

Year at a Glance	
Nov 9-Dec 14	Early Church Age
Jan 4-Feb 8	Post-Nicene Age
Feb 15-Mar 22	Medieval Age
Mar 29-May 10	Reformation Age
May 17-May 31	Great Awakening to Today

Post-Nicene Age	
January 4 – February 8	
Date	Topic & Reading
Jan 4	"The Conversion of the Empire" (chapter 9)
Jan 11	"The Doctrine of the Trinity" (chapter 10) "Christ in the Creeds" (chapter 11)
Jan 18	"The Beginnings of Monasticism" (chapter 12)
Jan 25	"Augustine" (chapter 13)
Feb 1	"The Beginnings of the Papacy" (chapter 14)
Feb 8	"Eastern Orthodoxy" (chapter 15) "Mission to the Barbarians" (chapter 16)

**Assigned Reading:** [Bruce Shelley, Church History in Plain Language, Word Publishing 1996](#)

In last week's class, we walked through one of the most decisive seasons in Christian history (the fourth and fifth centuries) when the church was compelled to define clearly who God is and who Jesus Christ is. From the Council of Nicaea (325) to the Council of Chalcedon (451), the church labored carefully and courageously to confess the **doctrine of the Trinity** and the **full deity of Christ**. **These were not academic debates detached from life; they were matters of worship, salvation, and faithfulness to Scripture.** We saw how early misunderstandings of the Trinity fell into opposite errors, either dividing the Godhead (subordinationism) or collapsing the persons into one (modalism), until the church, through Scripture, confessed that **God is one essence existing eternally as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

We then examined the rise of **Arianism** and why it spread so rapidly. Arius taught that the Son was a **created being, exalted, but not eternal**, and the controversy exploded across the Roman world. Into this storm stepped **Athanasius**, who, though young and politically vulnerable, refused to surrender the confession that the Son is of the same essence (homoousios) with the Father. His long life of exile, slander, and suffering demonstrated that the deity of Christ is not a theoretical issue but the very heart of the gospel: only God can save, only God is worthy of worship, and only an eternal Son can reconcile sinners to the Father.

Finally, we considered why these ancient debates still matter for us today. The doctrine of the Trinity guards the truth of our salvation, shapes our worship, and anchors our understanding of who God is. A diminished Christ cannot save, and a confused God cannot be trusted. **The church's confession of one God in three persons and of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man remains the foundation of Christian faith, hope, and life.**

## THE BEGINNING OF MONASTICISM

*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?—Matthew. 6:24-25*

What comes to mind when you think of a monk?

### I. Monasticism defined<sup>1</sup>

- A. Greek term is “*monachos*.” Probably first meant “celibate” or “single”
- B. Represented total withdrawal from the world
- C. Probably emerged in Egypt and Syria in the late 3rd century with the Hermits and spread to a very dominate position by the 5th and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries
- D. Tremendous development in the Middle Ages
- E. Took one of three basic approaches:
  - 1. Anchorite (*out in the bush*) - a monk by himself
  - 2. **Cenobite** (*communal life*) - many monks together
  - 3. Stylite (*pole*) – a monk living on a pillar

### II. Monasticism's roots

- A. Roots within the church
  - 1. Biblically
    - a. Paul's commendation of a celibate life (1 Cor. 7)
    - b. The expectation of the return of the Lord
    - c. Jesus' words that in the kingdom people do not marry
    - d. The Rich Young Ruler (influenced Antony)

<sup>1</sup> These notes are compiled mainly from the following sources: the lectures of Prof. James Stitzinger (TMS 1996); the lectures of Dr. Michael Vlach (TMS 2006); lectures of Dr. David Calhoun (Covenant Seminary 1999); *Sketches from Church History*, S.M. Houghton; *Church History in Plain Language*, Bruce Shelley; *The Story of Christianity, vol. 1*, Justo Gonzalez; *Lectures on Medieval Church History*, Richard Trench; *Monks and Mystics*, Mindy and Brandon Withrow; *Charts of Church History*, Robert Walton.

