

Celibacy as Discipleship or Vocation? A Protestant Reading of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas

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For a variety of reasons, American Protestants are being forced to reconsider historic teachings and practices of celibacy.¹ This article is but a small part of the larger project of clarifying the place of celibacy and singleness in Protestant systematic and pastoral theology.² Specifically, this article attempts to determine to what extent celibacy should be understood as a matter of discipleship and to what extent it is a matter of vocation. The term “discipleship” is used here to mean the common standard against which all Christians are judged while the term “vocation” is used here to mean a specific calling only given to some disciples. Placing celibacy in these categories will, hopefully, bring clarity to Protestant discussions of the issue and avoid some of the confusion caused by similar discussions surrounding wealth and poverty in recent years.³ In an attempt to think through these distinctions, this article will first outline the proposals of two theologians who had a high valuation of celibacy—Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas. The article will then conclude

with a distinctly Protestant proposal which draws on helpful insights from both Nyssen and Thomas while also critiquing their formulations.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

Of the early theologians who wrote on the issue of virginity perhaps none have attracted more attention in recent years than Gregory of Nyssa.⁴ Nyssen's praise of virginity began where his literary career began, with his treatise *De virginitate*.⁵ In the treatise, Nyssen praises virginity as the state of life that best enables one to already begin realizing humanity's *telos*—"to participate more deeply in the being of God" through divine contemplation.⁶ Since "the real Virginity, the real zeal for chastity, ends in no other goal than this, viz. the power thereby of seeing God," Nyssen indiscriminately calls for everyone to pursue the life of virginity, seemingly making virginity the path of true discipleship.⁷ Nyssen's argument in *De virginitate* is reinforced by the traditional interpretation of humanity's protology—itsself informed by humanity's *telos*—as described in Nyssen's *De hominis opificio*.⁸ According to Nyssen, humanity's paradisaical future is a return to its paradisaical past, both states that were defined by virginity. Therefore, the true life of discipleship here and now will also be lived in virginity.

One of the central features of Nyssen's argument in *De virginitate* is his ambiguous usage of the term "virginity." In some passages, Nyssen uses virginity just as a modern speaker understands the word—the state of never having had sexual intercourse. In other passages, Nyssen uses virginity in a much broader sense. He states, "The perfection of this liberty [i.e., virginity] does not consist only in that one point of abstaining from marriage. Let no one suppose that the prize of Virginity is so insignificant and so easily won as that; as if one little observance of the flesh could settle so vital a matter."¹⁰ Virginity in the narrow sense merely involves bodily control and keeps one from the distractions of a spouse and children. Virginity in the broad sense, however, "is not a single achievement, ending in the subjugation of the body, but ... it reaches to and pervades everything that is, or is considered, a right condition of the soul."¹¹ The right condition of the soul is a "disengagedness of heart" which turns the mind's eye up toward God in contemplation.¹² The embrace of bodily virginity, then, is not an end but the beginning of the

pursuit of the disengaged, contemplative life.¹³ Indeed, “if the whole life does not harmonize with this perfect note [i.e., virginity],” it is nothing but the “‘jewel of gold in the swine’s snout’ or ‘the pearl that is trodden under the swine’s feet.’”¹⁴ Therefore, it becomes clear that in *De virginitate*, virginity often refers explicitly to sexual renunciation, but it almost always carries the broader meaning of the “life according to excellence”—the participatory, contemplative life.¹⁵

Nyssen ushers forth a variety of arguments for creating such a strong connection between physical virginity and the participatory, contemplative life. The analogy between physical virginity and the nature of God is the first piece of evidence Nyssen offers. He argues that physical virginity reflects the purity of each member of the Trinity: the Father begets the Son without passion, the Son is begotten apart from passion, and the Holy Spirit has an “inherent and incorruptible purity.”¹⁶ Similarly, from the facts of Jesus’ virginal conception, virgin birth, and virgin life, Nyssen concludes that “purity is the only complete indication of the presence of God and of His coming.”¹⁷ Thus, physical virginity reflects the ineffable purity of God, both in his imminent triune relations and in his economic incarnation. Nyssen then devotes a substantial amount of the treatise to the argument that physical virginity enables the mind to push through and beyond physical realities to contemplate that “Intellectual Beauty . . . in which all other beauties get their existence and name.”¹⁸ Nyssen uses the metaphor of a stream being divided and losing its force to explain the effect marriage has on the abilities of the mind.¹⁹ Though he admits that some are able to create briefly a “small outlet” devoted to the sexual passion and then to reconstitute the “main stream,” Nyssen warns that, “there will be danger of the whole stream quitting its direct bed and pouring itself sideways.”²⁰

