THE STORY
of
MONASTICISM

RETRIEVING an ANCIENT TRADITION
for CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

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Greg Peters, The Story of Monasticism
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
To my sons, Brendan and Nathanael,
for giving me great hope
in the church’s future
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As with all books, this one would not have been possible without the assistance of many people. My interest in and study of Christian monasticism continues to benefit from my friendship with the monks and oblates of St. Andrew’s Abbey, Valyermo, especially Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB, and Fr. Cassian DiRocco, OSB. The past and present faculty, staff, and students of the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University continue to stimulate my thinking on monasticism through their insightful questions and comments. I am thankful to the administration of Biola University for awarding me a sabbatical during which I began writing this book. I appreciate my research assistant Nadia Poli for dutifully retrieving articles and books and for moments of levity in an otherwise stressful environment. The members of Anglican Church of the Epiphany, La Mirada, have been gracious in supporting me, their priest, through this and all writing projects. My wife, Christina, continues to support me unconditionally, creating a home that is both conducive to and a refuge from the ups and downs of writing. I am truly thankful for her companionship and love. Lastly, I give thanks for Brendan and Nathanael, to whom I dedicate this book. I am blessed that God called me to be their father.
Introduction

The Monastic Impulse

It seems sensible to suppose that there are at least two reasons why you might be reading this book: (1) you already have an interest in monasticism and are wondering what this book has to say about the history and institution of the monastic religious life; or (2) you have no idea about monasticism and want to learn what it is. I hope, in either case, that this book will be of value to you. But first I will need to speak to those who do not know too much about monasticism, which is the exact position that I was in nearly twenty years ago. Being raised a Southern Baptist in Virginia in the 1970s and 1980s did not give me a good grounding in the finer points of monastic life and history. Having received a decent public school education, I do not ever recall reading about monks and nuns, though it seems reasonable to suppose that I did at some point. It was not until I took a church history class that included the Middle Ages and the Reformation era during my final semester at a Christian college that I was finally introduced, in a proper manner, to monasticism. My introduction came through the charismatic and important figure Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century Cistercian monk (of whom more will be said later). I recall asking myself, What is a monk? What is a Cistercian? Several months and a few books later, I knew that I had discovered my academic area of interest. Not only was I captivated by the personality of Bernard of Clairvaux, but everything about monasticism was fascinating to me. I am probably the only graduate from Dallas Theological Seminary who has on
his transcript an arranged course titled “Medieval Monastic History”! From there I went to St. John’s School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota, to study monks with monks. Needless to say, I was hooked and I continue to be hooked. Hence, a book on the history of Christian monasticism geared toward a ressourcement of the tradition for the twenty-first century.¹

The untranslatable French word ressourcement is most often used in connection with the theological movement known as the nouvelle théologie (new theology), a reaction among younger Roman Catholic theologians of the early twentieth century to the theological dominance of neo-Thomism.² Since then, however, the task of ressourcement has come to be viewed as the recovery by contemporary Christian scholars of insights from the church’s past. Thus it is appropriate to speak of a biblical ressourcement or a liturgical ressourcement. The Roman Catholic theological milieu after the Second Vatican Council is often described holistically as a climate of ressourcement. Semantically the idea of ressourcement falls within the range of other words that speak to a recovery or retrieval, which are common themes in monastic history—particularly during the Middle Ages—as will be seen below.

Ressourcement is not just a rediscovery or recovery of the past for the past’s sake, but it is a rediscovery and recovery of the past in order to give fresh expression to contemporary faith. In the words of French philosopher Charles Péguy (d. 1914), “A [true] revolution is a call from a less perfect tradition to a more perfect tradition, a call from a shallower tradition to a deeper tradition, a backing up of tradition, an overtaking of depth, an investigation into deeper sources; in the literal sense of the word, a ‘re-source.’”³ Martin Luther’s recovery of the apostle Paul’s teaching that justification is by faith alone, an insight that led to the Protestant Reformation, becomes in hindsight (and anachronistically) a moment of ressourcement. Likewise, as we will see below (in chap. 14) in the Vatican II decree Perfectae Caritatis, the council fathers commended the recovery of ancient sources as a way to imagine the future. The decree explicitly states that the way forward for monasticism is by looking to its past and by appropriating the good that is found there. Though paradoxical, in order to move forward in faith, one has to go backward first. This sentiment, that the future lies in the past, is not only a Roman Catholic

1. It should be noted that the institution of monasticism is not unique to Christianity. Buddhist forms of monasticism predate Christian monasticism by about 2,500 years. Good introductions to non-Christian forms of monasticism can be found in William M. Johnston, ed., Encyclopedia of Monasticism, 2 vols. (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000).
sentiment but has also drawn the attention of evangelical scholars, including myself. This book, therefore, is a work of monastic *ressourcement*.

**Defining Monasticism**

When considering monasticism it is always important to start with definitions since many forms of religious life are oftentimes wrongly labeled “monastic.” The English word “monk” comes from the Latin word *monachus*, which is a transliterated form of the Greek word *monachos*. The original meaning of *monachos* may or may not been equivalent to the English word “solitary,” that is, one who lives alone. By the fourth century, however, as evidenced in a letter of Jerome to a woman named Eustochium, the term was also applied to those monks who lived in communities. Later, around the sixth century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a Syrian monk and theologian, retains a sense of *monachos* as solitary when he writes that some were given the name “‘monks,’ because of the purity of their duty and service to God and because their lives, far from being scattered, are monopolized by their unifying and sacred recollection which excludes all distraction and enables them to achieve a *singular mode* of life conforming to God and open to the perfection of God’s love.” Thus “monasticism” refers to those men and women who either live alone, in a solitary manner, or to a group of men or women who live together in community. By this definition, however, many institutions could be labeled monastic that are certainly not monastic, such as prisons, boarding schools, or even live-in drug rehabilitation centers. Thus something more needs to be added to this definition; not only does the community live together, but they also live together according to a rule of life that includes some form of vows—an explicit institutionalization of the contours of their shared life and apostolate. In addition, it seems reasonable that monastics would have a self-understanding that would define them as monastic. This is another way of saying that one does not become a monastic by accident but


by intention. Consequently, monasticism refers to those who intentionally live alone or in a community under a rule of life and vows that give shape to their daily routine and shared mission in life.

Historically, however, there have been monastic types who do not self-identify per se as monks or nuns. The most prevalent example is the friars. While I was a student at St. John’s in Minnesota, my primary church history professor was a Franciscan friar. One day he said to me, “I’m not a monk; I’m a friar.” This was news to me. As we will see later in chapter 1 on the formation of the friars, they were (and are) distinct from cenobitic monks, but I would argue that they are monastic inasmuch as they meet the definition of monasticism sketched above. For the purposes of this book I will consider the orders of friars to be a kind of monasticism, though I will always refer to them as friars and not as monks and/or nuns. In doing this I beg forgiveness of the friars.

With a definition in place it is now possible to move forward, seeking to answer the question, why would/should any evangelical Christian today care about monasticism? Hence, this introduction will analyze the latent reality of religious vocation in the Old and New Testaments. The intended purpose of this examination is to demonstrate that in the Scriptures a religious vocation—understood today to be, essentially, an active way of life as a pastor, missionary, or evangelist—was not always understood in a purely active sense but also included a contemplative aspect. Additionally, communal life and vows (not to mention such monastic practices as hourly prayer) were all accepted and relatively common spiritual practices in ancient Israel and the earliest Christian communities. My examination is not intended to argue that evangelicals ought to reinstitute monasticism outright, but I hope that it will break down any overt and covert rejection of monasticism as an aberration, as is often done in many Protestant circles. This introduction is not an exercise in looking for support from the Scriptures for a practice that has already come into existence in order to somehow justify the presence of monasticism in the Christian church; rather, it is a general investigation into the biblical nature of religious vocation (or, in common Protestant terminology, religious calling).