- e. "Take no thought of what you shall eat or drink" (influenced Antony)
- f. Jesus had no place to lay his head
- g. Mary's place was better than Martha's
- h. Jesus sent his disciples out to preach without gold or silver (Matt. 10:7-10) (influenced Francis of Assisi, mendicant who joined poverty with preaching)
- i. OT testament figures like Elijah and the school of prophets

## 2. Culturally

- a. During **the first three centuries the church suffered periods of severe persecution**. Spirituality began to be associated with suffering, sacrifice and, especially, martyrdom.
- b. During periods of peace in the second and third centuries some began to view the church as growing **complacent and worldly**.
- c. When persecution rose again after periods of peace (like the Diocletian persecution) many in the church proved too weak.
- d. This led some in the church to view security and comfortable living as the greatest enemies of the church.
- e. It is no wonder then that monasticism exploded in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries as the church became favored by the state.
  - 1) The persecuted were now in the position to persecute—Theodius' edict in 380 AD (Shelley, pp. 96-97).
  - 2) The narrow way was now the broad way.
  - 3) The ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom was not an option.
- f. Also, the cities began to be considered sinful and distracting.

## B. Roots outside the church

- 1. Many, wishing to follow the Platonic ideal, were led to lives of asceticism (e.g., Origen).
- 2. While Gnosticism had been officially rejected by the church, its influence was still broadly felt.

3. ***Stoicism***, very widespread at the time, held that passions are the enemy of true wisdom, and that the wise devote themselves to the perfection of the soul and subjugation of the body's passions.
4. Other philosophies at the time held to a similar notion.
5. Several ***non-Christian religions*** at the time included sacred virgins, celibate priests, eunuchs, and others whose lifestyle set them apart for the service of the gods (Gonzalez, pp. 137-38).

### III. Early Monastic Leaders

#### A. Antony (251-356)

1. In Egypt (an **Anchorite**); had well-to-do Christian parents
2. Heard in the Church, "If you want to be perfect, go sell all you have" and "Don't worry about tomorrow" (Matt. 19:21; 6:34).
3. Crossed the Nile and learned the monastic life from an old hermit (*at age 20*).
4. Later lived in a tomb, then in an abandoned fort for 25 years; then went into further seclusion by Red Sea Mountains.
5. **However, couldn't get away from followers who sought him for instruction and healing.**
6. Had classic struggles with demons (kids would later play "monks and demons").
7. Slept on the ground, ate bread and water, and fasted a lot; said the immortal spirit doesn't have to eat, there is immortal food.
8. Visited Alexandria on two occasions: once to seek martyrdom during the Diocletian persecution; later to put down the rumor that he had sided with the Arians.
9. Barely literate yet left us eight extant letters.
10. ***The Life of Anthony*, by Athanasius became a "best seller."** Was influential in the conversion of Augustine.



11. Not everybody has been quite so positive about his actions. The historian Gibbons said, “It was an awful waste for a man like Antony to spend his life living in the desert.”

12. Anchorites, like Antony, frowned on the possession of books, went for years without taking communion, began to view themselves as holier than the bishops of the established church, and some sadly “became the pawns of others of more education, power, and cunning, who used the zeal of the desert hosts to their own ends” (Gonzalez, p. 143).

13. “Some ate nothing but grass, while others lived in trees. Still others refused to wash” (Shelley, p. 118).

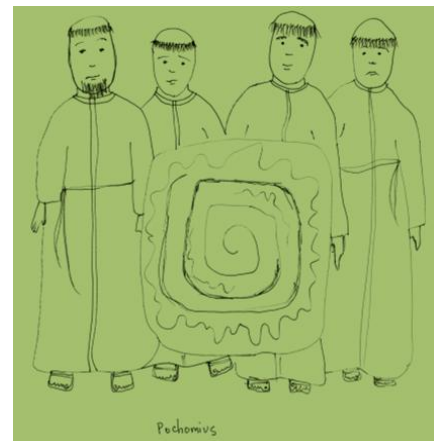
➤ Stories about the desert fathers

- Two monks who forget to eat lunch
- Monk who asks if there is enough faith to say let this mountain be thrown into the sea

B. Pachomius (286-346) and Basil

1. Credited pioneer of **cenobitic** (*communal life*) monasticism (in Egypt).

2. **Basil** of Cappadocia (330-379) **learned about monasticism through Pachomian communities**, either directly or through their reputation and structure.