The contrast between the active life of marriage and childbearing and the contemplative life is brought into starkest relief by the real-life examples Nyssen uses to illustrate each. Perhaps the most memorable argument of *De virginitate* is the detailed diatribe Nyssen mounts against marriage. For three long chapters, he narrates the distractions and difficulties of the active life. He is able to see the dark cloud of heartache, anxiety, and loss inside every silver lining of marriage and family life. Bookending the treatise, in both the introduction and the extended

conclusion, Nyssen directs the reader toward living examples—most likely his brother Basil’s monastic communities—of physical virginity that leads to the life according to excellence. Nyssen’s arguments for a close connection between physical virginity and the life according to excellence are so powerful that Nyssen anticipates the objection that he denigrates marriage in direct opposition to Scripture.²³ While he does not want to be charged with denigrating marriage *per se*, Nyssen’s argument in *De virginitate* seems to portray the active life as almost unavoidably distracting from the disengaged contemplation that constitutes the true call of discipleship and marriage, in particular, as inviting passions into the soul which is meant to participate in God’s own ineffable purity.

The arguments for virginity in *De virginitate* are reinforced by placing them in the broader understanding of human protology and teleology found in *De hominis opificio*. The traditional interpretation of *De hominis opificio* has read there an argument for a two-stage creation of humanity. That which is made “in the image of God” is described in the first two phrases of Genesis 1:27, “God created man [*adam*] in his own image, in the image of God he created them.” Nyssen points out that *adam* is not used as a proper name here, as it will be later in the Genesis narrative, but is the generic word for humanity. He joins that insight with the observation that the subsequent pronoun in Genesis 1:27—“in the image of God he created him”—is singular in order to argue that God is here creating all of humanity as a collective individual.²⁴ The first step of creation is the creation of “the universal ‘man’” or the “whole human item.”²⁵

After the first two phrases of Genesis 1:27, Nyssen believes, “There is an end of the creation of that which was made ‘in the image.’”²⁶ To Nyssen, the phrase “male and female he created them” obviously represents a new step in the creation of humanity because “every one [sic] knows that this is a departure from the Prototype: for ‘in Christ Jesus,’ as the apostle says, ‘there is neither male nor female.’ Yet the phrase [in Gen 1:27] declares that man is thus divided.”²⁷ The division of humanity into two distinct sexes is, according to Nyssen, “alien from our conception of God.”²⁸ Therefore, the creation of sexed humans is outside the realm of the divine image and represents a distinct step—logically, not temporally—in the creation of humanity.²⁹

The second step of creation was necessary in light of God’s

foreknowledge of the Fall. The movement from non-being to being put humanity in motion such that humanity is mutable, with the potential to ascend toward God or decline away from him in sin.³⁰ God foreknew that humanity would forsake ascension for declension in sin. In doing so, humanity forfeited their angelic life—and the asexual reproduction proper to it—and were given over to death.³¹ Therefore, if humanity is to fulfill the “whole human item” envisioned by God, sexual reproduction is necessary.³² Sexual reproduction, marriage, and possibly even the sexed body itself, then, are sad effects of the Fall, not part of God’s original intention for humanity.³³

Nyssen reinforces his position by pointing out that the resurrected state will also be free from marriage and procreation (Luke 20:35–36).³⁴ He is explicit that his understanding of humanity’s eschatological destiny has shaped his understanding of humanity’s protological beginnings. Since there will be no marriage nor giving in marriage in the resurrected state and the resurrected state is a return to Paradise, there must have been a sense in which humanity was created apart from marriage and procreation. With a future devoid of marriage ahead and an origin devoid of marriage behind, it is not surprising that Nyssen encouraged all disciples to avoid marriage in this life.

In conclusion, Nyssen appears to leave open the possibility that married people could attain to the disengaged, contemplative life—most likely through marital continence in post-reproductive years—but those would be rare and exceptional cases. Counterintuitive to most contemporary Protestant readers, Nyssen argues that marriage is a dangerous enterprise to be avoided because it potentially opens the floodgates of passion and almost unavoidably distracts from the disengaged contemplation of God that defines humanity’s end. Therefore, one is left with the impression that in order to truly pursue God, one must do so via physical virginity. Using contemporary categories and terminology then, we may say that Nyssen admits that the vocation of marriage is good while presenting celibacy as the true path of discipleship.

