

Benedict of Nursia and Christ's Church

I. Monkish Moment

What is a Monk?

Definition: A monk is an ascetic: one who practices severe self-discipline and self-denial in matters of marriage and diet.¹

Terms:

The words monk, anchorite, and hermit all apply to one who has adopted a solitary existence in the pursuit of a higher life. Both men and women undertook this lifestyle early in the history of the church.

In part, they were influenced by pagan, Jewish, and secular ascetic traditions that were already present in their culture.

Monasticism is a general term for the system of renunciation of life in the world for that of devotion and asceticism.

- A trace of the attitude which later characterized this system may be found in the preference given by Paul to the unmarried over the married state (1 Cor. 7:38, 40) and in his counsel not to marry on account of the expected return of the Lord (verse 26).²
- *But the principal motive of Christian monasticism was the desire to attain everlasting happiness and moral perfection by escaping from the world.*³

Why monks?

- Monks were the new martyrs.
- Gained momentum in the third century and then exploded with popularity in the fourth.
 - "There was also an element of protest, both against the institutional church and against the increasing secularization of the church. *In addition, an effort was made by some to work out the true Christian life in terms of the self-denial that had been required in times of persecution.*"⁴
 - "Less worthy motives were also at work among some who sought escape from responsibilities, and their disorderly behavior brought some discredit on the whole movement, whose champions sought to correct these expressions of escapism."⁵
 - **In the fourth century, champions of monasticism treated it not as a special form of the Christian life, as it came to be later, but as the actualization of what was in principle a life demanded of all Christians.**⁶

¹Ferguson, 228.

²Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 461.

³Jackson, 462. Emphasis mine.

⁴Ferguson, 229.

⁵Ferguson, 229.

⁶Ferguson, 229.

According to Basil of Caesarea, “The monk is the perfect Christian; the ascetic life consists not in specific practises of self-denial but in the sanctification of the whole personality; *the monk must exercise, next to the love of God, that of his neighbor, though practically this was confined to his fellow monks and contemplated no far-reaching influence on the Church at large or on society.*”⁷

The reception of a monk, with the binding vow which had been required since the Council of Chalcedon, was a solemn act, considered almost as a second baptism in its power to cleanse from sin.⁸

An extreme example of this was **Symeon Stylites** who was a so-called “pillar saint”. He lived from 390-459 in Syria and sequestered himself on top of a pillar. Initially he was only ten feet off the ground but eventually he lived atop a pillar some 50 feet from the earth. Truly, his design was to separate himself from the earth by a physical distance. From atop his platform he would regularly preach to passersbys and practice his monkish austerities. Ultimately, he died on the pillar after more than 35 years upon it.

Summary: In short, monks literally are “fleeing the world to be alone with God”.⁹ They were primarily focused upon individual spiritual transformation rather than world redemption.

Good:

“The main service of Greek monasticism as a whole was the awakening of the Church to the consciousness of practical needs. The monks’ constant effort for the sanctification of their own hearts had given them a deep insight into the inner life... [and] human nature through monasticism...”¹⁰

Bad:

Is a monastery a church? **No.**

II. Benedict of Nursia: “The Patriarch of Western Monasticism”¹¹

The Road to Monte Cassino:

- Mover and shaker¹²
- Lived circa 480–547.
- Was born in Nursia, central Italy around 480.

⁷Jackson, 464.

⁸Jackson, 464.

⁹Craig Radiner and Rowan Williams, *Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer’s Vision, Iona’s Witness* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018).

¹⁰Jackson, 465.

¹¹Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 317.

¹²Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Benedict of Nursia,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 199.

