

Sermon

*New Monasticism: Part 3***A New Monastic Anabaptist Model**Pastor Jerry Truex; Aug 21, 2011

A. Introduction

Today I finish the short series on the new monasticism. Today, I will present three things:

- I will describe traditional monasticism and its connection with early Anabaptism.
- Then I argue that early Anabaptism was the *new monasticism* of the sixteenth century.
- Finally, like the early Anabaptists, I will invite us to embrace the impulse of past and present forms of monasticism, but reinvent with our own unique express of it for our century.

B. Traditional Monasticism**1. Reaction to a Culture of Corruption**

Monasticism arose as a reaction to the constantinization of the Church. That is, when Constantine became emperor of the Roman world, Christianity became the official religion. If one wanted to be Roman, one had to be Christian. Millions flooded the church.

Some saw this as God's triumph, but others saw it as the corruption of the church. Christians had been poor, powerless, and persecuted for three centuries, but now, with Constantine, the church shared in the luxuries, power, and decadence of Rome.

For this reason, Christians left the cities and went into the deserts to form communities dedicated to following Christ on the narrow path. These were the monastics. In the forgotten places of the Empire, in the desert, they faced their trials like Christ by practicing asceticism, a Spirit-training aimed at relinquishing attachments and realizing union with God.

At first, monks lived alone, but in time they realized the importance of living together. They became known as *cenobites*—a conflation of the word "common" (*koinos*) with "life" (*bios*)—sharing *communal life* under the rule of Christ with one another.

2. The Benedictines

Many monastic groups and traditions formed over time. One of the most famous groups was the Benedictines, who are named after Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547). Benedict is famous for his community rule, *Benedict's Rule*, which contains a prologue and 73 short chapters on the principles and practices of monastic life.

Benedict's Rule calls monks to ten commitments:

- (1) living in a *covenanted community*,
- (2) remaining with one community, known as *stability*,
- (3) listening and responding to God's call, identified as *obedience*,
- (4) repenting of wrong doing and bad attitudes or *conversion*,
- (5) *praying the divine office*,
- (6) praying with Scripture or *Lectio Divina*,
- (7) welcoming the stranger or *hospitality*,
- (8) *keeping holy*,
- (9) *laboring* to provide for oneself and the community, and (10) *making peace*—Benedict said: "Let peace be your quest and your aim" (BR Prologue 17).

Rather than being restrictive, *the Rule*—from the Latin, *regula*, meaning "rhythm" or "regularity"—offered boundaries that guided, liberated, and empowered the monks.

C. Monks and Anabaptists

The monastic way of life deeply influenced the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century.¹ Some of the founding Anabaptists were former monks, including Michael Sattler and Leonard Schiemer.² In fact, Sattler was a Benedictine monk and the primary author of the first Anabaptist manifesto, the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527).

The *Schleitheim Confession* stressed the same themes found among monastics, including (a) voluntary membership in community, (b) a common way of life, (c) the disciplined pursuit of holiness, (d) lay leadership, and (e) peace making.³

*Anabaptism was the new monasticism of the sixteenth century.*⁴ The early Anabaptists were reinventing the monastery without walls. Just as the early monks and nuns rejected the constantinization of the church and the merging of Roman power with the church, so the

¹ Leonard Hjalmarson, "Ancient Monasticism and the Anabaptist Future: A Tale of Two Reformers," *Direction*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 71-83.

² C. Arnold Snyder, "Research Notes: The Life of Michael Sattler Reconsidered," *MQR* 52, No. 4 (1978): 328-32.

³ The seven Schleitheim Articles included: (1) baptism on confession of faith, (2) church discipline of the baptized, a celebration of a memorial Supper only among the baptized and disciplined group, (4) separation from the sinful world, (5) the pastor is to be elected by the community, (6) absolute nonresistance, and (7) forbiddance of swearing oaths. Arnold Snyder, "The Monastic Origins of Swiss Anabaptist Sectarianism," *MQR* 57, No. 1 (Jan 1983): 5-26.

⁴ Leonard Hjalmarson, "Ancient Monasticism and the Anabaptist Future," 71.

sixteenth century Anabaptists rejected the corruption they saw in the state organized churches of their time.

D. Reinventing Monasticism

1. Desert places of the 21st century

Can the Mennonite Church of the Servant reinvent monasticism for the twenty-first century as the early Anabaptists did during the sixteenth?