THOMAS AQUINAS

For a different perspective, we turn next to Thomas Aquinas. As is the case

with many other topics, Thomas is most helpful not for his innovation but for the precision with which he articulates his positions. Thomas provides a clear, systematized presentation of the tradition that had developed in the Western Church in the centuries after Nyssen. Theologians had continued to consider marriage and virginity in light of humanity's *telos*. However, while many early theologians, such as Nyssen, taught and practiced virginity "literally and absolutely" as the "advised means to fulfill this common [Christian] vocation," Thomas inherited a developing distinction between the commands of Christ that apply to all Christians and the evangelical counsels which are heeded only by some.³⁵ This section will outline Thomas's view of marriage and virginity in contrast with Nyssen's and with the discipleship, vocation distinction in mind.³⁶

To begin, Thomas defines virginity, following Augustine, as, "the continence whereby integrity of flesh is vowed and consecrated to the service of the Creator of body and soul."³⁷ Having thus defined virginity, Thomas provides a number of arguments for why one should pursue the life of virginity. Perhaps his primary argument for virginity is that it is the state of life which best allows one to approach the final happiness of the saints here and now.³⁸ The Beatific Vision, as Thomas's view of the future happiness of the saints is often called, cannot be realized in this life. However, "a certain participation in happiness can be had in this life."³⁹ That certain participation is most easily attained in the contemplative life which "begins here so that it may be perfected in our heavenly home."⁴⁰

In support of his view that the contemplative life is a participation in the beatitude that is to come, Thomas cites the well-known pericope of Jesus with Mary and Martha from Luke 10. As Mary sat gazing upon Jesus, so too does the contemplative life allow one to gaze upon God. In contrast, as Martha was busy serving the visitors in the pericope, so too does the active life force one into action directed toward other people. Following Nyssen's friend Gregory of Nazianzus, Thomas interprets Jesus' statement that, "Mary has chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her," to mean that by simply sitting and gazing upon Jesus, Mary was taking part in the life of contemplation that would last for eternity future.⁴¹ Therefore, choosing the contemplative life in virginity is a way of participating in the life to come here and now. In this respect, Thomas sounds a lot like Nyssen when he says, "Virginity is directed to

the good of the soul in respect to the contemplative life, which consists in thinking ‘on the things of God.’”⁴²

Therefore, Thomas concludes that, objectively speaking—i.e., when considering marriage and virginity as institutions, not married people and virgins as individuals—virginity is better than marriage. However, Thomas entertains a number of objections to this conclusion. One objection Thomas is compelled to consider is whether marriage should rank above virginity because the Philosopher—Thomas’s nickname for Aristotle—ranked common goods above private goods.⁴³ Thomas acknowledges that marriage is a “human good” and a “good of the body, namely the bodily increase of the human race.”⁴⁴ Going even a step further, Thomas considers whether the increase of the human race is a “precept of the natural law” based in Genesis 1:28.⁴⁵ To answer, Thomas draws a distinction between two types of duties. The command to eat in Genesis 2:16, for example, falls on each and every individual, for without food the individual would die. In contrast, the command to reproduce in Genesis 1:28 falls on the population, not each and every individual, since a population can continue without every single individual reproducing. In Thomas’s words, “The human family is sufficiently provided for if some undertake the responsibility of bodily generation, while others are free in order to devote themselves to the study of divine things, for the health and beauty of our race.”⁴⁶ The production of children in marriage, then, is a human and bodily good, but stands in contrast to the “Divine good” and “good of the soul” which is virginity.⁴⁷ Therefore, considering marriage and virginity objectively, as states of life, Thomas concludes, “Without doubt therefore virginity is preferable to conjugal continence.”⁴⁸

Moving from the objective consideration of marriage and virginity as states of life to the subjective consideration of married people and virgins as individuals, Thomas admits that “a married person may be better than a virgin.”⁴⁹ The first reason he gives is that a married person may be “more prepared in mind to observe virginity, if it should be expedient, than the one who is actually a virgin.”⁵⁰ Thomas, following Augustine, presents Abraham as an example of one who was unable to remain a virgin, yet proved his virtue to an extent that Thomas and Augustine both assume that he would have been an even better virgin than they were.⁵¹ The

second reason Thomas gives for why a married person may be better than a virgin is that “perhaps the person who is not a virgin has some more excellent virtue.”⁵² There are a host of virtues and married people may excel in any of them. Furthermore, a married person may offer themselves to God in chastity of the heart while a virgin may abstain from sex but not offer their hearts and minds to God, thereby failing even in the virtue of chastity.⁵³ Therefore, while virginity may be objectively better than marriage as an institution, there are individuals for whom marriage may prove to be better.

