began to be free of my image of an implacable God who demanded perfection. Certainly, I no longer confused faith in God with faith in what we say about God. Finally, in my contact with Mother Jane and the Benedictine women I had seen for myself a breath-taking sight of what is possible for a human being and a woman, and therefore myself, to become, and I never, ever forgot it.

Over the next years, I completed my dissertation and then turned back to the monastic texts of the early church, including, this time, Benedict and his *Rule*. During this time I began to learn from them the content of the true perfection the early monastic teachers believe God asks of us, and it was not the perfection of "believing the right doctrine," or being obedient to the expectations of the church, my family, or the culture that I be a "good" woman: rather, it was the living out of the Great Commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Finally, under the influence of the early monastic teachers I was able to truly begin to understand that, if their conviction that love is the final goal of the Christian life, then loving and learning how to love is neither a matter of gritting one's teeth and becoming instantly perfect, instantly loving by a matter of sheer anxious will, nor is it something God does to us in a moment of conversion to Christianity, as Brother Smith thought that learning to love fully is a Christian's life-time work and discipline and pleasure. What makes growth in love possible is God's generous and gentle love for us which precedes, works with, and enables all that we do as we grow in love.

During this same time, not so surprisingly considering how thoroughly grounded in the theology of the early church John Wesley was, I became able to understand and then claim as my own John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. For Wesley, as for the great monastic teachers of the early church, the goal of Christian perfection lay at the heart of what he was about, and for him, as for them, Christian perfection is "nothing

higher and nothing lower than this: the pure love of God and humanity—the loving God with all our heart and soul and our neighbor as ourselves.” Wesley, like the early monastics believed that reaching this goal did not generally come in some instant transformation that took place all at once at the moment of conversion to Christianity, but was rather, the work of the Christian life. And Wesley, too, like the great teachers of the early monastics, was convinced that whatever we do to grow in love, we are only able to grow because of the love and grace of God which precedes and works with all we do ourselves.

Three years ago I became an oblate at St. Benedict’s Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, a Roman Catholic community that embodies in the present what I found nearly thirty years ago in the Anglican Benedictine convent in Oxford. Becoming a Benedictine Oblate was something I had felt led by the Spirit to do for a long time, but I did not think it was possible because I am a United Methodist. When at last I asked the director of Oblates at St. Benedict’s about this, her reply was simple and unambiguous, and it confirmed what my heart already knew. There is no conflict, she said: Benedictines preceded the division of the churches.

Today, I am a professor of church history at Candler School of Theology, the largest of the United Methodist Church’s seminaries which train men and women for the ministry. As I was led by the middle-aged oblate into the Benedictine convent in Oxford so long ago, I now also lead droves of hungry students into our common life-giving riches of the early monastic tradition. It is amazing to me still how often this tradition, as it did for me, gives the Methodist students access to the meaning in the depths of their own tradition in the teaching of John Wesley.

Is this where the renewal of the people of God lies, in the recovery of the early monastic tradition and in the roots of Methodism? It would be grandiose to say so. Nevertheless, I am convinced we hold in our hands and our heart extraordinary resources for renewal if we are willing to make them available, and I trust the work of the Holy Spirit who, I know from my own experience, renews all things.

