



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Evangelicals and Monastics
(*Monasticism Old and New*,
pp. 26-32)

Suggested Article:

📖 Old Monasteries for New
Generations
(*Monasticism Old and New*,
pp. 52-59)

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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Evangelicals and Monastics

Could any two groups of Christians—evangelicals and monastics—be more different? But the New Monasticism movement has opened a new chapter in the relations of these previously estranged groups. Nothing is more characteristic of monastics and evangelicals than their unshakable belief that one cannot be truly spiritual without putting one's faith into practice, and one cannot sustain Christian discipleship without a prayerful spirituality.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:161-168

Meditation[†]

Modern society has the idea that if you want to live a truly spiritual life, you have to leave life as we know it and go away by yourself and 'contemplate,' and that if you do, you will get holy. It is a fascinating although misleading thought. The Rule of Benedict says that if you want to be holy, stay where you are in the human community and learn from it. Learn patience. Learn wisdom. Learn unselfishness. Learn love. Then, if you want to go away from it all, then and only then will you be ready to do it alone.

Joan Chittister, OSB

Reflection

The New Monasticism movement—emerging from within the American evangelical community yet deeply connected to the monastic tradition reaching back to the early centuries of Christianity—may seem like an odd hybrid. But to Ivan Kauffman, it makes perfect sense. That is because he takes a long view of Christian history, looking beyond the trees to see the forest.

Imagine a river cutting through that forest. On one side of the river Kauffman sees the "institutional church" with hierarchical institutions housed in imposing buildings. Historically it has been centered in Rome and Constantinople. But on the other side of the river he sees many small, self-governing communities of intentional Christians. "Rather than including everyone in their boundaries, they include only those who have voluntarily chosen to join," he notes. "And rather than being defined by past tradition, they are governed by their members' religious experiences and their study of Scripture." Of these intentional communities, some are celibate monastic, others are lay evangelical.

Kauffman identifies a few basic features that all of these intentional Christian groups, both monastic and evangelical, share.

- ▶ *A sense of calling and willingness to act without support.* Accepting the tasks they thought God, through Scripture and the Holy Spirit, was calling them to do, these groups did not wait for cultural approval or official support. Kauffman says, "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 and remarkable persistence.* "They asked what needed to be done, and were willing to undergo all sorts of pain,



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ridicule, loneliness, and even outright persecution to get it done," he writes. Sometimes the fruit of their work was evident only decades or centuries later.

- ▶ *Community formation.* Deeply shaped by experiences of their founders, these groups usually formed communities that outlasted their founding members and thrived later on.
- ▶ *Spiritual discipleship.* "Nothing is more characteristic of these groups than their unshakable belief... 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.* Viewing discipleship as a way of life, "they eventually became involved in every aspect of human life... [transforming] the societies around them, as well as the cultures that transmit the fundamental values of any society."

Because these intentional Christians, monastic and evangelical, "do not ask 'What must I do to be a Christian?' but 'How can I be more Christian?'" Kauffman concludes, "these persons and their communities have influenced Western civilization to an extent completely out of proportion to their numbers."

Study Questions

1. "Up until the Reformation, celibate monastic communities had the greatest impact," Kauffman says. "After the Reformation, the lay evangelical communities have been the great innovative force in Western civilization." Discuss his view.
2. Heidi Hornik describes the earliest surviving complete, but idealized, plan for a monastery in St. Gall, Switzerland. What does the plan suggest about the complexity of monastic communities, and their roles in the wider society?
3. Do you agree with Ivan Kauffman that the seven basic features shared by all intentional Christian communities have permanent relevance to our discipleship? Which features does your congregation best exhibit?
4. According to the meditation by Joan Chittister, how can intentional communities be crucibles for holiness? Discuss how your congregation is forming you in the traits she mentions.

Departing Hymn: "Come, All Who Bear the Name of Christ"

Come, all who bear the name of Christ,
the work of prayer is ours to do;
God's image borne in each of us
shines brighter, working to renew.

We praise the Holy Three in One,
our God, who sits enthroned on high;
the Lord draws near to hear our praise,
and moves our hearts t'ward unity.

Amber Inscore Essick (2010)

Tune: OLD 100TH

† Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 33.

Evangelicals and Monastics

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore some historical similarities between monastic and evangelical intentional communities in Church history.
2. To sketch the significant contributions of intentional Christian communities, monastic and evangelical, to the Church and society.
3. To allow the ideals of these intentional Christian communities to challenge and inspire our own discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 and suggested article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "Come, All Who Bear the Name of Christ" is sung to the familiar melody OLD 100TH, which can be found in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

The connection between the evangelical and monastic traditions is deeply personal for Ivan Kauffman. "I grew up in the evangelical community in the 1940s and 50s," he writes. "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."

His research into evangelical origins over more than forty-five years convinced him "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." In this study, he helps us glimpse the whole forest. (*Monasticism Old and New*, pp. 26-27)

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 appreciate the big patterns of God's work through the entire sweep of the Church.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:161-168 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

Often we respond to new or unfamiliar products, people, or institutions by comparing them to things we know and highlighting their salient differences. Thus the New Monasticism movement may seem strange (in differing ways) when we approach it from an evangelical, a traditional monastic, or an institutional church perspective. Ivan Kauffman's sweeping overview of Church history helps us get our bearings and appreciate these new monastic groups by emphasizing their *similarities* with other Christian groups, especially the post-Reformation evangelical intentional communities. Yet, just as many Christians today are returning to ancient resources of the faith, the new monastic groups respect and learn from classic monastic traditions stretching back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. All Christian monastics, classic and new, draw inspiration from those faithful followers who honored God's *torah* (law) by ordering their daily work around God's praise (Psalm 119:164).

Study Questions

Create two small groups – one to list the contributions to Church and society by celibate monastic communities, and the other to list the contributions by lay evangelical communities. They should begin by reviewing Ivan Kauffman's evidence for these contributions in "Evangelicals and Monastics," but feel free to add other contributions they know about.

Due to space limitations, Kauffman's evidence for the contributions of monastic and evangelical intentional communities could not be summarized in the study guide. His comparative judgment of their impact, pre- and post-Reformation, is a "for the most part" generalization. Notice that he emphasizes the contributions of lay evangelical groups because "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."

1. "The size and complexity of the plan reflect the importance of monasteries as centers of learning and self-sufficiency" in the ninth century, Heidi Hornik writes in "Old Monasteries for New Generations." Daily activities of farming, animal husbandry, food preparation, and skilled craftsmanship revolve around worship in the great church. Areas for hospitality to the poor, the infirm, and travelers are integrated into the village. "The only significant addition to the plan of St. Gall Abbey in later monasteries was the chapter house, or daily meeting room... [that] provided a location for the monks to carry out the communal discernment prescribed in the third chapter of Saint Benedict's *Rule*: 'Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon.'"
2. Divide members into groups to brainstorm one or two of the basic features of intentional Christian communities. Ask each group to respond to two questions: Is the feature a winsome ideal that is transferable to all Christian groups? If so, how well does their congregation exhibit the feature? Encourage members to see monastic and evangelical intentional communities not as competing alternatives to their congregational life, but as sources of inspiration and guidance for their congregation's reflective discipleship.
3. Joan Chittister states a theme that runs through Benedictine spirituality: we become holy not by retreating from others, but by immersing ourselves in a reflective community where our daily work becomes a prayer of devotion to God. We have many opportunities to learn patience, wisdom, unselfishness, and love, as the inescapable menial tasks, bothersome colleagues, and necessary schedules are redeemed. That's the ideal, anyway, for monastic communities. Invite members to use this ideal to measure and improve their congregations.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.