By now, it is clear that Thomas is not merely expanding on Nyssen’s position. Thomas shares a similar view of humanity’s *telos* and even agrees concerning the value of virginity in aiding the Christian toward that *telos* already in this life. However, the divergence between the two theologians in regards to the goodness and value of marriage is obvious. Thomas argues that marriage is woven into the order of creation as a “precept of natural law” instead of, as Nyssen argued, being an unfortunate but necessary response to the Fall. And Thomas admits that for some, marriage will prove to be the context in which they are able to live a virtuous life. Therefore, for Thomas, marriage and virginity are both states of life within which one can live out the commandments of Christ in Christian discipleship.

Thomas identifies the commandments that define Christian discipleship as the two commandments given by Jesus in Matthew 22:34–40, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵⁴ Since Jesus specifically listed these two imperatives as the commandments on which the law and prophets depend, Thomas concludes that charity, which is the essence of both commandments, is the perfection in which the Christian life consists.⁵⁵ Therefore, primarily and essentially, Christians must observe charity. The rest of the commandments given in scripture “are directed to the removal of things contrary to charity.”⁵⁶ Since marriage is not contrary to charity, it is not against the commandments and, therefore, permissible. In other words, the requirements of Christian discipleship can be met within the state of marriage.

However, “secondarily and instrumentally . . . perfection consists in the observance of the counsels”—i.e., poverty, continence, and obedience.⁵⁷

The counsels are different than the commandments because while the commandments remove things contrary to charity, the counsels remove “things that hinder the act of charity, and yet are not contrary to charity, such as marriage, the occupation of worldly business, and so forth.”⁵⁸ Marriage, then, does not break the commandments, but neither does it fulfill the commandments in the best way.⁵⁹ Thomas argued for four levels of perfection in charity. The most perfect charity is only possible for God himself, because in God alone is love perfect and perfectly directed at the perfect object, God.⁶⁰ Next, there is a perfection of love only possible for those saints already in Paradise. Their affections are always directed toward God, though they remain finite.⁶¹ In this life, there are two levels of perfection possible. Within marriage, one could reach the “lowest degree of Divine love,” which is, “loving nothing more than God, or contrary to God, or equally with God.”⁶² However, there is “another perfection of charity . . . in this life” that a Christian can attain by refraining “even from lawful things, in order more freely to give himself to the service of God.”⁶³ Therefore, while one may meet the minimum requirements of Christian discipleship within marriage, virginity—along with the other two counsels—aids the Christian in attaining a more perfect life of charity.

With this understanding of commands and counsels, marriage is not disparaged to the extent it was in Nyssen’s writing, but virginity is still held to be objectively better. The religious life, in which one would vow to observe all the counsels, is a “greater good.” In fact, Thomas goes so far as to say that anyone who doubts that entrance into the religious life is better “disparage[s] Christ Who gave this counsel.”⁶⁴ Therefore, Thomas does not believe anyone should hesitate in joining a religious order and vowing themselves to celibacy, poverty, and obedience. If one is inclined to join a religious order as a child, they should join.⁶⁵ There is no need to bother with many counselors or deliberate for any length of time. If one is inclined to join a religious order, they should join.⁶⁶ And if anyone can convince someone else to join a religious order, they have “merit[ed] a great reward.”⁶⁷ There is no consideration given to the subjective fitness of the individual for the vocation of virginity.

Because virginity is objectively better than marriage, Thomas does not hesitate to impress upon everyone the beauty of the religious life. The objective value of virginity makes the subjective experience of a

“calling”—to use a familiar contemporary term—almost unnecessary. The only subjective consideration for Thomas is that virginity must be entered into voluntarily—one cannot be forced into virginity by violence, by bribery, or by lies.⁶⁸ There is no consideration given to the candidate’s fitness for virginity because God will provide the grace necessary to keep the individual chaste. Thomas cites Augustine’s vision of personified Continence calling out to him as proof that God will grant continence to anyone who desires it.⁶⁹ The perfection of charity within virginity is an act of God, not of the virgin. Therefore, whether one is “called” to virginity is only contingent on whether one will trust oneself to the Lord in virginity.