- Underwent study in the city of Rome but was disappointed with the rampant immorality present in the city. He left the city and his father's house for a life of solitary mortification.¹³
- So, he became a hermit and went alone to live in a cave near Subiaco, Italy. He lived there for three years in "rough monastic garb and with scanty nourishment."¹⁴
- Eventually shepherds in the area spread stories of his fame and the "monks of a neighboring monastery..., whose head had just died, begged him to come and rule them."¹⁵
- His rules were so strict that these monks hated Benedict and tried to poison him.
- He gently rebuked them and returned to his cave.
 - Benedict, Gregory wrote, "perceived that the glass had in it the drink of death," called his monks together, said he forgave them, reminded them that he doubted from the beginning whether he was a suitable abbot for them, and concluded, "Go your ways, and seek some other father suitable to your own conditions, for I intend not now to stay any longer amongst you."¹⁶
- Though he desired isolation, Benedict did not receive it. New monks came to him and asked him for guidance. Eventually, he established twelve small communities of monks, each with twelve inmates and a "father" or "abbot" at their head.¹⁷
- The dating is uncertain, but it appears that Benedict remained in the Subiaco area until 529 when around the age of 49 he moved to Monte Cassino. This new location was half-way between Rome and Naples and was situated atop a hill which had formerly been a Roman military colony.
- From this new location he constructed a monastery that would be famous throughout Italy and Europe. And the rules by which he governed the monastery would be more famous still.

Benedict's Rule:

- Benedict used his experience in assembling monasteries to write a series of rules to govern them. These rules became known collectively as Benedict's Rule.
- Benedict's Rule was marked not so much by originality as by reasonable moderation and wise elasticity.¹⁸
- Benedictine monks made oaths to poverty, silence, chastity, and stability (or permanent residence).¹⁹
- "The aim of this life is complete surrender to the will of God, *accomplished through entire obedience to the abbot and the rule*. The abbot thus appears as an absolute ruler, responsible to God alone. It is true that in weighty matters he is to seek the counsel of the brethren, but the ultimate decision rests with him."²⁰

¹³Jackson, 46.

¹⁴Jackson, 46.

¹⁵Jackson, 46.

¹⁶Galli and Olsen, 199.

¹⁷Jackson, 46.

¹⁸Jackson, 466.

¹⁹Jackson, 47.

²⁰Jackson, 47.

Benedict's End:

- We know little about Benedict's life after the composition of his Rule.
- He died around 547 of a fever at Monte Cassino at the age of 67.
- He was buried next to his sister Scholastica who was a nun in a nearby village.

Benedict's Impact:

- "Thus he became the founder of the great Benedictine Order which for centuries concentrated in itself the extraordinary spiritual force of the technically "religious" life, and contributed in so marked a degree to the extension of the Western Church."²¹
- **Relation to civilization.** Eventually through reform in the Benedictine monasteries, their lives became increasingly pointed outward than inward. One author remarked that "Benedictine monks turned the forests into ploughed fields, brought the message of Christianity to the north of Europe, and handed down the ancient theology and some part of ancient civilization. Monasteries were the central points of the religious life of the day, and schools everywhere arose in connection with them..."²²

Bad:

Is a monastery a church? **No.**

III. Christ's Church

What is the Church?

- The word church translates the Greek word *ekklēsia*. In secular Greek culture, an *ekklēsia* referred to an assembly or gathering of people who were drawn together for a common purpose.
- Used in the more specific New Testament sense, an *ekklēsia* "refers to the community of those who have been called out by God to faith in Jesus Christ".²³
 - "The church is not a physical building; it is not a religious institution; an ethical organization; or a sociopolitical association."²⁴
 - "The church is the assembly of the redeemed—those who have been called by God the Father to salvation as a gift to his Son".²⁵
 - Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 4:1; 2 Tim 1:9.
- The church began on the day of Pentecost when Peter preached the gospel to the crowd in Jerusalem and many believed in Jesus Christ, repented of their sin, and were baptized (Acts 2:1-21, 38-47).²⁶
- The gospel continued to be proclaimed throughout the world and, as people believed, the church was added to in number.

²¹Jackson, 47.

²²Jackson, 466.

²³MacArthur and Mayhue, 387.

²⁴MacArthur and Mayhue, 388.

²⁵MacArthur and Mayhue, 388.

²⁶MacArthur and Mayhue, 388.

