

Christian Monasticism: Cause, Course and Consequence
Early Church History
Dr. Paul L. Kaufman

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By:
Christopher J. Kinner

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Through this Essay a brief history of Christian Monasticism will be provided for the purpose of observing some of the factors that contributed to its origins. The western course of monasticism will then be followed with close interest paid to the impact and consequence of Christian monasticism upon the American protestant church of the 20th century. Due to the brevity of this essay there will be a notable bias to the positive aspects of Christian Monasticism.

The origins of Christian Monastic life have been traced simply as early Christians moving to the desert with a goal of growing closer to God, thus following the example of Christ, when he fasted for forty days in the wilderness of Judea. Jesus' example of a life that is wholly devoted to God and bathed in prayer, Bible study, and the spiritual disciplines such as fasting and scripture memorization furthered this passion for many early monks. Additionally, Old Testament prophets such as Samuel, Elisha, Nathan and John the Baptist, provided inspiration as individuals led by the Holy Spirit to reject sin in their lives and remove themselves from the aspects of popular culture that oppose or detract from the ways of God.

Keeping these initial causes in mind it is understandable that early monastic life was not a corporate endeavor. In Athanasius' "Life of St. Anthony" the life of an early "religious hermit" is presented. Anthony (ca. 251-ca. 356), an early monk, sells his possessions and dedicates his future to the pursuit of a monastic existence. This book first introduced Christian Monasticism to much of Europe and inspired many to adopt a monastic lifestyle.

Also during this time another early monk named Pachomius (AD 290- AD 346) formed the first monastic community. While a heavily individualized existence was maintained, the monks would meet together to observe weekly religious services.

These two types of Christian Monasticism are recognized as Eremitic monasticism – Monks who live alone (“eremites”) and Coenobitic Monasticism – Monks who live in community (“Cenobites”). The term Monk is drawn from the Greek word for “solitude” and refers to the individual in Eremitic Monasticism and more to the “separate community” in Coenobitic Monasticism.

A major foundation for what can be called a second wave of Christian Monasticism or **The Monasteries** was “The Rule of St. Benedict”. Benedict who was born in about 480 AD established twelve small monastic communities during his lifetime, the most notable located at Monte Cassino, near Naples.

Benedict drew up rules for the monastic communities which were based on both the needs and functions of the Monastery. Of the seventy-three chapters comprising the *Rule*, nine regard the duties of the Abbot, thirteen regulate the worship of God, twenty-nine are concerned with discipline and the penal code and the remaining twelve are miscellaneous regulations.

Benedict envisioned a life of balance between prayer and work as the ideal. Benedictine Monks make three vows: Stability, Fidelity and Obedience. “The Rule of St. Benedict” became the governing text for most Christian Monastic communities in Europe. Some significant points of interest to the western church were the practical approach of monasticism, its ability to organize life in the community and the support of the church hierarchy by the Christian Monastic community.

One of the main occupations of the Benedictine Monks became the study of scripture or the “divine office”. Additional books were needed and Benedictine Monks became adept at copying the Bible and other books, thus many were preserved for later generations. Because of the high view of scripture observed by the monks, their manuscripts are a remarkable testament to accuracy. Other monastic orders such as the Augustinians were founded and most were based on some type of *Rule* such as “The Rule of St. Augustine”.

Monasteries also became used as stops for weary travelers, hospitals for the care of the sick and infirmed and educational centers for learning (some monasteries contained seminaries). Thus the western church and culture were highly influenced by the “Spirit of Monasticism”.