8. For examples of these rejections of monasticism by Protestants, see Greg Peters, Reforming the Monastery: Protestant Theologies of Religious Life (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).
Contemplation: “With God”

Before looking to biblical examples of religious calling, however, it is important to understand the meaning of “contemplative” since I am suggesting that a contemplative aspect is a common feature of religious callings in the Christian Scriptures. The words “contemplative” and “contemplation” are very loaded terms in the Christian spiritual tradition. For the purposes of this book, I will use the definition provided by Tom Schwanda: “Contemplation is a loving and sustained gaze upon God’s presence in creation and God’s mighty acts.” As well, Keith Egan explains that “the Christian tradition has also seen a life of virtue as a prerequisite for contemplation as well as a foretaste of heaven. . . . Christians perceive contemplation as a divine gift of grace.” Multiple texts in the Bible speak to or hint at contemplation. Psalm 27:4 says:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

Of interest here is that the word “contemplation” comes from *con* (with) and *templum* (temple), which when used together carries the connotation that one is with God in his temple, exactly what the psalmist desires. In the Psalms we also find David’s confession:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory. (Ps. 63:1–2)

And perhaps the most vivid biblical testimony, discussed again below, comes from the apostle Paul, who writes, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen

years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12:2–4). One manifestation of contemplation is either talking directly with God or having some experience of face-to-face contact with God. Given this overview concerning the nature of contemplation, it is possible to turn to the concept of calling.

Religious Calling in the Old and New Testaments

In the Bible there are two primary meanings of “calling”: (1) the call to membership in the people of God (e.g., Isa. 41:8–9); and (2) particular callings by God to a special work, office, or position of responsibility within his covenant community. To illustrate, the word for “church” in the New Testament is ekklēsia, which is derived from ek (from, out of) and klēsis (calling). Thus the Greek word for church literally means “calling out of” or “called out ones.” This etymology demonstrates a general call to membership in the people of God. Yet God calls out some individuals of the church (literally, out of the called-out ones) to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). This illustrates God’s practice of “calling out” to a special work, office, or position of responsibility. In God’s economy “individuals have their callings within the corporate calling.” Further, God is the one who calls based on his own initiative (see John 15:16), though his calling almost always comes through mediators. Some callings are to specialized roles in church and society, and others are to particular duties within these spheres. Douglas Schuurman sums it up well when he writes:

The Bible has two basic meanings for vocation or calling. Each of these has two forms. The first is the one call all Christians have to become a Christian and live accordingly. Of this there is a general form, where the proclaimed word echoes the voice of creation calling all away from folly and into the wisdom that is Jesus Christ, and there is a specific form, where this call becomes existentially and personally felt. The second meaning is the diverse spheres of life in and through which Christians live out their faith in concrete ways. Of this there

15. Ibid., 18.
is a more general form, such as being a husband, wife, child, parent, citizen, preacher, etc., “in the Lord.” And there is a specific form, where it refers to the actual duties each of us takes on in our concretely occupied places of responsibility “in the Lord.”

In light of this, it will be necessary to look at biblical examples of those called by God and, in particular, to look at those whose calling was to the specific duty of contemplating God.

Adam

One does not have to read far into the Christian Scriptures before encountering the concept of religious vocation. In the book of Genesis, we read that “no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up” because “the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground” (Gen. 2:5). Subsequently, “the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” in part, it appears, to care for the land that God created (Gen. 2:7). There was no one to care for the land; consequently God created humankind to care for the land. In light of this, it would appear that the first man was created with a specific vocation given to him by God—land maintenance and stewardship. Thus humankind’s initial vocation, at least in part, was to serve God by caring for his creation. Such creation care was an active apostolate, yet we must bear in mind that prior to sin and the fall, caring for creation did not so much involve toil as it involved communion with God and with all of his creation in its perfection. In the words of Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), “The world was not devised at random or to no purpose, but to contribute to some useful end and to the great advantage of all beings, if it is truly a training place for rational souls and a school for attaining the knowledge of God, because through visible and perceptible objects it provides guidance to the mind for the contemplation of the invisible.”

In an unfallen state with no rational impediment, Adam had the opportunity to contemplate God himself, primarily through God’s unfallen creation. Thus Adam’s initial vocation of caring for creation was in reality also a calling to contemplate God; specifically, it was a religious vocation.

16. Ibid., 40–41.
Abraham

The most widely know calling of an individual in the Old Testament is that of Abram/Abraham, a resident of Ur of the Chaldees: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen. 12:1). For many students of the Scriptures it is tempting to rush past this opening verse of Genesis 12 in order to get to the actual promises made to Abraham in verses 2–3, which play such a vital role in subsequent Old and New Testament history and theology. Yet verse 1, like God's calling of Adam in Genesis 1, provides us with a description of God’s activity of calling people to overtly religious vocations. Like Adam, Abraham’s calling is to a particular land for a particular purpose. Whereas Adam’s responsibility was to steward God’s creation, Abraham’s was to relocate to a land from which God would create a nation to be his special people. Adam’s role was stewardship; Abraham’s role was fatherhood. Throughout the remainder of the Old and New Testaments we are reminded more than once that Abraham was called by God:

You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. (Neh. 9:7)

Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
that I might bless him and multiply him. (Isa. 51:2)

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.” Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. (Acts 7:2b–4a)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Heb. 11:8)

Like Adam, Abraham was called to be in communion with God, and we see this communion worked out through God’s promise to Abraham and in God’s faithfulness to his promises from one generation to another: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). According to the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855), Abraham was a great and godly man for three reasons: what he loved, what he expected, and what he strove with.
Abraham was great because he loved God, because he expected the impossible (i.e., that God would give him and Sarah a son in their great age; Gen. 17:15–27), and because he strove with God. Abraham’s calling was not just to be the father of a great nation in the sense of creating a nation-state; his primary calling was to a life lived in communion with and contemplation of God. Abraham’s calling was to a life of faith: “He left behind his worldly understanding and took with him his faith.” As a father, he was to lead an entire people in worship and contemplation of God. This understanding of Abraham as a person of contemplation is well known in Jewish tradition. According to Jewish legend, Abraham’s mother gave birth to him in a cave and then abandoned him for twenty days. When she returned he had already grown into a young man, able to speak. Upon seeing this, his mother’s surprise is tempered only by Abraham’s response to her: “O my mother, it is made known unto thee that there is in the world a great, terrible, living, and ever-existing God, who doth see, but who cannot be seen. He is in the heavens above, and the whole earth is full of His glory.” The point of this apocryphal account is to demonstrate that even before Abraham was called by the true God to found a nation, he was already a searcher after God and one who sought to be in communion with the true God. As an apocryphal account this proves nothing definitively, but it demonstrates a long history of understanding that Abraham was one who contemplated God.