In conclusion, Thomas largely agreed with Nyssen’s view of humanity’s *telos* and the valuation of virginity as the best way to experience beatitude here and now. However, instead of the divine contemplation possible within virginity setting the standard for Christian discipleship and the distraction of marriage being some degree of falling short, Thomas presents charity as the standard for Christian discipleship. In addition, Thomas directly refuted Nyssen’s view of humanity’s protological beginnings, calling it “unreasonable.”⁷⁰ Because of his different views of the demands of discipleship and of creation, Thomas presents a more positive evaluation of marriage than Nyssen. For Thomas, loving nothing instead of or greater than God is the standard of discipleship, and that level of perfection can be reached in marriage. Virginity, though, allows the Christian to offer oneself more fully to God and, therefore, reach a higher level of perfection in this life than is possible in marriage. Therefore, marriage and virginity are both paths of discipleship while virginity is a vocation that goes beyond the commands of Christ.

Protestant Appraisal

In conclusion, a few words of appraisal from the perspective of contemporary Protestant evangelical theology are in order. First, the emphasis in both Nyssen and Thomas on humanity’s *telos* and eschatological destiny stands in contrast to much Protestant theology, which rarely devotes much space to reflections on how the future, eternal state influences the understanding of how Christians ought to live now.⁷¹ Commenting on the sexual ethics of Martin Luther and John Calvin, Christopher Roberts notes, “There appears to be little consideration of

any eschatological dimension to sexual difference in the Reformers.”⁷² The lack of consideration given to the eschatological dimension of human sexuality removed from early Protestant theology what was perhaps the primary theological argument for celibacy in Nyssen and Thomas. Grounding sexual ethics almost exclusively in the creation account did more than merely remove support for celibacy; it led the Reformers, especially Luther, to actively oppose the practice.⁷³ The almost exclusive use of the creation account in the Reformers’ reflections on sexuality continues in contemporary evangelical Protestant theology. For instance, Stanley Grenz, in the introduction of *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective*, plainly states,

At the foundation of the medieval practices of monasticism and celibacy, the Reformers perceived a specific understanding of the Christian life, namely, that true Christian piety entailed the attempt to live up to the standards of the next life. In the place of this emphasis they taught the principle of obedience to one’s true calling within the orders of creation.⁷⁴

In keeping with this method, Grenz grounds his understanding of sexuality primarily in the creation account. Even in his largely favorable discussion of singleness and celibacy, there is no mention of the eschatological destiny of humanity.⁷⁵ Jesus’ interaction with the Sadducees in Matthew 22, which was so central to Nyssen’s anthropology, receives scant mention in Grenz’s work, and in each instance, the discussion concerns the role of sexuality in our post-resurrection existence, not how post-resurrection realities influence our present lives.⁷⁶ Just as the eschatological vision of believers from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation before God’s throne (Rev 7:9–10) informs our ecclesiology here and now, so should the eschatological vision of humanity have some influence on our anthropology here and now.

Admitting that Nyssen and Thomas helpfully challenge evangelicals to reclaim an eschatological dimension to their sexual ethics does not mean evangelicals should simply adopt either Nyssen’s view—celibacy as the true path of discipleship—or Thomas’s view—celibacy as a vocation of supererogation. Despite Nyssen’s protests to the contrary, by identifying marriage as a consequence of the Fall and by insisting that throwing off

marriage is the first step to reversing the effects of the Fall, Nyssen does not appear to hold marriage in honor (Heb 13:4) and complicates how it could function as a *mysterion* or *sacramentum* for the relationship of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32). Therefore, Nyssen's argument for celibacy as true Christian discipleship fails because it cannot sufficiently incorporate the biblical praise of marriage.

On the other hand, Thomas holds marriage in honor, listing it as a *sacramentum*, but erred in arguing that those who entered into marriage were choosing a lower level of perfection. There are two errors that lead to this conclusion. The first is the claim that the commands of Christian discipleship are negative, only concerned with removing obstacles to the love of God. In fact, "[The] Christian life is not defined by the minimum of the negative commandments, but by a calling to the maximum proposed in the two precepts of charity."⁷⁷ If Christian discipleship simply is a calling to maximum charity, then the counsels cannot be add-ons for the most extreme disciples, but somehow "belong irrevocably to the common Christian vocation."⁷⁸ Since Scripture assumes there will be married disciples and since maximum charity is required of all disciples, celibacy and marriage must both be understood as vocations with the potential for the perfection of charity. In this light, Jesus's challenge to the rich young ruler of Matthew 19 was not a challenge to reach another level of perfection in charity—as many read "if you would be perfect"—but a call to Christian discipleship within a particular vocation—as evidenced by the common call to discipleship with which Jesus concludes, "come follow me" (Matt 19:21).⁷⁹