A third movement in Christian Monasticism could be titled: **The Friars**. This movement included men such as Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181 – ca. 1226) who most notably focused on a return to “Biblical Monasticism” and ministry to the poor. The Franciscan Monks were seen as “unusual” and new terms such as “friars” the “Mendicant order” were coined to describe this order. St. Dominic (ca. 1170 – 1221) also founded the Dominican order as a “Mendicant Order”. As with the Franciscan order, they were monks who went about preaching rather than only in monasteries, withdrawn from the world. Later John Wycliffe (ca. 1328 - ca. 1384) began to prepare the way for the protestant reformation, and much later, John Wesley and the Methodist Church. He translated the Bible into English and his monastically trained Lollard Preachers were known for sparking ‘revival’ in Europe. Finally St. Ignatius of Loyola (AD 1491- AD 1556) was the founder of the Jesuits and first general of that order. Originally called the

Company of Jesus or the Society of Jesus, the term Jesuit was used in the 15th century as a term of reproach for using the sacred name of the Lord too frequently. The Society was a mendicant order of clerks regular, that is, a body of priests organized for apostolic work, following a religious rule, and relying on alms for their support. The Jesuits became the main instruments of the Counter-Reformation along with labors in education and as missionaries throughout the world.

With the basic causes of Christian Monasticism discussed and a brief historical course outlined, one can take pause to reflect on the basic impact and consequences of monasticism to today's church.

One major impact was the preservation of western civilization much in part to the message of balance, moderation, stability, hospitality and stewardship provided by Monasteries, as much of Europe was overrun by invading tribes. Scripture was also preserved and its integrity protected to the credit of St. Patrick (AD 387 – AD 493), and the monasteries of Ireland that had not been sacked by invaders as the territories located in the ancient Roman Empire had been. It is for us to wonder when and how the Americas would have been found and settled and what our contemporary culture would be like if western culture had become 'lost' or altered.

Another contribution of monasticism is the goal of the modern Evangelical Church in renewing the world personally, and not through making Christianity a "State Religion". Not that Monks rejected the Christianization of the state, but that the true Monk reacted against the secularization of the church. The monastery was meant to be a representation of the 'authentic life'. As with the monastic reforms begun by Berno at Cluny in AD 909, monks who sincerely felt called to the monastic life despised those who became

Abbots through purchasing their posts or even in some cases through homicide.

Following the *Rule* brought the Cluniacs into a position of restoring many monasteries.

The Cluniac movement tended to weigh more heavily in the observance of the Divine Office than in physical labor although that may have been a reactionary overcorrection to an order that had been corrupted by the Secular world. In much the same way many Evangelical Protestant churches of today stress praise, worship and Bible study over working in the community and assisting the poor.

Observing Daily devotions, seeking to be discipled and possibly even fasting are all terms understood by modern Protestant Evangelicals and are encouraged for growing Christians. Each represent an ascetic form that was practiced by and passed to us in no small part from the Monks way of life. Through spiritual fatherhood, daily spiritual exercises that included prayer, readings and fasting the Monks endeavored to attain harmonious unity with God, their fellow humans and nature. Similarly, Protestant Evangelicals are encouraged to exercise spiritual disciplines today.

Probably the most notable heritage of monasticism lies in its call to perfection. True unity and solidarity was the ultimate goal of the monastics, living together as brothers and sisters with God as the Father and nature as the home. Division between people and nations disappear, loving God becomes loving people and loving people means showing hospitality. For this reason monasteries established hostels, homes for the poor and elderly, hospitals, orphanages, and other kinds of social foundations. The call to perfection relates to the renunciation of self, the oblation of self, the offering of one's being and life. In our world today one cannot count the number of resources that the

modern church makes available to our society along with the constant encouragement of the church to be involved in “service opportunities”.

In Summary, the Christian Monastics have offered the Church a great gift. A history of the practiced art of interior cleaning and an avenue of spiritual self-knowledge, sensitivity to nature, reconciliation with fellow man and familiarity with God. A familial society in which no one scoffs at poverty and no one is praised for riches. Monasticism is a practice that seeks to turn love from a centripetal or inward direction to a centrifugal or outward direction. Its history of seeking spiritual discipline was not for self benefit, but for the benefit of others, most notably God’s joy. It is a worthy and notable heritage for the church of today to take notice of, although the act of monasticism in itself precludes notoriety.