

# Evangelicals and Monastics

BY IVAN J. KAUFFMAN

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**A**t first the connection seems far-fetched. Could any two groups of Christians be more different? Evangelicals have their origins in the Protestant Reformation; Catholic and Orthodox monks have their origins in the pre-Reformation medieval era. Monks live lives of ordered submission to established tradition; evangelicals live their lives devoted to more individual pursuits, always open to the new. But the New Monasticism movement has opened a new chapter in the relations of these previously estranged groups.

On the one hand the New Monasticism movement has emerged from the very heart of the American evangelical community. But on the other hand it is, as its name indicates, deeply connected to the pre-Reformation monastic movement, and to roots that reach back to the very earliest centuries of Christianity.

For me this connection is a deeply personal one. I grew up in the evangelical community in the 1940s and 50s. My father was a revivalist, as were many of his friends and colleagues who were constantly in and out of our home. We were part of a Mennonite community that was just emerging from an Amish past, but our theology and beliefs were evangelical. Our leaders had been trained in Baptist seminaries.

But there was something different about us. As my wife has often said, “The house you lived in, the job you had, the clothes you wore, the car you drove, all were determined by the church you belonged to.” I have often told my non-Mennonite friends that it was like growing up in a non-celibate Protestant monastery.

So when Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove invited me to write a short history of the monastic movement for the New Monastic Library being published by Cascade Books I was glad to accept.<sup>†</sup> For more than forty-five years I had researched and studied evangelical origins, and this convinced me that there is a larger pattern in church history which we miss by studying only one Christian community at a time. We have come to know a great deal about the individual trees, but we have missed the forest they grow in.



What this lifetime of historical research and reflection has taught me is to see Christianity as a whole. That is the way Christ sees, I am convinced. I have come to believe Christ sees the many churches based on his life and teachings as a very large forest, extending through two thousand years of history, and now covering the entire globe – more thickly in some places than others, but nonetheless now present in some way everywhere.

Flowing through this forest is a very wide river, one that constantly grows wider as it flows toward its destination. On one side of the river Christians have erected large hierarchical institutions, and equally large and powerful buildings to house them. This I have suggested we might call the institutional church. Historically its center has been in Rome and Constantinople.

On the other side of the river Christians have formed what we might call communities of intentional Christians. These communities are equally as Christian as the much larger and more powerful communities on the other side, but they are very different. Rather than being governed by hierarchies, they are self-governing. Rather than including everyone in their boundaries, they include only those who have voluntarily chosen to join. And rather than being defined by past tradition, they are governed by their members' religious experiences and their study of Scripture.

These communities of intentional Christians are in turn divided into two rather different groups. One is celibate, what we refer to as monastic, and the other is formed by married persons with families, what we have come to call intentional evangelical communities.

The story of the Christian monastic communities has been told by historians, and although there is much still to be learned, that story is well known and available to anyone. The story of the non-celibate evangelical communities, however, has been studied by few historians – most of them unfriendly and disapproving of these communities. The result has been a rather serious blind spot in our understanding of our common past.

This blind spot is not something that matters only to a few historians. It matters to all Christians because these small intentional communities have played a profound, formative role in making the Christian community what it is today. If we erase them from our memory we rob ourselves of important information we need to move into the future.

These intentional Christians have been those who throughout history have asked not “What must I do to be a Christian?” but “How can I be more Christian?” Although only a small percentage of Christians have asked that question, especially after Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe, these persons and the communities they have formed have influenced the development of Western civilization to an extent completely out of proportion to their numbers.

Up until the Reformation, celibate monastic communities had the greatest impact. They were the people who converted the pagan inhabitants of Europe to Christianity. They were the people who copied the Scriptures, and kept the learning of the past alive. They were the people who founded schools and hospitals. And they were the people who introduced the basic principles of democracy into society by electing their own leaders. They were the people who made manual labor respectable by including it in their daily lives. They were the people who taught us the meaning of time, by living disciplined lives governed by a schedule, and by inventing the clock that made such lives possible. Even the beginnings of the modern business corporation can be traced back to the medieval monasteries. Our whole way of life depends on things we now take for granted, things that were first introduced into society by the pre-Reformation monastic communities – especially the Benedictine monastic communities.