Putting aside the question of the two states *qua* states, Thomas's second error is in giving too little attention to one's subjective fitness for celibacy. Though Thomas argues that celibacy would be better for any who entrusted themselves to God, the Apostle Paul plainly states that marriage will be better for some (1 Cor 7:9).⁸⁰ Since marriage will be better for some, discerning which vocation the Lord is calling a disciple to must include consideration of that disciple's fitness for each. Following Luther, many Protestants have virtually rejected celibacy because they assume nearly everyone is "burning with passion"—the marker of those for whom marriage will be better (1 Cor 7:9).⁸¹ What exactly Paul means by the phrase is a subject for another time and paper, but it seems unlikely

that Paul would expect a nearly universal lack of self-control in the area of sexual desire, given that self-control is listed as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22–24). Therefore, in conclusion, somewhere between Thomas's nearly complete rejection of a subjective aspect to the call of celibacy and Protestantism's nearly complete rejection of the call to celibacy based on the subjective aspect is a biblical position that speaks of celibacy as consistent with Christian discipleship for any Christian and the God-given vocation of some.

¹ The growth in the number of "singles" in the United States and the debates surrounding issues of same-sex attraction and marriage are two noteworthy reasons. On the growth of singleness in American adults see, D'Vera Cohn, Jeffrey S. Passel, Wendy Wang, and Gretchen Livingston, "Barely Half of U.S. Adults Are Married – A Record Low," *Pew Research* (2011). Cited 22 August 2017. Online: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low/>. On the increase of same-sex attraction and sexual activity, see Rachel Feltman, "Study: Same-sex experiences are on the rise, and Americans are increasingly chill about it," in *The Washington Post*, electronic ed. (1 June 2006). Cited 22 August 2017. Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2016/06/01/study-same-sex-experiences-are-on-the-rise-and-americans-are-increasingly-chill-about-it/>.

² For the purposes of this article, "celibacy" will be defined as the intentional choice to remain unmarried and, therefore, sexually inactive for religious purposes. This definition is a slight variation of O. G. Oliver's definition of celibacy as "the state of being unmarried for purposes of religious devotion and ethical purity" (O. G. Oliver, Jr., "Celibacy," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001], 217–8). This definition avoids the discussion of celibacy within marriage as it is outside the immediate purview of the article. "Singleness" will refer to the state of being unmarried, regardless of intention, desire, or longevity.

³ See the point, counterpoint of David Platt's *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook & Multnomah, 2010), and Michael Horton's *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

⁴ "No one who works in systematic theology, let alone in patristic studies, can have failed to notice the recent up surge of interest in the work and thought of Gregory of Nyssa." Sarah Coakley, "Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of *The Song*," in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1. "Virginity" is used here instead of "celibacy" to reflect Nyssen's language. Celibacy, as defined in note two, is virginity but, as will be discussed, virginity is not necessarily limited to celibacy.

⁵ William Moore, Preface to *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, etc., NPNF2 5 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1893; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), viii, xiii.

⁶ Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Analogical Approach*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate*, trans. William Moore, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, etc., NPNF2 5 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1893; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 357.

The interpretation of *De virginitate* presented here is a traditional reading of the treatise in that, in the words of Christopher Roberts, "such summaries represent the traditional and, until recently, virtually unanimous view of the sexed body in Gregory" (Christopher C. Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* [New York: T&T Clark, 2007], 25). In addition to a number of contemporary scholars—e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995]) and Hans Boersma (*Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*)—the traditional interpretation has been held by Maximus the Confessor (Andrew Louth, *Maximus the*

Confessor, The Early Church Fathers [London: Routledge, 1996], 72–73.) and Thomas Aquinas (*ST* 1-98.2 s.c.).

Mark Hart has offered an alternative interpretation that treats *De virginitate* as a work of irony. Hart argues that despite initial appearances the deeper logic of the treatise places virtuous marriage above virginity as the highest calling of Christian discipleship. Hart's interpretation is born from an attempt to reconcile some tensions within the treatise and within its traditional interpretation. While it succeeds in releasing those tensions, it does so by straining the interpretation of the work as a whole and, therefore, is unconvincing. See Mark D. Hart, "Marriage, Celibacy, and the Life of Virtue: An Interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa's *De Virginitate*," PhD diss., Boston University, 1987; "Gregory of Nyssa's Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life," *HeyJ* 33 (1992), 1–19; "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage," *TS* 51 (1990), 450–67.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis officio*, trans. William Moore, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, NPNF² 5 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1893; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 387–427.