Moses

One of the most illustrious examples of someone in the Old Testament who is called and who also experiences contemplation of God is Moses. Moses’s calling is recounted in the book of Exodus:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And

19. Ibid.  
he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off
your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he
said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,
and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at
God. (Exod. 3:1–6)

Notice that Moses speaks to and sees God, both evident signs of contempla-
tion. God continues speaking to Moses, explaining to him that he has heard the
cry of his people, the Israelites, who are being held as slaves by the Egyptians.
God’s purpose for appearing to Moses is to call him to go to the Egyptians
and free the Israelites: “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring
my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exod. 3:10). After a time of
insisting that he is not the right person for the job, Moses acquiesces to God’s
calling, ultimately delivering the Israelites from their bondage. Throughout
the remainder of his life Moses not only continues to lead the Israelites but
also continues to have intimate, contemplative encounters with God:

[The Israelites] came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the
wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up
to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain. (Exod. 19:2b–3)

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick
cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in
the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet
God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai
was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke
of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.
And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and
God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the
top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain,
and Moses went up. (Exod. 19:16–20)

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the
camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD
would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever
Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand
at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses
entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of
the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw
the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise
up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses
face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. (Exod. 33:7–11a)
When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. . . . And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. (Exod. 34:29, 33–34a)

In short, Moses’s relationship with God is summed up nicely in Deuteronomy 34:10: “And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.” From these texts we see that Moses was both called by God into service and had frequent recourse to communion with and contemplation of God—so much so that Moses became paradigmatic of the contemplative life. Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 395), in his Life of Moses from the fourth century, writes, “I have briefly written for you, tracing in outline like a pattern of beauty the life of the great Moses so that each one of us might copy the image of the beauty which has been shown to us by imitating his way of life.”

Elijah

Another great prophet called by God and given the grace of contemplation is Elijah, who arrives on the biblical scene rather abruptly but leaves an indelible mark. There is no explicit mention of Elijah’s calling to be a prophet of God, but it is reasonable to suppose that Elijah’s prophetic ministry was the result of a calling by God similar to that of other prophets. In general, prophets were called as a result of some sort of confrontation. For Moses it was the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians, and for Gideon it was Israelite oppression from the Midianites (Judg. 6:11–14). Elijah’s calling was prompted by King Ahab’s disobedience to God: “Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Kings 16:33b). Thus God called Elijah onto the scene to warn of impending divine judgment, including drought and famine. Moreover, Elijah was called by God to demonstrate to the Israelites (and the world) that the God of Israel was greater than the false god Baal (see 1 Kings 18:20–40). Not only was Elijah called as a prophet, but he was also a contemplative, a traditional understanding that flourished in the Middle Ages. Sometime between 1379 and 1391, a Carmelite friar named Felip Ribot (d. 1391) wrote a book titled The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites. This

work, a purported history of the founding of the order of Carmelite friars (which views Elijah as the first eremitical monk), offers a novel interpretation of 1 Kings 17:3: “Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.” According to Ribot, “The goal of this [monastic and prophetical eremitical life] is twofold . . . to offer God a pure and holy heart, free from all stain of sin . . . [and] to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory, not only after death but already in this mortal life.” Elijah, by Ribot’s standards, was certainly a contemplative, but the Bible says as much when it records that Elijah spoke directly with God: “And when Elijah heard [a low whisper], he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him” (1 Kings 19:13). Like Adam, Abraham, and Moses, Elijah enjoyed direct encounter and conversation with God.

Paul

There are two important New Testament examples of individuals who were called by God and also graced with an experience of contemplation. The first is Jesus at the transfiguration, and the second is Paul, who experienced being taken up to the third heaven. Given the uniqueness of Jesus’s life and calling, I will focus only on the apostle Paul’s experience. The Renaissance painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio painted two scenes of the conversion of Paul. The one installed in the Cerasi Chapel of the Santa Maria del Popolo Church in Rome is the more dramatic and visually striking of the two. In this painting three objects draw the viewer’s attention. The most vivid, because it is the most illuminated, is the figure of Paul on the ground, lying on his back with his eyes closed, perhaps having just been thrown from his horse; his arms and hands are extended, palms outstretched toward God, who cannot be seen but is obviously the source of light in the painting. Standing directly over Paul—and unnaturally contorted so as to create an intense perspective—is Paul’s horse. The horse is looking down at the ground and does not look like he has been startled. His front right hoof is raised above Paul so as to appear that he might step on him. To the horse’s left and in the

22. “Eremitical” is the most common designation of monks who live solitary lives or in loose-knit communities. They are also known as anchorites from the Greek anachōreō, meaning “to separate oneself, withdraw.” “Eremitical” comes from the Greek word erēmos, meaning “desert,” which is also the root of the English word “hermit.”

poorly lit background is a servant who has taken the horse’s reins and bridle in hand to lead the horse, presumably, away from Paul. This image contains all the emotion latent in the biblical account of Paul’s conversion:

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. (Acts 9:3–7)

Like Moses’s encounter with God in the burning bush, Paul was given a powerful and life-changing experience of God. Formerly a persecutor of the church and her believers, Paul was now called to a life of active service. Paul’s calling was to be a founder and overseer of churches throughout the Roman Empire. On more than one occasion, Paul is forced into defending his calling, and these defenses allow us to hear Paul’s own explanation of his calling.

One of his most impassioned apologies is found in 2 Corinthians 10–13. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul continues to call the Corinthians out on their immoral behavior and to admonish them to a lifestyle of greater holiness. His justification for being able to do this is dependent on his standing as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He defends his ministry by making several important claims. First, the Corinthian church would not even exist, nor would the Corinthians have come to faith, had it not been for God’s calling of Paul as an apostle: “For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged” (2 Cor. 10:14–15). Second, Paul did not charge the Corinthians for bringing the gospel to them, which is a sign that he did it because of his calling, not because he sought any form of gain: “Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God’s gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way” (2 Cor. 11:7–9). Third, Paul lists his credentials, reminding his readers that he has shared in the sufferings of Jesus Christ:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am
talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:22–28)

Fourth, Paul boats in his weakness, something that the false prophets of the day would not do, thereby demonstrating to the Corinthians that Paul was one sent from God: “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor. 11:30). It is in this testimony of boasting that Paul also reports that he had been called up to the third heaven. He writes, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12:2–4). Though Paul speaks of this event in the third-person singular, the history of scholarship concludes that the event must have happened to Paul himself or he would have no grounds for boasting, which is the very reason Paul is recounting this event to the Corinthians. Thus we see that Paul was called by God to serve him as an apostle (see also 2 Cor. 13:10), but we also see that Paul’s calling (like the callings of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah) was to contemplation.

We must note, however, that in none of these examples do we see a calling only to an active life or only to a contemplative life. Rather, what the Bible pictures for us is that God calls people to active ministries (Adam is to care for the garden; Abraham is to be the founder and leader of a great nation; Moses is to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian oppression; Elijah is to prophesy against evil rulers; and Paul is an apostle sent to start and shepherd churches) and to a life of contemplation. Biblically, the active life and the contemplative life are not in tension with each other but are meant to complement each other. This has not always been the case in the history of the Christian church, where oftentimes the so-called contemplative life was valued much greater than the so-called active life. Putting aside this imbalance, however, does not change the biblical revelation that presents a calling to active ministry coupled with the expectation that active ministry serves and complements contemplative
ends. The Bible not only depicts God calling people to a particularly active apostolate—such as pastor, missionary, or evangelist—but it also depicts individuals called to the practice of lovingly gazing on God’s presence, most often evidenced in a direct one-to-one encounter with God. The dynamic of these two callings, active and contemplative, has been discussed historically within the context of the Mary and Martha narrative of Luke 10 and John 12.

