



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life
(*Monasticism Old and New*, pp. 33-40)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life

If we are going to live the Christ-like life in American society today, then we had better do it as a body or else we will never make it. Yet growing a shared life in Christ out of our frantically busy lives is quite a challenge. How can a common rule of life—a salient feature of monasticism, old and new—help us to covenant with others in Christian community?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 1:13-23

Meditation¹

At the risk of focusing too much on the negative, I want to begin with something that almost everyone in the Church acknowledges: it's hard to be a Christian in America... Monasticism, I learned, isn't about achieving some sort of individual or communal piety. It's about helping the church be the church.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Reflection

We have often seen it on the news, or in our own neighborhoods: when tragedy strikes, people pull together. Arenas become hospitals, elementary schools become bunkers, and church basements become havens for evacuees. Kyle Childress saw this firsthand when headline-grabbing hurricanes swept through the Gulf coast in 2005. As evacuee families moved into the Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, TX, members stepped up to share in child-care, meal preparation, debris clean-up, and much more. The church was taking the time to be the church.

"I believe that the call of Jesus Christ is to a shared and common life in him much like what I saw our local church embody the week following the hurricane," Childress writes, yet "it is rare to see local congregations share such a common life, and most church members have no idea such a life exists, much less is desirable." How can we recognize that shared calling and shape our lives around it? He suggests that congregations adopt a rule of life, a shared plan for life together in community.

Drawing on his experiences of a rule of life while working for the Baptist Peace Fellowship, and his study of the covenants in contemporary new monasticism, the early church, and Baptist history, Childress offers four characteristics of a rule of life.

- ▶ *Practice-oriented.* The rule of life in a monastic community, old or new, "is not confessional, creedal, or doctrinal (for their orientation to right belief, these communities have the historic Christian creeds), but it makes plain how the members live and serve together."
- ▶ *Common in the free church tradition.* Rules of life, or covenants, were standard in early Baptist and Puritan circles. "Covenant was the 'theological dynamic' for separating from the state-established church and the basis for church membership and governance," Childress notes. "It became common after 1650 for Baptist churches to be organized around covenants; they became the



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basis for constituting new congregations and receiving new members, and the means for maintaining the integrity of church membership.”

▶ *Specific to a local congregation.* Historically, “these covenants were written by the local congregations and reflected their particular effort to embody the New Testament vocation of following Jesus Christ in that place and time. Like the rule of a monastic community, these covenants were practical ... and they spelled out the congregation’s practices of prayer, service, worship, and education,” he writes. A congregation-specific rule of life articulates the commitment among members and their service to those beyond their community. Such accountability keeps the congregation healthy.

▶ *A challenging task.* “In our individualized – some would say hyper-individualized – society, to participate in the body of Christ takes extraordinary time and effort,” Childress warns. “People in congregations have less and less time to devote to God and to each other, much less serving others outside of their congregation. Busyness seems to be the number one obstacle in people’s lives to following Jesus.”

Which develops first – a deep sense of community or a shared commitment expressed in a rule of life, or covenant? “Strange but true, a church needs a covenant to better order the communal life of the congregation, but it takes a rich and vibrant communal life to produce a covenant,” Childress concludes. “Even more, it takes a good common life to even understand the need for sharing a common rule.”

Study Questions

1. Do you agree with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove that “it’s hard to be a Christian in America”? If so, how does this fact make sharing a common life crucial for local congregations?
2. While he admits some past missteps can make local church covenants seem like “historical oddities” today, Kyle Childress thinks “there is little doubt that most hostility to covenantal ecclesiology, or a common life ordered by a rule, arises from American individualism.” What do you think?
3. Discuss the practical difficulties of developing a shared common rule of life for your congregation. Why might it be difficult to ask church members to make commitments to serve God, each other, and the larger community?
4. “Most of the you’s in Scripture are ya’lls,” Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove has noted. “The Bible isn’t addressed to a person but to a people.”² For example, in his model prayer, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray with communal pronouns – “our” and “us,” not “my” and “me.” How do the worship services in your congregation reflect and inculcate this communal understanding of discipleship?

Departing Hymn: “Gather Now around His Teachings”

¹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 11, 21.

² *Ibid.*, 57-58.

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss what it means for a congregation to share a common life in today's busy world.
2. To consider how a rule of life, or covenant, can strengthen community in a congregation.
3. To explore worship practices that encourage a common life of discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Monasticism Old and New (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "Gather Now around His Teachings" can be found on pp. 41-43 of *Monasticism Old and New*.

