



Monasticism in the early church

Prior to the Protestant Reformation, monasteries covered the landscape of Europe. Christians were convinced that monastic seclusion was among the highest forms of holiness. Self-deprivation and ascetic rigor were treated as virtual means of grace.

The apostles did not establish monasteries. Far from promoting self-deprivation as a way to holiness, the Apostle Paul, in 1 Timothy 4:4-5, taught that, *"everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer."* The Gospel of Jesus Christ sets men free from rules, regulations, and ineffectual human striving for holiness. Yet monasticism touted the virtues of self-denial and deprivation, ascetic fervor, and human labor as means to holiness.

Egyptian Hermits

Monasticism first arose and flourished in Egypt. Solitary cave dwellers, pole sitters, and other desert madmen sought a slow martyrdom of starvation and insanity. Actual martyrdom had ceased when Christianity received legal protection from Rome. Men who desired to seal their discipleship with blood adopted the next best alternative; they sealed it with loneliness, self-denial, horrible deprivations, and often, insanity and death. The supposed spiritual value of asceticism was a belief that took root early and deeply. Whether it was life lived as a hermit in a dank cave or under the scorching sun, the urge toward monasticism found its most ardent and extreme devotees in Egypt. The western church suffered introduction to hermitic excesses when Athanasius, the great Bishop of Alexandria, brought with him on a visit to Rome two Egyptian hermits. The citizens of Rome were shocked and appalled by these emaciated and haggard looking men of Egypt. There were, however, especially among the women, a few who looked upon the hermits with wonder and admiration. A very few hardy souls ventured to Egypt or to other lands in the east, seeking to find a similar holiness in ascetic self-deprivation.

Athanasius visited Rome in AD 340. In AD 590 Gregory the Great became the first monk elected pope. In the interim, monasticism was transformed, shedding its image as the extreme practice of a few Egyptian madmen, and becoming instead a respected and institutionalized arm of Christianity. It was, in large part, the labors of four men that brought that change in the western church: Martin of Tours, Jerome, John Cassian, and Benedict of Nursia.

Martin of Tours

Martin was born in present day Hungary in AD 315. Christianity was officially protected within the Roman Empire, but not widely accepted by the Roman aristocracy. Martin's father, a soldier, cleaved to the old pagan religion of Rome, but Martin, at the age of ten, ventured to a local Christian church, wherein he discovered Jesus Christ.

Martin was conscripted into the army at the age of fifteen, but desired instead to live the life of a hermit. Assigned to duty in Gaul, he did not behave like most officers. Although granted a personal servant, Martin insisted on washing his servant's feet. Once, while riding patrol on a cold winter day, Martin saw a freezing beggar, wrapped in tattered clothes. He removed his own fur-lined cloak, cut it in half with his sword, and gave half to the beggar. Later that night he had a dream in which he saw Jesus Christ, wearing the half of the robe given to the beggar. Christ turned to his angels and said, *"This is the cloak that Martin, still a catechumen, gave me."*

Shortly thereafter Martin's religious beliefs led him to become a pacifist, a conviction that is largely incompatible with military life. He retired from the service, and returned home.

After traveling briefly, Martin founded the first monastery in Gaul, at Ligug. He soon achieved fame, both for his piety, and for a variety of purported miracles, not the least of which was the claim that he had brought dead men back to life.

In AD 370 Martin was, under false pretenses, lured out of his monastery and into the city of Tours, where the people then elected and forcibly consecrated him bishop. Throwing himself into the work, Martin labored ceaselessly for the poor, for those in prison, and for the sick. He moved away from the city, founded a new monastery in the countryside, and yet continued to carry out his duties from afar.

It was his success as both a bishop and a monk that helped to promote and to legitimize monasticism in the west. While Egyptian hermits might achieve a measure of personal holiness, their commitment to solitary living prevented them from serving as a blessing to the church. Martin of Tours helped to take the principles of asceticism and self-denial and combine them with communal living and Christian charity. That a monk could also serve as a dedicated churchman and pastor helped to legitimize monasticism in the western church.

That legitimacy was strengthened by the life and labors of Jerome.

Jerome

Born around AD 340 to wealthy Christian parents, Jerome was educated in Rome, his studies focusing on rhetoric. He rebelled against the faith of his parents for a time and indulged himself in a licentious life. His conscience soon convicted him and he repented, received baptism, and devoted himself to Jesus Christ.