**Mary and Martha**

From as early as the late second century, the biblical narrative of Mary and Martha was interpreted as an allegory of the active life (Martha) and the contemplative life (Mary) or, perhaps more accurately, the active-contemplative life. Pertinent to this book is the statement of Giles Constable: “Monastic authors were particularly attracted to the view of Mary and Martha as two contrasting but complementary, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, types of life or of people.” This, I would suggest, is consistent with the biblical witness that we have already investigated above. A good illustration of this truth comes from John Cassian, a fifth-century monk and theologian (whom we will encounter again). In his *Conferences*, Cassian asserts that the telos (final end) of the monastic life is eternal life, whereas the scopos (this-worldly end) of monastic life is purity of heart. Cassian writes, “Whatever therefore can direct us to this scopos, which is purity of heart, is to be pursued with all our strength, but whatever deters us from this is to be avoided as dangerous and harmful.” A sign of purity of heart, for Cassian, is that one’s mind is always attached to divine things and to God. This being the case,

Martha and Mary are very beautifully portrayed in the Gospel as examples of this attitude and manner of behavior. For although Martha was indeed devoting herself to a holy service, ministering as she was to the Lord himself and to his disciples, while Mary was intent only on spiritual teaching and was clinging to Jesus’ feet. . . . Yet it was she [Mary] whom the Lord preferred, because she chose the better part, and one which could not be taken from her. . . . You see, then, that the Lord considered the chief good to reside in theoria alone—that is, in divine contemplation.

Though Cassian, like many others, interprets Jesus’s words (“Mary has chosen the good portion”) to elevate the contemplative life above the active life, Constable reminds us that “Cassian rejected the radical dichotomy [proposed by other exegetes] . . . and accepted the need for action, in the form of caritative [charitable] as well as ascetic and apostolic work, in the monk’s progressive struggle towards perfection.”

An even stronger positive evaluation of the role of Martha (that is, the active life) comes from the eleventh-century poet Marbod of Rennes (d. 1123). In a work dedicated to the miracles of the monk Robert of La Chaise-Dieu (d. 1067), Marbod writes that Robert did not begin the active life and then ascend to the contemplative life; rather, he moved in the opposite direction. Robert did not think of the active life as less good than “the good portion” of Mary (i.e., contemplation), but he thought of Mary and Martha, both the active and contemplative life, as the same. For Robert, explains Marbod, engaging in contemplation that then causes one to act is a sign of the love that one has for one’s neighbor. Again, action is not inferior to contemplation, but the two together equal the most God-honoring life.

Perhaps the apostle Paul’s life is the most illustrative biblical example of this reality. Paul was engaged in the active life before being called up to the third heaven, and afterward he entered back into the active life of planting, guiding, and shepherding churches.

From this brief examination we can conclude that the Bible, as well as some in the Christian tradition, do not view the active and the contemplative life as being at odds. There are certainly many authors in the history of the church who unashamedly elevate the contemplative life far above that of the active life, even disparaging those who did not live a life conducive to contemplation. The moral of the story is that there have been many who have seen the monastic life as the pinnacle of Christian living, going so far as to refer to it as the “angelic life.” Yet the examples cited above must give us obvious warning that this is certainly not the conclusion of the biblical testimony. Of course, on the other side are those who would elevate an active life far above the “uselessness” of contemplation. In many ways this has been the besetting sin of much of the theologizing that comes out of the Protestant tradition with its emphasis on finding God’s will for one’s life. “Finding God’s will” is often code for “what job/ministry/vocation should I have?” At worst,

29. Ibid., 41.
there exists an overriding perspective in evangelical culture that God has a permissive will and a perfect will. God’s permissive will allows the believer to engage in any job/ministry/vocation that does not compromise biblical teachings. As long as a believer is not sinning against God in her choice of work or ministry, then God is pleased, though God might have a different perfect will for her. According to this view, God, by way of his permissive will, might be perfectly fine with me working as a professor at a Christian university. Yet if God wills that I should be a church pastor, then I need to figure that out, get on board, and stop being a professor. If God’s perfect will is for me to be a pastor, then being a professor means that I am not living in God’s perfect will. I might not be sinning, but I am certainly not living into God’s ideal plan for my life. At its best, the evangelical tradition is insistent that our first and primary calling is to be in relationship with God, and from that we are able to discern further callings of God on our life. In the words of John Calvin, “We ought first to cleave unto him so that, infused with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls.” Support from the biblical record would seem to indicate that Calvin is right on the mark in this regard. Adam, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Paul all received a direct calling from God. Moreover, they were also given the graces of contemplation, suggesting that there is no distinction between contemplative and active lives but rather that every Christian’s life is an active-contemplative life.

Communal Life, Vows, Hourly Prayer

Contemplation, which is so often tied to the monastic vocation, is not the only monastic-related aspect found in the Bible. Other practices that are essential to the monastic vocation (including communal life, vows, and hourly prayer) are also biblical. Communal life is evidenced most obviously in Acts 2:43–45: “And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” This is reiterated in Acts 4:32: “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was

his own, but they had everything in common.” Communal living is also wit-
nessed in Jesus’s own life with his disciples. They most often moved together
as a group (Matt. 8:23; Mark 6:1), took meals together (Matt. 12:1), prayed

Though there is wide disparity among monastic authors regarding the exact
theology and nature of vows, in essence monastic vows can be defined as a
deliberate and free promise made to God about a possible and better good.
Furthermore, the vows must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion.
Such an understanding seems consistent with James 5:12, which says, “But
above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any
other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not
fall under condemnation.” This is an echo of Jesus’s own words: “Let what
you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil”
(Matt. 5:37). The Bible also has examples of individuals taking vows, such as
the Nazarite vow of Numbers 6:1–2, the purpose of which was to separate
oneself to the Lord. Samson (Judg. 13:5), John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), and
Paul (Acts 18:18) each took the Nazarite vow.

Finally, fixed hours for prayer (known as the canonical hours in monastic
history) are also witnessed to in the Bible, having been adopted by the early
Christians from Jewish practice (see Ps. 119:164 and Dan. 6:13). Peter and
John’s healing of the crippled man on the temple steps happened while they
were on their way to pray at a fixed hour: “Now Peter and John were going
up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (Acts 3:1). Likewise,
Peter’s vision of the unclean and clean animals occurred at the sixth hour,
when he went to the rooftop to pray (Acts 10:9).

Without much argument, then, it is obvious that the Bible teaches the good
practices of living with others communally, taking vows to God, and praying
at fixed times. These practices, which later become staples of monasticism,
have biblical precedent. Again, this is certainly not a sufficient argument for
the wholesale reintroduction of monastic life into the evangelical church writ
large, but it assuredly indicates that the institution of monasticism must not
be rejected simply because it adopts and values these practices.

**Ressourcement: Religious Vocation**

If the active and contemplative lives were what constituted the full range of
monastic life, sprinkled with some communal living, vow-taking, and fixed
times of prayer, then the Bible certainly commends the monastic life. It is
not necessary to go that far, though there are those who do believe that the
Scriptures advocate a monastic life above all other kinds of life33 or, at best, provide examples of differing kinds of monastic life,34 suggesting that the Bible plainly supports monasticism. At the least this survey has shown that a religious vocation is a biblically based way of life. Inasmuch as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Paul were called to specific vocations and duties, they were also called to contemplate God in his person and in his creation. Each of them had some sort of a direct, contemplative encounter with God: Adam in the garden during the cool of the day; Abraham in Moriah by way of an angel (Gen. 22:1–13); Moses at the burning bush on Horeb; Elijah at the mouth of a cave in Cherith; and Paul on the road to Damascus. It is likely the case that no Christian doubts that the concepts of calling and vocation are biblically centered. What is more likely to be doubted by Christians today, though not necessarily by Christians in the past, is that some believers are called to unique contemplative vocations. In the Christian churches where monasticism continues to exist, this questioning of a contemplative vocation is not necessarily the case. But in many Protestant traditions, especially the evangelical church, there is doubt whether God would call someone to an explicit contemplative vocation. This is certainly changing, and it must change given that the Bible unquestionably supports religious vocations that consist of contemplative callings.