Begin with a Story

"Every Sunday for over twenty years we have ended worship with a benediction I first learned from an African-American pastor," Kyle Childress writes. "'Let's take each other's hands,' it begins. 'Now look who you're holding hands with, and hold on tight! Because we're going to need each other this week.'"

"Several times over these years, church members in unexpected crisis have told me later, 'When I first heard the news, I didn't know what to do or who to call. Then it hit me, who was I holding hands with Sunday? And that is who I called.'"

Childress concludes, "I want my people to think in terms of God and each other, each other and God – that we cannot have one without the other – and to think like this so much that it becomes habitual. It becomes so natural that it is an automatic way of thinking. It becomes instinctive." (*Monasticism Old and New*, p. 39)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for wisdom to discern whether a covenant, or rule of life, would encourage deeper community in your congregation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Peter 1:13-23 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Each monastic community, classic or new, is ordered by its rule of life, its embraced pattern for daily living. "A rule of life in a Christian intentional community might go by any number of names – rule, covenant, document of commitment, oath, vows, and so on," Kyle Childress explains. "It usually represents the foundational vision of the community, or identity statement, that all members subscribe and submit to." Use this study to explore the possibility of your group or congregation developing a rule of life.

For guidance, consider St. Benedict's *Regula*, or *Rule of Life*, which monastic communities have used or adapted since the sixth century. It is available in many printed versions, or online in the Christian Classics

Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org). For contemporary inspiration, see the covenantal statements of The Simple Way, a new monastic community in Philadelphia. They are available online at www.thesimpleway.org/about/ under the links to “commitments,” “foundations,” and “functionality.”

Study Questions

1. Consider how affluence, busyness, individualism, hyper-mobility, and other characteristically American priorities might make discipleship difficult. Ask members to unpack clichés like “the American dream” and “keeping up with the Joneses.”

Kyle Childress notes that as church members become more and more busy, they are less able to participate fully in the common life of the congregation. For example, work and family activities often prevent them from being present in worship. Going it alone makes them more susceptible to discouragement, difficulty, temptation, and disordered priorities. “If our people are going to live the Christ-like life, then they had better do it as a body or else they will never make it,” he warns. “Lone individuals trying to live faithfully cannot stand against sin, death, the Powers, and the overwhelming pressure of society. Church members, as individuals, are easy pickings for the Powers of Death; they will separate us, isolate us, *dismember* us, pick us off one at a time, and grind us down into the dust.”

2. Discuss why American Christians might be reluctant to embrace a church covenant or a common rule of life. Concerns might range from an insistence on personal rights to interpret Scripture, to an understanding of certain topics being “personal” and nobody else’s business, to a fear of legalism in the carrying out the details of the covenant. Discuss why church members would be reluctant to hold one another accountable to a covenant that includes practical matters like church attendance and community service.

Another way to tackle this question is to discuss the pros and cons of individualism within the Church. For instance, personal accountability and responsiveness to an individual calling can be a good thing in an individual believer’s life, especially as she is equipped for service within the body of Christ. But how could these potentially good things get distorted into the type of go-it-alone individualism that concerns Childress?

3. An obvious practical difficulty is that members will disagree on what should be included in the common rule, big issues and little details alike, and how to hold one another accountable to it. As a test, ask group members to draw up a short list of possible items to be included on a shared rule of life – e.g., communal and individual prayer times, service to one another or to the greater community, sharing a particular number of meals each week, defining what it means to be hospitable, and so on. If this is hard in a small group where members already know and trust one another, imagine how difficult it would be in a large congregation. Childress notes the difficulty of committing to a common rule of life: “Overcoming such obstacles to grow a common life takes daily teaching and reinforcement, paying attention and making connections, and just plain old persistence. It takes working and serving together in community, sharing meals together in community, and worshiping together in community. But it also takes the willingness to make sacrifices, to simplify our lifestyles, and give up some of our desires and expectations of ‘having it all.’”
4. Consider whether written prayers, hymns, and responsive readings use communal language and pronouns; how often and in what manner the Lord’s Supper is practiced; to what extent laypersons are involved in the worship service by reading Scripture, leading prayers, or congregational singing; and whether elements of worship (e.g., passing of the peace, open prayer requests, and praise time) build spiritual intimacy among members. Perhaps your congregation would adopt a version of Childress’s benediction, which includes holding the hands of nearby church members.

Departing Hymn

“Gather Now around His Teachings” can be found on pp. 41-43 of *Monasticism Old and New*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.