⁹ Inspired by Hart's alternative interpretation of *De virginitate*, John Behr has argued for an alternative interpretation of *De hominis officio*. Parallel to Hart, Behr argues that Nyssen presents humanity's protology not as without sex or sexuality, but instead without the disordered passions associated with sexuality in a post-Fall world. Therefore, the true path of Christian discipleship is not virginity, but dispassionate marriage. As with Hart's proposal, Behr offers some helpful insights but is ultimately unconvincing. See John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis officio*," *J ECS* 7 (1999), 219–47.

¹⁰ Nyssa, *De virginitate*, 364, capitalization original to Moore's translation.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹² William Moore, preface to *De virginitate*, by Gregory of Nyssa, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, NPNF² 5 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1893; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 342.

¹³ "Therefore, to limit the notion of virginity to bodily chastity would be to lose the grand perspective, which sees virginity as identical to divine purity and incorruptibility and therefore as encompassing all human virtues." Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 120, italics original.

¹⁴ Prov 11:22 and Matt 7:6, quoted in Nyssa, *De virginitate*, 363.

¹⁵ Nyssa, *De virginitate*, 343.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 352–3.

²⁰ Nyssa, *De virginitate*, 352.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 345–51.

²² Moore, note in *De virginitate*, by Gregory of Nyssa, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, NPNF² 5 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1893; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 343n2.

²³ "Let no one think however that herein we depreciate marriage as an institution. We are well aware that it is not a stranger to God's blessing," Nyssa, *De virginitate*, 352.

²⁴ Nyssa, *De hominis officio*, 406.

²⁵ Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 104; Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, SVG 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 156.

²⁶ Nyssa, *De hominis officio*, 405.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 405.

²⁸ Nyssa, *De hominis officio*, 405.

²⁹ For fuller treatments of the dual nature of creation in *De hominis officio*, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 49–55; Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and [Post]Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 166–81; and Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa*, 145–74.

³⁰ Nyssa, *De hominis officio*, 405.

³¹ "Yet while, as has been said, there is no marriage among them, the armies of the angels are in countless myriads; for so Daniel declared in his visions: so, in the same way, if there had not come upon us as the result of sin a change for the worse, and removal from equality with the angels, neither should we have needed marriage that we might multiply; but whatever the mode of increase in the angelic nature is (unspeakable and inconceivable by human conjectures, except that it assuredly exists), it would have operated also in the case of men, who were 'made a little lower than the angels,' to increase mankind to the measure determined by its Maker." *Ibid.*, 407.

³² *Ibid.*, 407.

³³ Sarah Coakley, following Verna Harrison, describe Nyssen's portrayal of resurrection life as a "'bodily'—albeit de-genitalized—life." If Nyssen envisioned the resurrected state as a bodily but de-genitalized existence, then per-

haps he also entertained the possibility of a bodily but de-genitalized existence for humanity in this world that was abandoned due to God's foreknowledge of the Fall. Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," in *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 166; and Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *JTS* 41:2 (1990), 468–9.

³⁴ Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 407.

³⁵ Richard Butler, *Religious Vocation: An Unnecessary Mystery* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Publishing, 1961), 39.

"Now the goods of this world which come into use in human life, consist in three things: viz. in external wealth pertaining to the 'concupiscence of the eyes'; carnal pleasures pertaining to the 'concupiscence of the flesh'; and honors, which pertain to the 'pride of life,' according to 1 John 2:16: and it is in renouncing these altogether, as far as possible, that the evangelical counsels consist. Moreover, every form of the religious life that professes the state of perfection is based on these three: since riches are renounced by poverty; carnal pleasures by perpetual chastity; and the pride of life by the bondage of obedience." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-1.108.4 co.

³⁶ As stated in the introduction, "vocation" is used here to mean a particular calling only given to some disciples.

The term is used in Catholic theological writings in a number of ways: in reference to the Christian life in general, to speak of marriage and virginity as states of life, or simply as shorthand for those committed to a religious life as a monk, nun, or in an ecclesial office. Edward Farrell, *The Theology of Religious Vocation* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1951), 39–50.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.152.1 s.c. Quoted from Augustine, *De virginitate* 8. PL 40, 401. Though Thomas's definition of virginity is the same as the contemporary definition of celibacy, this section will continue to use virginity to reflect Thomas's language.

³⁸ "Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1-2.3.8 res.