3. Even though he very much approved of the monastic lifestyle, he said, “How can a person test his humility when he has no one to whom he can show himself the inferior? It is very hard to be humble all by yourself, out in the middle of the desert. But if there are other people around then you can be. If the Lord washed the feet of the disciples, whose feet will you wash?”

1. Raised pagan; taken from home and forced to join the army.
2. Was impacted by Christians who came to console him.
3. When released from the army, studied under an aged anchorite.
4. Had visions in which an **angel** told him that he was to serve mankind.
5. **Established a society of monks along the Nile—9 monasteries.**

6. His sister, **Mary**, founded similar communities for women.
7. Monasteries had hierarchal order—self-sufficient complexes.
8. The monastery complex had a **wall** around it that signified the idea of separation from the world.
9. By the fourth century monasteries were established in the Christian East, particularly in regions of Syria and Asia Minor.
- 10. Prayer without ceasing was the model; daily memory of Scriptures.**
- 11. People were called “athletes of God.”**
12. Those who wished to join were forced to spend several days and nights at the gate begging to get in (in order to prove their resolve).
13. Surprisingly, **many of the candidates who appeared at the gates had to be catechized and baptized once they were admitted, since they were not Christians.**

B. Symeon or Simeon (390-459)

1. He was a Stylite called “Simeon the Stylite” or pillar saint.
2. Stylite - “An ascetic who lived permanently on the top of a natural or artificial pillar.”
3. Fairly common until the 10th century.
4. As an early shepherd boy, he heard the beatitudes and then lived in monasteries for 20 years with a heavy chain on his leg.
5. Then in 423, he built a pillar 70 feet high and lived on it for 36 years.
6. Small hut or platform to protect him from the rain.
7. There was a **wall around the pillar to keep women from coming up.**
8. Food sent up by disciples who gathered at the base
9. Preached to the crowds below twice a day
10. Many made pilgrimages to see this sight.





11. A follower was Daniel the Stylite—lived on top of two pillars for 33 years until the age of 84. He came down only once to reprimand an emperor.
12. Simeon the younger, 592—spent 68 years on a pillar—ate once a week.

## II. Western Monasticism

A. Soon the monastic movement became popular in the western church.

1. By the fifth century monasteries existed in Italy, Spain, and Gaul.
2. Augustine established two monasteries in North Africa between 400-425.
  - a. He believed monastic communities were necessary for the realization of the Christian ideal of love.
  - b. Intellectual activity and spiritual study were to take place.

B. The rise of the Cloister

1. Definition: “Clergy-house,” “closed off place”
2. The word had a general meaning into the 14th century in England when “Cloister” and “Convent” became parallel terms. The main idea was seclusion from the world. **Note:** A convent was originally a “meeting or association of men for some purpose.” Historically it has been applied to the living place of the religious of either sex. It tends now to be restricted to houses of nuns.
3. Became important centers of learning.