Because there is a great diversity of religious vocations, including becoming a contemplative, today’s church needs to be ready to help its members in their quest to hear God’s directive voice. This is not to say that each person has one specific calling and it is now their job to somehow read God’s mind on the matter so that they can be doing God’s perfect will.35 Rather, God has equipped each person with a range of talents, skills, and gifts, coupled with things that they like to do and things that they do not like to do. Just because one is good at math does not mean that one has been called to be an accountant. Or, just because someone has a “heart for the lost” does not mean that she should necessarily become a missionary. This being the case, the church needs to take seriously its role in helping its members discern God’s will in their lives. When I felt called to become an Anglican priest, the first step that my local parish took was to assemble a group of church members into

33. The reasoning is as follows: Jesus was celibate. Celibacy is a defining trait of monasticism. Therefore, monasticism is more Christlike and thereby more biblical. In place of celibacy, one could also use the example of poverty.


35. The theology behind such erroneous thinking is summarized in and challenged by Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*. 

Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism* 
a Parish Discernment Committee. This committee was tasked with taking
time to meet with me on a number of occasions to help me discern if I did,
in fact, have a vocation to the priesthood and how I envisioned that vocation
would manifest itself in light of my also being a university professor. In short,
I discerned my vocation corporately, not independently.

Thus today’s church should assist its members in discovering their vocations,
perhaps especially if those vocations are religious ones. If it is determined
that a person has a religious vocation (and perhaps even a vocation to the
contemplative life), then the church should do all in its power to support that
person in his or her vocation. This is illustrated well in the Book of Common
Prayer’s rite for marriage when the officiant asks the congregation, “Will all
of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two
persons in their marriage?” The congregation responds with a hearty “We
will,” signaling their understanding that because this couple is called to the
vocation of marriage, the church now has a responsibility to support them in
this vocation. At the same time, individual believers need to submit them-
selves to the process of corporate discernment and not act individualistically,
for we do not always know what is right and best for us. The modern focus
on individuality has created a culture in which I know what is best for me, so
I am the primary agent for discerning God’s will for my life. The hazard in
this mentality, however, seems clear: I, acting individually, am most likely to
discern poorly because of my blind spots about myself and my selfishness.
There is, I believe, a greater chance for God’s voice to be heard correctly
when a group of believers are discerning together. In the end, the church has
a responsibility to its members, and its members should be able to count on
that support as they discern and live out their vocations. While this is true
for all vocations, it is certainly true for religious vocations, including those
of a contemplative nature.

36. A similar congregational affirmation occurs in the ordination of a deacon and priest,
signaling that the congregation affirms the person’s calling to holy orders.
1

The Origins of Christian Monasticism

What came first, the chicken or the egg? So goes one of the most well-known proverbial questions. Monasticism has an equivalent question: What came first, monastics or the institution of monasticism? Answering this question is not easy, and it might actually be unanswerable. Thus this chapter will explore the origins of Christian monasticism, seeking to answer the following questions: What were the motivations for such a practice? What were the earliest manifestations of Christian monasticism? What was the Christian monastic pattern drawing on religiously, and what were its influences? Why did it start when it did? Though these questions do not always have clean-cut answers, this chapter will strive to answer them inasmuch as they are in fact answerable. There is not enough space in one volume to address all the monastic movements and tendencies that existed in earliest Christianity (or in any Christian era for that matter), but this chapter will highlight some of the most pertinent and influential movements while also investigating one of the more obscure movements that appears to have biblical precedent.

Pre-monastic Impulses

To begin, the pre-monastic impulses of the Qumran community and syneiasaktism will be examined to show that a kind of “monastic” impulse was...
present in those movements that most influenced Christianity as well as in
the earliest manifestations of Christianity itself.

The Qumran community of Essenes was a Jewish ascetical group of the
Second Temple period (515 BCE–70 CE) whose life was rooted in the teachings
of the Hebrew Bible. They spent their days praying, working, and copying
manuscripts. At night they held liturgical gatherings similar to synagogue
Sabbath worship, with the exception that the Essenes had a common meal at
which they shared bread and wine. The Essenes were divided into two well-
defined groups. One group, like that at Qumran, lived in strict community,
following a rule. The other group was made up of families who also lived in
the wilderness in spiritual communion with the others. In order to adhere to
the teachings of their scriptures, they lived a communal way of life, practic-
ing “celibacy (at least for a major segment of the movement), a materially
simple life free of private possessions, temperance in food and drink, avoid-
ance of oil, simplicity of dress, reserve in speech, desert separatism (for those
at Qumran), [and] strict rules of ritual purity and of Sabbath observance.”

Philo of Alexandria (d. ca. 40), the great Hellenized Jewish writer, referred
to them as the athletes or practitioners of virtue, and they have often been
viewed as a precursor and model for early Christian monasticism (though
this is not without debate). Within the community were a group called the
ya ḫad, that segment of the sect that was governed by the Community Rule.
It is this group in particular that has often been labeled “monastic” and seen
as a precursor to Christian monasticism. Some scholars have gone so far as
to argue that John the Baptist was an Essene. However, others have rejected
this connection between the Qumran community and early Christian monas-
ticism, arguing that the ascetical ya ḫad are a “voluntary association” of the
kind that dotted the ancient Mediterranean landscape and are not precur-
sors to Christian monasticism. If this is the case, as Matthias Klinghardt
has argued, then there is no evidence of cenobitic monasticism until the rise
of Christian cenobitism in the fourth century. However, this does not mean
that there was no monasticism earlier than the fourth century but only that

1. Steven D. Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in Jewish Spirituality: From the
      Bible through the Middle Ages, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 266.
2. See Edmund F. Sutcliffe, The Monks of Qumran (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1960); and
      Magen Broshi and Hanan Eshel, “Was Qumran Indeed a Monastery? The Consensus and Its
      Challengers: An Archaeologist’s View,” in Bread, Wine, Walls and Scrolls, ed. Magen Broshi
      (London: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 259–73.
3. C. Marvin Pate, Communities of the Last Days: The Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament
      and the Story of Israel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).
monasticism in community (i.e., cenobitism) arose in the fourth century. This seems to support the extant Christian literary witness that will be discussed in chapter 2. Also, even if the *ya ad* were not the immediate forebears of cenobitic monasticism, it seems obvious that the Essenes must have influenced early Christian monasticism.5

A form of monastic life that was in existence as early as the first century CE and known to the apostle Paul is *syneisaktism*. *Syneisaktism* (spiritual marriage) is a term for the practice of “female Christian ascetics who lived together with men, although both parties had taken the vow of continency, and were animated with the earnest desire to keep it.”6 In the Greek-speaking church the participants of this practice were termed *syneisaktai*, *agapētai*, or *agapētoi* (beloved), and in the Latin-speaking church the participants were known as *agapetae* or *virgines subintroductae* (virgins secretly introduced).7 In most scholarly English writings, the practice is referred to by its Greek name *syneisaktism* or “spiritual marriage,” and the participants are referred to by the Latinized Greek term of *agapetae*. The earliest nonbiblical reference to the practice is from the first century, and there are numerous references to the practice from the second century on. Both orthodox and heterodox ecclesiastical authors, as well as secular emperors,8 were familiar with the practice, which had spread to most church provinces in ancient Christianity by the fourth century.9 Although references to the practice are scarce in comparison to other ancient ascetic phenomena, it is certain that celibate men and women lived together in chaste relationships for mutual support and encouragement. The praxis of asceticism was embraced by both Christian men and women,10 but

9. The number of references to the *agapetae* shows that the practice was rather common since it drew the attention of so many writers. Additionally, the geographical locations of these writers suggest that *syneisaktism* was common in most territories of the antique world.
“the fervor with which large numbers of early Christian women pursued lives of asceticism and renunciation is a curious fact in the history of women in late antiquity.”