After the Reformation, the lay evangelical communities have been the great innovative force in Western civilization. These are the persons who wanted to go all the way, whatever the cost, who wanted to live as the apostles and the early Christians had – completely committed to following Christ in daily life, without compromise. These are the people whose stories I have studied, and in the process I have become convinced they are the ones who invented the future. They were the prophetic minority that opened the way forward into the world we now live in – a very different world than the one our ancestors lived in five hundred years ago.

Perhaps the greatest contribution these communities have made is evangelism. Wherever and whenever we encounter evangelicals, from the first century to the twenty-first, we find them preaching. We first find them traveling throughout the Roman Empire preaching wherever people would listen to them. In the centuries following we find them preaching to the indigenous peoples of northern Europe, once again wherever and whenever they could gather a crowd. In the medieval era we find them preaching in the churches – until they are expelled from the pulpit, and then we find them preaching in the streets, in the marketplaces, in the fields and in homes, in jails and in taverns. After the Reformation we find them preaching to huge crowds in the open fields.

To this day the vast majority of persons who enter the Christian community from outside do so through the efforts of evangelical Christians. This fact requires members of the institutional churches to ask who would

make membership in the Christian community possible for those now outside its boundaries if members of the evangelical churches did not do so? And, it forces all members of Western societies to ask what would have happened if the Christian community had not developed in a way that included persons from all social groups and all economic classes? Would our civilization have come to hold the egalitarian values that now characterize it if we had not learned those values from evangelical communities?

On the same level of importance is the role that evangelical communities have played in making the Scriptures available to everyone. This effort goes back to the centuries before the Reformation when the Waldensians in France, the Lollards in England, and the Brethren of the Common Life in the Netherlands first took steps to rescue the Scriptures from the clericalism of the priestly establishment. This devotion to the Scriptures has had an impact far beyond the religious realm. The increase in literacy that it has produced, and the empowerment of the Christian laity that has resulted from it, have both played a major role in the development of Western civilization. The fact that the first book printed with movable type in Europe was an edition of the Bible indicates the role that the demand for affordable copies of the Scriptures has played in the development of today's publishing industry.

Connected to this devotion to Scripture, and a direct result of it, has been a gradual but massive increase in the level of education available to members of Western societies. Throughout history, virtually every evangelical movement has offered education opportunities to people who would otherwise have remained illiterate, especially poor people. Today this process continues throughout the world. Thousands of evangelical Christians, both indigenous and those sent from other nations, are today patiently educating the poorest of the poor – which is often the same group they themselves came from.

We need to remember that the great majority of the most prestigious universities in Europe and the United States were originally founded as seminaries, or as schools intended to educate Christians to read and understand the Scriptures. These include Oxford and Cambridge in England, and Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the United States.

These great institutions are an example of another major contribution that the evangelical movements have made. Although these movements have typically placed the individual before the communal, they have in fact created large numbers of institutions – many of which are now important parts of the institutional church, as well as secular society. Evangelicals have quite likely produced more institutions per capita than the churches in the institutional tradition. The evangelical institutions tend to be smaller and more voluntary than those in the institutional churches, but what they lack in size or authority is often made up for in vitality and in the commitment of their members.

Finally, the role evangelical communities have played in making social justice and compassion major components of Western civilization is also

greatly underappreciated, both by present-day evangelicals and secular and religious historians. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, evangelical Christians in England took the lead in abolishing slavery. William Wilberforce, an English evangelical and political leader, introduced the first bill in the British Parliament to abolish slavery. A former slave ship captain who was converted and became an evangelical Anglican pastor – the author of *Amazing Grace* – also

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played a major role in enacting this great monument to human rights. In the United States evangelicals played a similar and equally significant role in the abolition of slavery.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evangelical Christians were in the forefront of political reform in the United States. An evangelical Christian, William Jennings Bryan, played a major role

in forming the present Democratic Party and in enacting several measures that have been essential to its success, including the direct election of senators and the establishment of an income tax.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s was led by a Baptist pastor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and will always stand as a monument to the major role that social justice has played in the African American churches, which tend to be overwhelmingly evangelical in their origins.