C. Benedict of Nursia (480-543)

1. Born in Rome. He was offended by the corrupt society of fallen Rome – renounced the world at age 14.
  - *He spent three years in a cave south of Rome where he studied the Scriptures and practiced extreme self-denial, until a neighboring monastery asked him to be their spiritual leader. However, strict discipline resulted in him narrowly escaping death when the monks tried to poison him (Shelley, p. 121). This made him a wiser man as seen in his Rule.*



2. Established a monastery at Monte Cassino (near Rome; blown up by the Americans during WWII).
3. The Benedictine Rule (wrote in 540 AD)
  - a. Sought to order monastic life with strict discipline, but without undue harshness. Two meals a day; wine every day; cover and a pillow.
  - b. He starts this way: “Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the expressible delight of love.”
  - c. The rule was regulated by prayer, reading, and work.
  - d. Two crucial elements:
    - 1) *Permanence* – Cannot leave monastery at will.
    - 2) *Obedience* – Full authority and responsibility is given to the Abbot of each monastery—absolute obedience.
  - e. The “Divine Office” – prayer seven times during the day and once in the middle of the night. Recitation of Psalms and other Scriptures
  - f. Physical labor shared by all
  - g. Possessions are held in common; no particular vow of poverty
  - h. The rule provided for a federation of independent monasteries rather than a religious order.
4. By the 9th century Benedictine Rule had superseded all others. Formed the basis of a new Order of Monks. This Benedictine Order lasted until the Reformation when it was suppressed and did not revive until after 1830 in the U.S. and Europe.

D. Other monastics we will look at later

1. Columba (6<sup>th</sup> century)



2. The Venerable Bede (673-735) – Father of English history
3. Cluny & the Cluniacs
4. Cistercians
5. Mendicant Orders - 13th century orders that were supported by gifts.
  - a. Franciscans (1210)
  - b. Dominicans (1216)
  - c. Carmelites (1247)
  - d. Augustinians (1256)
6. Military Orders
  - a. Knights Templar (1119) -- extremely wealthy
  - b. Knights Hospitaler (1190) -- hospital activity
  - c. Teutonic Knights (1189) -- Of German Origin; governing

### III. Analysis

#### A. Benefits of Monasticism (*viewed in light of God's sovereignty*)

- a) Constant Prayer – Largely through the Psalms, day and night.
- b) Preservation of the Scriptures. As Europe plunged into the Middle Ages, the monasteries became the centers for the protection and reproduction of the Scriptures. Because the monks had plenty of undisturbed time on their hands they were able to undertake the laborious and time-consuming task of copying the Scriptures by hand.
- c) Service to the poor and sick; alms-bearers
- d) Missionaries to England, Germany, Scandinavia, etc.
- e) The monasteries became the centers for education. Not only did the monks copy the Scriptures, but they also read and copied great works from antiquity. This preservation of learning was important later on since it was from the monasteries that many of the Reformers received their initial education and were first exposed to both the Scriptures and the Greek and Hebrew behind them. Most Christian theologians of the Medieval Era were members of monastic communities or had close connections with them.

- f) The dignity of labor – “Immense was the gain when the Benedictines gave a religious consecration to the cultivation of the earth by the linking of this with prayer and the reading of Scripture, effectually and forever redeeming this labour from the dishonor which slavery in the old world had impressed on an occupation which was then regarded as the proper business of slaves” (Trench, p. 105).
- g) The monks were devoted not only to prayer but also to learning and good works, and their monasteries became centers of light and education as darkness spread across Europe, preserving knowledge especially in places like Ireland through figures such as Saint Patrick. The Benedictines summarized their mission as coming “with a cross, with a book, and with a plow,” preaching Christ, teaching Scripture, and advancing agriculture and civilization. Their life of charity was embodied in Benedict’s rule: “Every guest who comes to the monastery shall be received as if he were Christ himself.”

## 2. Negatives of Monasticism

- a) Christ against Culture
- b) Separation of the church into the *secular* and *religious* Christians (Reformers would later speak of the sanctity of all callings)
  - The laymen stayed on the ground while “godly” leaders were on pillars –or away from the world
- c) The soteriological *emphasis* was taken off grace and put squarely on the back of works. **Monasticism often drifted toward a works-based view of salvation.** Although elements of grace appear in Benedict’s Rule, the dominant emphasis fell on doing good works to attain the kingdom, and that emphasis effectively shaped the theology. This tendency was strongly resisted by Augustine, whose doctrine of grace faced its greatest opposition from monastic communities, especially the semi-Pelagian movement that arose in the monasteries of Southern Gaul.
- d) Separation of families and the sexes: which too often led to moral evils (prostitution, illegitimate births, abortions, and infanticide). *Compromises the image of God in man and women together.*
  - What benefit might have been had if these men and women would have communed within local churches? Monasticism misunderstood the doctrine of the corporate indwelling of the Spirit; the importance of living in the community of the local church under the direction of Elders. What would have happened if Matt 18 and such scriptures were applied rather than withdrawal?
- e) Separation from the world in the extreme (Matt. 5:16)