It has been suggested that the renunciation of marriage and family life presented women with the opportunity to move outside the restraints of both society and family, extending to them a degree of self-determination that was unavailable to them in marriage. This arrangement was necessary since they were unable to obtain such support and encouragement outside marriage in the prevailing Roman culture.

In Roman society, marriage was a private act that did not require the sanction of a public or religious authority. A marriage that was contracted according to the civil laws of the time was recognized by the Christian church. The undertaking of this private act was primarily for legal purposes since ultimate proof of a marriage often rested on the intention of the parties involved and not on the vows performed. Within this custom of marriage women found themselves in a difficult situation. Since they were often married at a very young age, they were unable to avoid the demands of married life that included the pains of childbirth, nursing, and, at times, the death of their infant children. Besides these burdens there was also the double standard for men and women concerning adultery. It was accepted that men would have intercourse with women other than their wives. However, married women were not permitted similar indulgences. As Peter Brown writes, “Despite harsh laws punishing married women for adultery, infidelity by their husbands incurred no legal punishment and very little moral disapprobation.” Therefore, the adoption of a celibate life allowed women the opportunity to free themselves from this double standard. With the renunciation of marriage


12. Rader, Breaking Boundaries, 70: “The practice of syneisaktism or celibate cohabitation was an external expression of the Christians’ belief in a new age which allowed an expression of the normative male/female husband/wife relationship. While under the protection of a male celibate partner the female celibate was accorded a freedom, a dignity, and an importance not granted to her married woman-counterpart.”


15. Most girls were married by the age of sixteen. See Gillian Clark, Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 14.

16. Ibid., 28–29. These women were often of the lower servant classes.

they were able to move outside the restraints of the social and sexual expectations associated with it. It was within this milieu that *syneisaktism* developed and flourished.

Scholars have argued that the origin of *syneisaktism* can be found in the famous passage on virginity in 1 Corinthians 7:25–38, in particular, verses 36–38: “If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.” Hans Achelis suggests that the situation here involves two persons of the opposite sex living in a difficult situation. Though they initially agreed to live together in a celibate marriage, they are tempted beyond their limits of control. The question is then raised, “Can such a virgin, vowed to virginity in a spiritual marriage, be free to marry?” Paul concludes that the virgin can marry if necessary, and in this she would not be sinning. This understanding of the text holds that Paul was familiar with *syneisaktism* and, because he does not condemn it, grants his approval.¹⁸

Historically, there have been at least four ways to interpret 1 Corinthians 7:36–38: (1) Paul is writing about a young man and his fiancée; (2) Paul is writing about a father and his virgin daughter; (3) Paul is discussing a levirate marriage (in which a man marries his brother’s widow); or (4) Paul is describing spiritual marriage.¹⁹ Though there is not space to discuss these four views here,²⁰ the view that is the most ancient and that is frequently accepted by modern commentators is that Paul is describing spiritual marriage. Antiquity and consensus, of course, are not the only criteria for deciding whether a view is correct or incorrect, but for the purposes of this book the antiquity of this particular view allows us to see that it supports an early form of monastic life. The spiritual marriage view was first set forth in the modern era by Carl von Weizsäcker,²¹ expanded by Eduard Grafe,²² and exhaustively set forth by

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¹⁹. For a summary of these four positions, see Roland H. A. Seboldt, “Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church: A Suggested Interpretation of 1 Cor. 7:36–38,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (1959): 103–19.
Achelis. Though many commentators reject the spiritual marriage view primarily because the earliest known noncanonical reference to the practice is from the second century CE,\textsuperscript{23} Weizsäcker holds that 1 Corinthians 7 is the first reference to the practice. Simply put, he contends that because the practice existed only in Corinth, there would be no other references to the practice at this time. Achelis goes so far as to conclude that the apostle Paul was the one who developed the practice of syneisaktism.\textsuperscript{24} Twentieth- and twenty-first-century commentaries continue to conclude that the spiritual marriage view is the best interpretive option. The opinion of many modern interpreters is that (1) syneisaktism existed in the Corinthian church; (2) Paul was aware of the practice and allowed it to continue, and therefore, Paul fully supported syneisaktism; and (3) the earliest reference to syneisaktism is not the second century but possibly circa 50 CE or earlier, depending on the dating of 1 Corinthians. I believe that the practice was not only known and developed by Paul but that it was known to other early Christian authors such as Philo, the author of The Shepherd of Hermas (second century), and Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373).\textsuperscript{25} In particular is the comment of Ephrem in his commentary on the epistles of Paul. He writes that if “there is someone who perhaps has a virgin, and he remains for a certain time, as long as she be in her vow, and he realizes in himself, ‘I am not suitable,’ he should not feel ashamed about time that has already passed. However, one who is steadfast in his conviction, and has fallen into danger of lust and has chosen in his heart to keep his virgin, does good. So the one who gives up his virgin does good, and the one who does not give her up and is continent does good.”\textsuperscript{26} Ephrem believes that a man who gives up his virgin is good, but just as good is one who does not give her up and remains celibate. From this we can conclude that Ephrem supports the practice of spiritual marriage. Thus, with the possible exception of 1 Corinthians itself, this is the earliest reference explicitly supporting syneisaktism, and we are able to see that from the first century of the Christian era there were monastics. They might not have adopted the more common lifestyles that we now associate with monasticism, but this does not make them any less monastic based on the definition given in the introduction. Of particular note is Ephrem’s


\textsuperscript{24} Achelis, Virgines Subintroductae, 26.


\textsuperscript{26} S. Ephraemi Syri Commentariorii in Epistulas Divi Pauli a patribus Mekhitaristis in latinum sermonem translati (Venice: Typogr. S. Lazari, 1893), 62.
reference to vows: “as long as she be in her vow.” This suggests that the practice of *syneisaktism* was more organized than expected. That women were taking vows to live this kind of lifestyle is suggestive of the institutionalization of the practice and its early establishment.