The emerging leaders of the new monastic movement think the future of monasticism is not in the desert, but in the cities. The forgotten places of the twenty-first century are *in* the slums, *among* the homeless, *alongside* the marginalized, and *with* immigrant populations. These forgotten “places” of today are equivalent to the desert of the past. And, like the past, the desert places of our world invite us *to enter*, *to engage* the devil, and *to emerge* in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1-14).

Can our church adapt the monastic spirituality and impulse to address the desolate places of our world? Let me suggest that we are well on the way. Consider our identity statements.

2. Radical and biblical spirituality

When we say, “We commit ourselves to radical and biblical spirituality,” we express the monastic impulse in all of its forms throughout all the centuries. It is also Anabaptist to the core. It says, “We are going to follow Christ no matter what!” Give us the desert. Send us a demon. “We can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us” (Phil. 4:13). With our very first identity statement, you and I have already entered the desert. We have said we are taking the narrow path of costly discipleship.

3. Relational and accountable community

When we say, “We live in relational and accountable community,” we concur with the monastic insight that followers of Christ cannot be hermits, cannot be “lone rangers,” but rather, must live in community with one another. We see Christ in each other. We share the Christ that has been formed within us. We serve that Christ that is in our brothers and sisters. And, most importantly, together we manifest Christ in the world as Christ’s Body, the church.

Through the centuries, most monastics have lived together in the same building or compound—in geographic proximity. In the twenty-first century, some of the neo-monastic communities are doing just that. Such communal living is risky business, because if people are not working at surrendering the ego with its attachments and self-centered agendas,

they will hurt each other with insults and attitudes. I think many of us are leery to getting too close, because we can hurt, and be hurt by, others.

But with the risk that comes with communal living, there is also potential reward. Living with others, who are traveling with us on the spiritual journey, can provide a supportive context for discovering our character flaws, overcoming egoistic attachments, and developing Christlikeness. That is why the monastics insisted on communal living. It was means of accelerating the spiritual transformation and union with God.

4. Christ's peace within and in the world

When we say, "We seek Christ's peace within and in the world," we agree with the monastic emphasis on the integration of the inner life and the outer life.

I think we agree with the monastics that a life of discipleship centers on God in Christ, which means centering our lives in contemplation and cultivating the inner life of peace with God. The Benedictines cultivate the inner life by praying the divine office, practicing *Lectio Divina*, and listening to God in silence.

I think we would agree with the monastics that a life of discipleship also moves toward serving our fellow human beings, especially seeking to care for the most vulnerable in society. Benedictines argue that the desire to take Christ's peace into the world arises from contemplation. Contemplation—deep prayer and union with God—moves one toward cultural engagement.

Monasteries often became places of refuge for orphans, widows, and the homeless. The Benedictines were explicit about engaging culture through the practice of welcoming the stranger. The mendicant orders, like the Franciscans and Dominicans, engaged culture by caring for the poor and homeless, and through preaching and teaching the gospel.

E. New Monastic Anabaptist Model

To conclude, we can see significant continuity between monasticism and Anabaptism, even strong continuity between monasticism and our own identity statements.

- Both MCS and monasticism are committed to radical discipleship to Jesus.
- Both MCS and monasticism value living in a covenanted community.
- Both MCS and monasticism see the importance of nurturing the inner spiritual life.
- Both MCS and monasticism realize the importance of cultural engagement, of bringing Christ to the abandoned places of the world.

These continuities lead me to believe we learn a great deal from past and present monasticism. The various forms of monasticism can provide guidance, spiritual resources, and vision for our church.

However, I believe we must not simply imitate, but adapt, reinvent, and find our own unique and contemporary expression of the monastic Anabaptist life for our church and our world.

In a post-Christian world, we will need to dig deep to find resources to be followers of Jesus in a culture that offers little support and plenty of disincentives.

The new monastic movement is a search to find such resources. Last week, I present three themes that typify the new monastic movement: *intentional community*, bringing Christ to the *forgotten places* of the empire, and *contemplation*, meeting God in the stillness of our hearts.

And so now, drawing on both the old and new monasticism, on both the old and new Anabaptism, I offer a conceptual that might guide us in a post-Christian, 21st century.