Although he was very bright and was a rising academic star, Jerome renounced worldly success, and with a few friends began an informal monastic community in his home. This was, however, not enough to satiate the monastic urge in Jerome, so he ventured to Antioch to become a hermit.

Jerome had difficulty devoting himself to the hermitic life in no small part because of his love for books. His favorite author was Cicero, whom he read voraciously and loved deeply. While living in a cave outside of Antioch, Jerome was plagued with a vexing dream. As he stood before the judgment throne of Christ, Jesus asked him what he was. Jerome replied that he was a Christian, to which Christ replied, "*You lie! You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian.*" Jerome was terrified and vowed forever to forsake secular literature and to feed himself only on the Word of God.

Jerome was displeased with solitary life. He loved that it provided him with ample study time, but loathed solitude and self-deprivation. He recognized quickly that, while he could and did run away from some of the sinful temptations of the world, the greatest temptations proceeded from his own heart.

After two years in the sands of the desert, Jerome returned to civilization. He stayed briefly in Antioch and then in Rome, but eventually withdrew to Bethlehem, where he founded the monastery in which he would live for the rest of his life.

Jerome's greatest contribution toward the establishment of monasticism in the western church was his biblical scholarship. The pen of Jerome helped to prove that monastic life could be of academic and theological benefit to the church. While the monastery was indeed a retreat from the world, it was not a place of luxury or of ease. It became a place to work the mind and body. It was in the confines of his monastery that Jerome produced his greatest work, the *Vulgate*, his Latin translation of the Scriptures. If the monastery could produce such a masterpiece as the *Vulgate*, what other gems might it mine for the sake of Christ and His church? Jerome helped to lure scholars and academics into the seclusion of the cloister and helped to begin a lasting tradition of scholastic excellence within the monasteries of the western church.

The movement toward monasticism, however, still lacked a theological footing. The monastic impulse had grown out of an undefined belief in the value of asceticism. In the writings of John Cassian, that impulse was given systematic expression, and the practice of monastic life was grounded in the theology of semi-pelagianism.

John Cassian

John Cassian was a contemporary of Jerome. He was born into a Christian home and spoke reverently about the piety of his parents. His family was Latin, aristocratic, and moderately wealthy. Cassian received an exemplary classical education and, while barely out of his teens, went to Bethlehem to study in a monastery.

Around AD 380 Cassian visited Egypt. The fame of the desert hermits had spread to Palestine, and Cassian was intrigued by their pursuit of holiness. Throughout his life, Cassian manifested a devotion to the spiritual value of asceticism that seems to have been grounded in this early visit to Egypt. He truly believed that self-denial and sanctification went hand in hand. Traveling the deserts of Egypt, Cassian learned a strict asceticism from the solitary cave dwellers, pole-sitters, and other hermits of the east.

By AD 400 Cassian had traveled to Constantinople, attracted by John Chrysostom, the Golden-Mouthed bishop of New Rome. Chrysostom, not unlike the majority of the eastern church fathers, taught that while salvation required the assistance of the grace of God, fallen men nevertheless possessed the strength of will to pursue righteousness. Chrysostom's teachings on salvation resemble the unbiblical, but popular adage, *"God helps those who help themselves."* Cassian later developed Chrysostom's views into a theology of salvation that is called semi-pelagianism. The semi-pelagian system taught that fallen men could, and were required to, take the first step toward God, who then met their effort with His grace, thus enabling them to do the good works by which they would save themselves.

Cassian already believed in the value of self-denial and asceticism, and Chrysostom's teaching that salvation was due, at least in part, to human effort, grounded that belief in a broader theology of salvation.

After traveling throughout the east, Cassian settled in Marseilles, France in AD 415. Serving as a link between the east and west, Cassian brought many of the principles of eastern asceticism to the west. His monastic writings were revered throughout the Middle Ages, especially in the years just prior to the Reformation. Like most monks, Cassian tended overly to exalt the virtues of ascetic rigor. Men involved in the cloister life often overemphasized external separation from the world, external rites and activities, external holiness, and external law keeping. The heart of the faith rapidly came to consist in obedience to a lengthy list of externals, the keeping of which fostered a spirit of pride and self-satisfaction.