What is evident from this brief analysis of both the Qumran community and *syneisaktism* is that there was, certainly, a kind of “monastic” impulse in these movements that influenced the early development of Christianity. Christianity received an inheritance where asceticism and monasticism were established practices, thereby giving shape to early Christian practices along similar lines. It should be kept in mind that the institution of monasticism is not unique to Christianity and even predates Christianity by nearly a millennium. For example, as far back as the sixth or seventh century BCE there were holy men called “wanderers” who practiced extreme fasting, wandered around naked so as to be exposed to the elements, submerged themselves in freezing rivers during the winter, meditated in the hot summer sun while surrounded by fires, went years without speaking, and adopted contorted bodily postures when seated. The Buddha himself rejected many of these extreme forms of asceticism, developing a middle way between normal social practices and the extraordinary ascetical life. This form of Buddhist life resulted in the formation of monastic communities. The rule for these communities was based on the four cardinal practices of Buddhist asceticism: (1) sexual continence, (2) nonviolence, (3) poverty, and (4) no pretension to spiritual attainment. These monks took only one meal a day, dressed in death shrouds, changed their names, abolished all ties with family and class affiliation, and had their speech and bodily deportment strictly controlled.27 Though these Buddhist monasteries, as far as we know, did not exercise direct influence on Christian monasticism, it is possible that Christian missionaries and others had come into contact with these monks and nuns. If the apostle Thomas did evangelize the Kerala region of India, as tradition states, then he would have come into some contact with Buddhists who first settled in southern India in the third century BCE. Therefore, Buddhism might be an indirect influence on the rise and structure of Christian monasticism, though the most direct sources of influence were certainly Jewish.

**Motivations**

Having seen that there were pre-Christian forms of monasticism and that the institution of monasticism itself sprang up in the first-century church of

Corinth, we can now ask the question, what were the motivations for such a practice in the Christian church? Despite the impossibility of knowing the hearts and minds of the earliest Christians on this matter, we perhaps can begin to form an answer to this question from the words of Jesus himself: “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (Matt. 19:12). In this saying of Jesus we see that there are three kinds of eunuchs or, to put it in today’s parlance, three kinds of celibate persons. First, there are some who are born with physical and/or biological issues that cause them to be unable to engage in sexual activity. Second, there are those who have been harmed by others to such an extent (whether physically or emotionally) that they are then unable to engage in sexual activity. Finally, and most important for this book, are those who have made themselves celibate. In the King James Version of the Bible this verse says that they make themselves eunuchs “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” In other words, the kingdom of heaven has already come by way of the incarnation and ministry of Jesus Christ. Therefore, seeing that the kingdom has arrived causes these men to become eunuchs out of thanksgiving for the kingdom. However, the English Standard Version seems to get it right with its rendering of “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” The subtle yet important distinction in this translation is that those making themselves celibate are not doing so because the kingdom has arrived but because they want to help build the kingdom on earth. They are celibate for the sake of the kingdom, not because of the kingdom. These eunuchs want to be involved in establishing the kingdom of God on earth and have chosen celibacy as a way to help make this happen. They are not responding to the work of God but cooperating with the work of God. In this reading and rendering, Jesus’s words do not so much report an event (i.e., some have made themselves eunuchs) as prescribe a way of life. These words, falling on the ears of Jesus’s first-century hearers, who were more familiar with intentional virginity (e.g., the Essenes), would

28. In its original context there is no doubt that Jesus was referring to traditional eunuchs, those who were castrated. However, the Greek word eunouchia (masculine) can also mean abstinence from sexual intercourse, or celibate. In this usage it corresponds to parthenia (virginity or celibacy; feminine). For example, Athenagoras of Athens, A Plea for the Christians 33.3, writes: “If the remaining in virginity and in the state of a eunuch brings nearer to God, while the indulgence of carnal thought and desire leads away from Him, in those cases in which we shun the thoughts, much more do we reject the deeds.” Or another way to say it: “If the remaining as a female celibate and as a male celibate. . . .”

not have sounded strange but would have sounded like a rallying cry to serve on Jesus’s team. What were the motivations for early Christian monasticism? First and foremost it was the call of Jesus Christ to be celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God. Again, celibacy is not the sine qua non of monasticism, but Jesus’s call to such a life must have caused a movement that led individuals to begin adopting monastic lifestyles, which we see described and manifested elsewhere and which certainly included the practice of celibacy on occasion.

Another motivation for early Christian monasticism brings us back to our discussion of *syneisaktism*, which Paul approves of in 1 Corinthians 7. Not only was Jesus preaching a message that encouraged his hearers to live monastic lifestyles, but it appears his disciples preached this message too. Making such a statement needs to be counterbalanced by another statement: there is no biblical support for monasticism. Let me explain. If a believer wants to find biblical precedent for something, then she needs to know what she is looking for. Someone might ask if smoking cigarettes is prohibited in the Bible. Well, cigarettes are never mentioned in the Bible directly, so one has to either conclude that the Bible has nothing to say on this matter or approach it from a different angle, such as care for one’s body, which is made in the image and likeness of God. This same principle applies to overt theological issues as well. For instance, the Bible never explicitly dictates the way in which a person should be baptized. Should it be by immersion, sprinkling, or pouring? Or could the answer be “all of the above”? To come to conclusions regarding the manner of baptism, theologians approach the topic not only biblically but systematically as well. One’s theology of baptism oftentimes dictates one’s mode of baptism. Let’s return to the topic of monasticism. If one goes to the Scriptures, one will never find a command as direct as the command from the mouth of Hamlet: “Get thee to a nunn’ry.” Rather, one needs to know what one is looking for in order to find it. If one’s definition of monasticism explicitly states that vows and celibacy are essentials, then one will go to the Scriptures looking for explicit teaching about vows and celibacy. Looking for a biblical definition of monasticism is an instance of looking for a definition of something that you have already defined. That said, I suggest that the Bible does give us enough to go on when it comes to monasticism, such as Jesus speaking of persons who are celibate for the sake of the kingdom and Paul’s encouragement of *syneisaktism*, as well as other examples and hints.

Further biblical texts that likely served to encourage early Christians to become monastics include the communal living and communal property passages of Acts 2 and 4 (mentioned above). Monasticism, as a flight into the desert or wilderness, finds inspiration in the wilderness wanderings of the nation of Israel depicted in the Pentateuch and in Jesus’s own flight into the desert after
his baptism (e.g., Matt. 3:13–4:1). Another frequent element of monastic life is the concept of exile and/or pilgrimage. The Israelite wilderness wanderings and the call of Abraham to leave Ur would have provided biblical precedent and motivation, as would the missionary journeys of the apostles in the book of Acts. The Old and New Testaments are littered with examples of people who lived in fidelity to God and intentionally consecrated themselves to him: “And I raised up . . . some of your young men for Nazirites” (Amos 2:11). Poverty, as a monastic virtue, finds biblical precedent in Luke 12:33a (“Sell your possessions, and give to the needy”) and Matthew 6:19a (“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth”). Together, these texts show that the earliest Christians were inundated with examples and admonitions toward the monastic life. In the words of Columba Stewart, “These traces of early ascetic attitudes pointed the way toward later developments in theology and practice.” This was certainly enough to help first-century believers begin adopting monastic lifestyles.

**Beginnings**

Having seen some of the biblical and pre-Christian examples and motivations for monasticism, we must still ask, why did monasticism start when it did? Why, within approximately twenty years of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, did Christians begin to adopt monastic lifestyles? Here I am thinking in particular about the practice of syneisaktism. Though it is not until the fourth century that cenobitic (communal) monasticism began to flourish (something that will be discussed in the next chapter), there were a plethora of non-cenobitic forms of monasticism within decades of Jesus’s own life. I would suggest that there are two primary reasons for the appearance and rise of monasticism in these early years of the Christian church’s life. First, the first-century context in which monasticism arose influenced the timing of its appearance. Second, monasticism is a movement of the Holy Spirit; therefore, it started at this particular time because of divine appointment.