³⁹ "A certain participation of happiness can be had in this life: but perfect and true happiness cannot be had in this life." *Ibid.*, 1-2.5.3 res.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-2.180.8 s.c.

⁴¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Hom. xiv in Ezech.*, quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.180.8 s.c. Most English translations render τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα as "the good portion," but Thomas's Latin text reads optimam partem, which is translated "the best part."

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.152.4 co.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Ethic.* i, 2, quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.152.4 arg. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-2.152.4 co.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-2.152.2 arg 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-2.152.2 ad. 1.

⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.152.4 co.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-2.152.4 ad. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Augustine argues that Abraham and the Patriarchs after him married, had children, and grew the nation of Israel in service to Christ because God promised to come in the flesh as a physical descendant of Abraham. Thus, Celibacy was not fitting in the salvation-historical time in which they lived. Augustine, *De bono conjug.* xxi, quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.152.4 ad 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.152.4 ad 2.

⁵³ Though Thomas allows for the possibility that a married person may exceed a virgin in chastity, virginity allows for a greater experience of chastity for those who can attain it. "A thing may excel all others in two ways. First, in some particular genus: and thus virginity is most excellent, namely in the genus of chastity, since it surpasses the chastity both of widowhood and of marriage." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2.152.5 res.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-2.184.3 s.c.

⁵⁵ "A thing is said to be perfect in so far as it attains its proper end, which is the ultimate perfection thereof. Now it is charity that unites us to God, Who is the last end of the human mind, since 'he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him' (1 John 4:16). Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.184.1 co.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-2.184.3 co.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-2.184.3 ad. 2.

⁶⁰ "One [level of perfection of charity] is absolute, and answers to a totality not only on the part of the lover, but also

- on the part of the object loved, so that God be loved as much as He is lovable. Such perfection as this is not possible to any creature, but is competent to God alone, in Whom good is wholly and essentially." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.184.2 co.
- ⁶¹ "Another perfection answers to an absolute totality on the part of the lover, so that the affective faculty always actually tends to God as much as it possibly can; and such perfection as this is not possible so long as we are on the way, but we shall have it in heaven." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.184.2 co.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 2-2.184.3 ad 2.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2-2.184.3 ad 3.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-2.189.10 co.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-2.189.5.
- ⁶⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.189.10.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-2.189.9 co.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ "Why standest thou in thyself, and so standest not? Cast thyself upon Him; fear not, He will not withdraw Himself that thou shouldst fall. Cast thyself fearlessly upon Him; He will receive and will heal thee." Augustine, *Confessions* VIII, 11, quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.189.10 ad 3.
- ⁷⁰ "Some of the earlier doctors, considering the nature of concupiscence as regards generation in our present state, concluded that in the state of innocence generation would not have been effected in the same way. Thus Gregory of Nyssa says (*De hominis opificio* xvii) that in paradise the human race would have been multiplied by some other means, as the angels were multiplied without coition by the operation of the Divine Power. He adds that God made man male and female before sin, because He foreknew the mode of generation which would take place after sin, which he foresaw. But this is unreasonable." Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1-98.2 co. Italics mine.
- ⁷¹ For a broader discussion of the effects of a lack of teleological considerations in ethical thinking, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
- ⁷² Christopher Chenault Roberts, *Creation & Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 134.
- ⁷³ "What Luther conveyed to his students throughout ten years of lecturing on the book of Genesis is that this monastic and ascetic concept of holiness was insufficient and ill-conceived, the product of human rather than divine righteousness." John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis: And the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 80 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 134–5.
- ⁷⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective*, 2nd edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 7.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 181–222.
- ⁷⁶ Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 19, 26, and 250.
- ⁷⁷ John M. Lozano, *Discipleship: Towards an Understanding of Religious Life*, trans. Beatrice Wilczynski, Religious Life Series vol. 2 (Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1983), 71.
- ⁷⁸ Lozano, *Discipleship*, 71.
- ⁷⁹ "The call of Jesus, 'Follow me,' which is always directed toward individuals, initiates discipleship." Georg Strecker, "Discipleship: New Testament," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milič Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 851.
- ⁸⁰ Similarly, even if Jesus's encouragement to become a eunuch for the kingdom is offered to all, his conclusion in Matt 19:12, "Let the one who is able to receive this receive it," obviously excludes some, namely those who are not able to receive it.
- ⁸¹ Though Luther admitted that some could be celibate and remain faithful to the Lord, he thought, "Such virgins will be rare, almost miraculously so, due to the relentless nature of postlapsarian desire." Roberts, *Creation & Covenant*, 117.