Against that ascetic and monastic ideal, Augustine's conception of the unmerited grace of God in salvation was a hammer stroke. Augustine taught that monastic asceticism was useless toward salvation. God saves, not based on the strivings of men, but based solely on His good pleasure, and according to the free gift of His grace. Church historian Philip Schaff has written that,

"Monasticism sought in cloistered retreats a protection against the allurements of sin, the desolating incursions of the barbarians, and the wretchedness of an age of tumult and confusion. But the enthusiasm for the monastic life tended strongly to overvalue external acts and ascetic discipline, and resisted the free evangelical bent of the Augustinian theology."

If grace and salvation were as Augustine taught, then the monastic ideal, with all its ascetic rigor and external strivings, was nothing but a chasing after the wind. Cassian would not abide that possibility.

John Cassian therefore became the chief proponent of semi-pelagianism. Cassian grounded his devotion to asceticism in the semi-pelagian theology he had learned years earlier from

Chrysostom. Cassian's monastic writings therefore not only promote asceticism as the ethic of western monasticism, but also semi-pelagianism as the theological foundation for that asceticism.

Martin of Tours had proved that a monk could be a pastor, and Jerome had proven the academic value of the cloister, but John Cassian provided the western church with a theology to support its preexisting devotion to the spiritual value of asceticism. Although his semi-pelagian system was later declared heretical, its spirit continued to infuse an element of human works into the Catholic Church's doctrines of salvation until the very eve of the Reformation.

The establishment of monasticism as a legitimate arm of the Catholic Church was nearly complete. All that remained was the necessity of providing monasticism with a unifying purpose and structure. These were provided through the fertile mind of Benedict of Nursia.

Benedict of Nursia

Born in Italy in AD 480 to noble parentage, Benedict was sent to school in Rome but was appalled by the immorality of the citizens of the city and by his fellow students. He fled the corruption of Rome and, desiring the solitary life, settled in a small cave at Subiaco, thirty miles east of Rome in a valley of broken rocks and thistles.

Benedict spent three years alone in a cave. He suffered the usual deprivations, torments of soul, and temptations that accompanied utter solitude. He was once so consumed with lust, tormented by a vision of a voluptuous woman he had known in Rome, that he considered for a moment casting aside his hermit's garb in pursuit of carnal pleasures. But, summoning up courage against the vision, Benedict stripped off his clothes and threw himself naked into a patch of thistles, rolling around until the pain of the lacerating and piercing thorns had all but extinguished his lust.

Haggard, hairy, and emaciated, Benedict was more than once mistaken for a wolf or other wild beast, and on one occasion an unknowing shepherd attacked him as such. Eventually word of his presence in the cave spread and Benedict began to attract both novelty seekers and genuine followers.

When the abbot of a local monastery died, the monks convinced Benedict to serve as their new abbot. Much to his dismay, he found their discipline lax and their spiritual exercises weak. He sought for a time to enforce a more rigorous asceticism on the cloister, but after his monks responded by attempting to poison him, Benedict departed.

Benedict's experience as an ascetic abbot in a lax monastery convinced him of the need for both obedience and permanence within the walls of a cloister. Monasteries were noted for their instability, both in their practice and their membership. Each new abbot brought his own set of rules and each monastery had its own abbot. If a monk did not care for the rules of a new abbot, he simply left to find another cloister. Monasteries throughout Europe lacked discipline and continuity.

Benedict, therefore, crafted a *Rule*, which was a veritable textbook for the organization and practice of cloister life. The brilliance of Benedict's *Rule* was manifold. Benedict was an ascetic, but not overly harsh. Setting western monasticism apart from the almost masochistic extremism of the east, Benedict prescribed that each monk should receive two cooked meals a day, including fresh fruits and vegetables when available. Each monk had his own bed, with a pillow and blanket for comfort, and wine was served with dinner.

In the same vein, however, Benedict required each monk to work physically. Every monk performed every task, and even the most menial tasks were treated with respect.

At the heart of the *Rule* stood two pillars of thought: permanence and obedience. Benedict's *Rule* demanded permanence. Once a man committed himself to a given monastery, he was required to stay there for life, unless ordered to go elsewhere by his abbot. Obedience to that abbot was the second pillar. The word "abbot" means "father" and Benedict intended abbots to behave as such. The will of the abbot was to be obeyed unquestioningly and immediately. The habit of imposed obedience was intended, over time, to cultivate a spirit of willing obedience in the hearts of the monks.