Equally significant, and equally ignored by most historians, is the role that evangelical Christians have played in the development of democracy. Just as the monastic movement introduced the ideas of elected leadership and elected representative government in the pre-Reformation period, evangelicals have been pioneers in introducing the principle of human rights into the Western political tradition. The exact role that evangelical beliefs regarding religious liberty and freedom of association have played in the development of democracy remains to be explored by historians, but these beliefs have surely played a significant and perhaps decisive role. Only a few highly motivated people will risk their lives, and the well-being of their families, to challenge deeply entrenched social and political structures. Had a significant number of people in Western Europe not been willing to do so in the sixteenth century, it is difficult to imagine how democracy could have emerged as the dominant political belief throughout the Western world. And the people who did so were the evangelical Christians of their time – the Anabaptists of northern Europe and the Puritans of England.



What can we learn from our evangelical past that will enable us to make these same kind of contributions in the conditions we and our children and our grandchildren will experience in the century (and the millennium) just begun? During the more than forty years I have studied these groups, both monastic and evangelical, I have come to the conclusion that there are a few basic features which all these groups have in common and which have permanent relevance.

*A sense of calling:* These people did not ask what would make them popular, but what they believed God, through the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, was calling them to do.

*A willingness to act without support:* These people did not ask for permission. Since they were motivated by the belief that they were called by a divine power, they began to act immediately. They did things everyone else believed were either impossible or misguided, but which often turned out to be prophetic, and thus beneficial to the entire society.

*A willingness to suffer:* These were people who did not ask what was easy. They asked instead what needed to be done, and were willing to undergo all sorts of pain, ridicule, loneliness, and even outright persecution to get it done.

*Persistence:* Often these persons and their communities' greatest impact has come decades and even centuries later. They did not need to be rewarded by immediate and observable success. Their reward was their sense that they were doing God's will.

*Community formation:* Although these groups always originated in the personal experiences of the individuals who founded them, they usually ended up forming communities that outlasted founding members and thrived later on.

*A combination of spirituality and discipleship:* Nothing is more characteristic of these groups than their unshakable belief that spirituality and discipleship are two sides of a single coin – that one cannot be truly spiritual in the Christian sense without putting one's faith into practice, and that one cannot sustain real Christian discipleship without a deep and prayerful spirituality.

*Culture formation:* Since these groups saw Christianity as a way of life, not merely a formal religion, they eventually became involved in every aspect of human life. As a result, they changed the societies around them, as well as the cultures that transmit the fundamental values of any society.



So long as the gospel is preached, more or less faithfully, there will be those who find themselves wanting to act on what they have heard – who will want to go all the way, who will want to follow Christ without compromise, who will find themselves asking, "What can I do to be a more faithful follower

of Christ? I don't want to hold anything back." Of course, not everyone who hears the gospel proclaimed will ask these questions. But, even those who do not will be challenged by their sisters and brothers in Christ who do ask and will become better Christians by being challenged by their more fervent fellow believers.

Just as we all sing better when led by someone whose musical gifts are greater than our own, and who has spent years learning and practicing, so we find our sense of what it means to be a Christian enriched when we see other Christians living at levels of discipleship and spirituality that we had not thought possible. Many of us have heard the question, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" and wondered secretly what the answer would be. And so, when we see other Christians living at a higher degree of intentionality than we had thought possible we react with hope. "If they can, why can't we?" we ask.

There is a reason there are Christian communities on both sides of the river, this river of grace which feeds us all. We need large institutional churches because the vast majority of Christians will not be able to live highly intentional lives. And we need celibate monasteries both to keep us connected to our pre-Reformation heritage and to provide an honored place for those not called to marriage.

Above all we need something that does not now exist – places where those called to greater intentionality can connect with others who have received the same call, and where together they can give each other the support needed to carry out that call.

My experience writing *Follow Me* was one of great grace, and when I neared the end these words came to me. I share them with all my fellow Christians, of all traditions, as my deepest conviction:

The Church needs its Evangelicals.  
The Evangelicals need their Church.  
The world needs both.

## NOTE

† Ivan J. Kauffman, *Follow Me: A History of Christian Intentionality*, New Monastic Library: Resources for Radical Discipleship (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009). This article is adapted from my book.

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