- These churches were to be gathered together based upon their location and overseen by elders and deacons who were gifted by the Holy Spirit and qualified to lead and care for souls (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).
 - All those who profess faith in Christ Jesus are to be folded into a local church. There are no exemptions. No lone rangers, no monks, no nuns. There are no provisions in the Holy Scripture which allow one to forgo meeting with the local church. Hebrews 10:24-25.

Purposes of the Church

- To Exalt God²⁷
 - “Because God is zealous for his glory (Isa 48:9-11; 49:3), his people should likewise be consumed with a desire to glorify and exalt him (1 Cor 10:31; 6:20).”
 - We do this through corporate worship—by ascribing to God the honor that he is due through words of praise and by acts of obedience (Jn 4:23-24).
- To Edify Believers²⁸
 - The church is also to build itself up into Christ Jesus (1 Cor 14:26).
 - This happens as we receive the ministry of the Word (Acts 20:32).
 - The mentoring of godly leadership (Eph 4:11-12).
 - The selfless exercise of spiritual giftedness (1 Pet 4:10).
 - The practice of the “one another” commands in the new testament (Col 3:12-17):
 - Love one another (Rom 12:10)
 - Live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16)
 - Confess sins to one another and pray for one another (Js 5:16)
 - *Obedience to the one another’s shows the world that we are disciples of Jesus Christ* (Jn 13:34-35).
- To Evangelize the Lost
 - The church is called together to proclaim Christ to a dark world (Mt 28:19-20).
 - Not only is the church to be proclaiming the gospel, we have been given the task of making disciples by our Lord.
 - This is the responsibility of church leaders, Christian individuals (1 Pet 3:15), and the church as a whole (1 Pet 2:9).

True Marks of the Church:²⁹

- True administration of the Word.
 - True churches teach and preach the Word to build up the saints.
- True administration of the ordinances
 - True churches practice baptism and communion on a regular basis as instructed by our Lord.
- True administration of church discipline

²⁷MacArthur and Mayhue, 394.

²⁸MacArthur and Mayhue, 394-95.

²⁹Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 245.

- True churches go after wayward sheep and call them back to repentance after sin. In other words, they deal with sin.

Is a Monastery a church?

- True administration of the Word?
 - No—Word confused by human tradition.
- True administration of the ordinances
 - No—the grace pointed to at the ordinances was veiled by monastic vows which created a new type of legalism.
- True administration of church discipline
 - No—the rules of monasteries did not always conform to biblical standards and were not enforced by qualified elders.

Other Concerns:

- Monasticism creates a two-tiered Christianity.
- Monasticism ignores God-given means of sanctification.
- Monasticism separates oneself from the world rather than being salt and light in it.
- Monasticism misunderstands humanity, God, and God's good gifts (Eccl 9:7-10).
- Negates the church.
- Monasticism seeks to draw near to God but they didn't do it through means that God appointed. *In seeking the husband they tried to circumvent his wife.*

Do you desire to grow as a Christian?

- Draw near to Christ through the Scripture (2 Tim 3:16).
- Draw near to Christ through prayer (1 Thes 5:16-18).
- Draw near to Christ's bride, the church (Heb 10:24-25).
 - Seek humility.
 - Be known—how can you practice the one-anothers otherwise?
 - Submit to your leaders (1 Peter 5:6-7; Heb 13:17).
- Draw near to Christ through the ordinances (1 Cor 10:16; Col 2:12-15).

Conclusion

"Nothing in the world is dearer to God's heart than his church; therefore, being his, let us also belong to it, that by our prayers, our gifts, and our labours, we may support and strengthen it. If those who are Christ's refrained, even for a generation, from numbering themselves with his people, there would be no visible church, no ordinances maintained, and, I fear, very little preaching of the gospel."³⁰ - Charles Spurgeon

³⁰Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Best Donation," Sermon no. 2234, preached April 5, 1891, in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Containing Sermons Preached and Revised* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1975, 37:633, 635. Cited in John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 739-740.

The church is a foretaste of heaven. May we be found faithful to honor the bride of Christ so that we may be found faithful in honoring her husband, Jesus Christ.