In order to promote a communal life that was God-centered, Benedict's *Rule* taught that the purpose of the cloister life was the worship of God. The monks met for worship and prayer eight times a day, including once in the middle of the night. The Psalms and other portions of Scripture were read, prayers were recited, and hymns were sung. The Benedictine *Rule* prescribed that every Psalm would be recited over the course of any given week and it was not long before every monk knew the Psalter by heart. Benedict prescribed the reading of John Cassian's interviews with several Egyptian hermits so that the Benedictine monks might benefit from the wealth of knowledge of the desert fathers. Nearly seven hours daily were devoted to manual labor or academic instruction, three to private prayer and meditation, two to eating, and about six hours a day were given to sleep.

The *Rule* of St. Benedict spread like wildfire across the landscape of western monasticism. Gregory the Great became acquainted with the Benedictine *Rule* in Rome and encouraged its adoption by the monasteries in that city. Thus, when Gregory sent the monk Augustine to the British Isles to evangelize the pagan people, Augustine took the Benedictine *Rule* with him.

Cloister after cloister across Western Europe adopted Benedict's *Rule*. By the time Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in AD 800, the question was legitimately posed whether there were any monks left in Europe that were not Benedictine.

Thus, Benedict added the final cornerstone to the foundation of monasticism in the western church. Martin of Tours had shown that monks could benefit the church through pastoral ministry. Jerome had given the church the *Vulgate*, and had written cherished commentaries on Scripture, luring fertile minds into the seclusion of the cloister. John Cassian had grounded the asceticism of the monastery in a semi-pelagian theology that taught the necessity of such strivings for salvation. But Benedict had folded monasticism into the arms of the church by teaching that monasteries of Europe became houses of worship and prayer, bringing a faithful discipline and civilization in the wake of a crumbling Roman Empire.

Monasticism evaluated

When the Reformation burst upon the church, monasticism, as a system of thought and life, was entrenched throughout Europe. And it was, in many ways, a blessing. In the preservation of learning, the cultivation of farmland, and the Christianization of society, all of western Christendom owes a debt of gratitude to the labors of countless, nameless, hard working monks. But it was not monasticism itself that was responsible for the blessing that these monks had on Western Europe. As Phillip Schaff has so significantly noted,

"It was Christianity in monasticism which has done all the good, and used this abnormal mode of life as a means for carrying forward its mission of love and peace. In proportion as monasticism was animated and controlled by the spirit of Christianity, it proved a blessing; while separated from it, it degenerated and became a fruitful source of evil."

Monasticism promoted, in reality, a significant theological deviation from the plain teachings of Scripture. The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the biblical teachings on salvation by grace, monasticism obscured rather than promoted. Schaff has said,

"For the simple, divine way of salvation in the Gospel, [monasticism] substituted an arbitrary, eccentric, ostentatious, and pretentious sanctity. It darkened the all-sufficient merits of Christ by the glitter of the over meritorious works of man. It measured virtue by the quantity of outward exercises instead of the quality of the inward disposition, and disseminated self-righteousness and an anxious, legal, and mechanical religion."

The monastic life was simply antithetical to the theology of the Reformers, and they railed against it.

Monasticism nevertheless served a purpose in the providence of God, who used the structure of the cloister and the self-discipline of the Benedictine *Rule* to bring civilization, Christianity, and self-control to the bright and ambitious, but brutal and warlike Germanic peoples that inherited the ruins of the Roman Empire. When those passions had been curbed, trained, and brought under the

sovereignty of Jesus Christ and the influence of the Holy Spirit, those nations were prepared to break free from the cloister, to cast off the burdensome legalism of Rome, and to venture forth into the freedom of the Gospel. Without the asceticism and legalism of the cloister, there would not have been the freedom and evangelicalism of the Reformation.

Schaff has concluded of monasticism that it *“became in some sense the cradle of the German reformation. Luther belonged to the order of St. Augustine, and the monastery at Erfurt was to him a preparation for evangelical freedom, as the Mosaic law was to Paul a schoolmaster to lead to Christ. And for this very reason, Protestantism is the end of the monastic life.”*

As Reformed believers, we heartily reject monasticism, for we understand that salvation comes not through asceticism, self-denial, or heroic effort. Rather, salvation comes by *grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*. That conviction is simply incompatible with the fundamental principles of the monastic life.

RB St. John

© 2011

www.christianstudylibrary.org