We know from the biblical text itself that the first century was not an easy era for Christian believers. The apostle Paul, known as Saul before his conversion, was a persecutor of Christians: “But Saul was ravaging the church,

and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). Furthermore, the Christians were persecuted by not only Saul but also the whole Jewish community: “When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” (Acts 23:12). The Romans were also active in the persecution of the Christians, something that did not stop until the fifth century. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (d. ca. 339), writing in the fourth century, describes early persecution this way:

When [Emperor] Nero’s power was now firmly established he gave himself up to unholy practices and took up arms against the God of the universe. To describe the monster of depravity that he became lies outside the scope of the present work. Many writers have recorded the facts about him in minute detail, enabling anyone who wishes to get a complete picture of his perverse and extraordinary madness, which led him to the senseless destruction of innumerable lives, and drove him in the end to such a lust for blood.34

It is into this environment of persecution and trial that the earliest Christians were thrust on a daily basis. To take up their cross in imitation of the Savior was a reality each day. Such a sense of imminent persecution, not to mention the possibility of death, could and likely does account for an early Christian’s flight from the world.35 While some Christians certainly fled from fear or self-protection, others likely found solace in the desert, not so much because they were looking to avoid persecution but because they wanted to choose persecution on their own terms. That is, fleeing civilization and moving into the so-called wilderness or desert was a Christlike form of self-denial, a kind of self-controlled persecution of one’s desires, anxieties, and sinful self-will. In the words of Bernard McGinn, “Withdrawal, like asceticism, was viewed primarily as a means for the reintegration of the self through deeper knowledge (gnôsis) and more ardent love (agapê).”36 Such flight was seen as honorable and an imitation of Jesus’s own retreat into the wilderness to fight the demons. Accordingly, it is logical to conclude that monasticism arrived in the church so quickly because the monastic life was a way to live in light of possible persecution and death, as well as a means to pursue persecution on one’s own terms.


36. Ibid., 150.
Related to this is the reality that some in the earliest church wrongly assumed that Jesus’s return was going to be imminent; therefore, some believers chose to live lives that were not attuned to the culture but stood against cultural expectations. Though this motivation is not exactly a positive motivation, it seems to have existed. Although the eschatological expectation of the parousia (the second coming of Christ) enunciated by Paul and other New Testament writers began to diminish with the end of the persecutions by Emperor Diocletian in 305 CE, during the first three hundred years of the church Christians anticipated, oftentimes in a very intense manner, the immediate and unexpected return of Christ. Around 50 CE, Christians—including the apostle Paul and those in Thessalonica—were already eagerly awaiting the return of Jesus: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16–17). They assumed that Jesus’s return was impending, so they recommended diligence in being ready and prepared (see 1 Thess. 5:6). However, these same believers appeared to have taken an extra step soon thereafter—they stopped working and began waiting full time for Jesus’s return. Paul alludes to these individuals when he writes, “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thess. 3:10–12). From this we can see that there were early Christian believers who were so convinced of Christ’s return that they began to live lives that were countercultural, but in all the wrong ways. It is conceivable that some of these individuals were the ones who would adopt a monastic lifestyle, giving up societal expectations and norms to live in expectation of the imminent coming of the Lord. If persecution likely accounts for believers choosing to live as monks and nuns, then so does the expectation of Christ’s return.

Others began to live monastic lives because they were moved to do so by the Holy Spirit.37 We have already seen how God is in the business of calling people to particular vocations, so we should not be surprised that some are called to live monastically. Such a position is not so much based on a biblical text as it is in a robust theology of calling or vocation. (A brief discussion is found in the introduction, but any further elaboration is beyond the scope of

37. It is hoped that all persons who enter the monastic life have done so because of the Holy Spirit’s call!

Greg Peters, The Story of Monasticism
this book.) What is obvious is that “the monastic life presupposes the grace by which God calls a man or woman to love and serve him in the monastic way.” From the survey in the introduction to this book of calling stories and other stories in the Bible, we can conclude that there are four common features in biblical vocation narratives: (1) God’s elective love; (2) God’s assurance of his faithfulness; (3) God’s demand for faith and obedience; and (4) personal growth and transformation by grace. For some individuals this manifests itself in a monastic lifestyle. When this happens it is the result of God’s calling on their lives, a movement of the Holy Spirit. Just as Mary’s “yes” to the Holy Spirit was a response to her election as the mother of God (Luke 1:38), so is a Christian’s “yes” to monastic life a response to the Holy Spirit’s calling. Simply put, monasticism began in the church because God called people to live monastic lives.

Ressourcement: The Monastic Tendency in Christian History

Trinitarian theology contains a dogma about the Son of God: there was never a time when he was not. That is, the Son is eternally begotten and has always existed. His begottenness is a description or a definition of his relationship to the Father, not a reference to a time when he was born. Perhaps the same is true of monasticism in the Christian church: there was never a time when it was not. We have seen in this chapter that the monastic impulse was a part of the Christian church from its very birth. In addition to this monastic impulse, actual monastic institutions (like syneisaktism) are known from the earliest decades as well. Granted, there are no biblical texts that say “go and be a monastic,” but that does not negate the fact that monasticism seems to be a part of the church from its very origins. Although some may think that this is simply a ploy to legitimate and justify the institution of monasticism without a biblical mandate, I am tempted to conclude that there are no biblical commands for monasticism primarily because monasticism is perfectly biblical. If there were consensus on the absolute essentials of monasticism (and there is not at this point in Christian history), nothing would go against scriptural teaching. Celibacy is biblical. Communal living is biblical. An intentional pursuit of holiness apart from society is biblical. And on and on it goes. Thus monasticism has been with the Christian church from the start, and it will likely remain until the final advent of Christ.

39. Ibid., 112–14.
This being the case, it is important for the church today, especially in those ecclesial traditions that historically have not had monastic institutions (e.g., evangelical Protestantism), to recognize that not everyone is called to the institution of marriage and not everyone is called to live their lives according to the prevailing norms of Christian subculture. It has come to be viewed in many Christian traditions that marriage is the norm and singleness is something to be regretted yet accommodated. Most church ministries are built around the nuclear family, and whole ministries are dedicated to familial structures and their flourishing (e.g., Focus on the Family). This implicit “marriage is the norm” philosophy alienates those who are not married. Without doubt, several groups of celibates can be found in the church: those who are single yet desire to be married; those who are homosexual in their orientation and believe that same-sex marriage is not biblical and therefore choose to live celibately; and those who are called to be single celibates. The church needs to minister to each of these groups in ways other than simply promoting marriage: singles wishing to be married should not necessarily be encouraged to enroll in a dating site; homosexual celibates do not need to be “cured” so that they will desire heterosexual marriages; and true callings to celibacy should not be dismissed as emotionally or psychologically aberrant.

Those who are called to be celibate need to be given the space to discern this within their parish. Just as a pastor is willing to work with an engaged couple to prepare them for married life, so a pastor needs to be willing to work with individuals who are called to celibacy, helping them to affirm their calling and to discern in community how this calling will work itself out in their life and ministry. For example, could churches pair up celibates with families in the congregation who have extra space in their homes so as to lighten the financial burden of the celibate who does not benefit from a spousal income? Could Christian camps and retreat houses offer unused space to celibates for similar financial reasons? Likewise, Christian celibates should be encouraged to seek out other celibates so that they may live a common life together. Too often such arrangements are viewed with suspicion because those involved are doing something that is not “normal”—they are not marrying like others their age. The church must defend the calling of these celibates and instruct members on the merits of living according to one’s vocation, including the vocation of celibacy. Though these celibate vocations might not be full-blown monastic vocations, celibacy is biblical and must therefore be honored by the church, including those traditions that have not historically supported the institution of monasticism.