- f) In some cases separation from communion (Anchorites) and from the word of God (some orders disallowed owning a book).
  - g) Temptation of fame
  - h) “To me it seems undeniable that so soon as ever the better moral forces, which even at the beginning were not the only ones, began to ebb, there sprung out of the Monastic system mischiefs the most enormous” (Trench, p. 104).
  - i) **Monasticism is not first a theological error. It is a human reflex. The gospel confronts it not by lowering devotion, but by redefining where true holiness is found.**
  - j) In what ways might we ourselves have monastic tendencies? (see **Appendix**)
- Be careful not to dismiss this as “Roman Catholic” or “Orthodox” history. This is our history—the good, the bad and the ugly.

“The whole medieval Church, with its grand features of devotion, of heroic self-sacrifice, with all its strivings after the highest, and then this same with its terrible aspects of evil, of evil which has often seemed as if it were inextricably bound up with its very existence, is a constant perplexity to the student who takes history in earnest, who is not satisfied with merely knowing that such and such things have been, but would fain know also why they have been, and to what ends they served; above all is it a mystery and a perplexity to him who regards the Church as a divine institution for good, and only for good, in the world. Some, attracted and awed by the noble aspects which the Church in those ages presents, have resolutely shut their eyes to all which was otherwise in it, have fallen down and worshipped, counting all succeeding ages a declension from ages of faith which have forever passed away. Others, repelled and shocked by the frightful mischiefs of those times, have had no eye except for those mischiefs, and have refused to believe any good about them at all” (ibid., p. 103).

“What can we say to these things? What indeed but briefly this, namely, that He who is the King of Ages does in each age for His Church the best which the moral materials He has at command will admit. Men are free agents, with the choice therefore of working for God or working against Him. He who has willed to be served only by the free can only use the materials which He finds, whether these are absolutely the best or not. He will give partial allowance to much which is very far from being according to his perfect and highest will, shows Himself the one supreme and absolute Workmaster, in that with materials and instruments so imperfect He brings about his purposes, making all things and, in one way or other, all men to serve Him; not suffering the evil which may have mingled with his good to defeat it; but rather causing the good to operate so effectually as often to rob what was not good of its worst power to harm” (ibid., p. 107; cp. *Monks and Mystics*, Withrow, pp. 13-14).

**Homework:** Read Chapter 13 (“Augustine”)

## APPENDIX: Modern Forms of Protestant “Monasticism”

Here are several ways in which monastic impulses may show up among us today. You do not need to agree with every example listed, as the purpose is not to accuse but to help us think carefully about our own tendencies toward asceticism, separation, and a higher life view of Christian faithfulness.

### What Is Meant by “Monasticism”

- Medieval monasticism involved withdrawal from ordinary life to pursue *holiness through discipline and separation*.
- More fundamentally, monasticism is the belief that certain lifestyles, practices, or callings place a believer on a *higher spiritual* plane.
- While Protestantism rejected monastic orders, the underlying impulse can still appear in modern forms.
- The danger arises when *ordinary* Christian faithfulness is viewed as insufficient.

### Higher Life or Next Level Christianity

- Language that divides believers into ordinary Christians and truly serious Christians.
- Focus on elite discipleship tracks, intensives, retreats, or radical commitments.
- Ordinary means of grace are subtly minimized.
- Mirrors monasticism by creating tiers of spirituality.

### Elevated Callings and Radical Obedience

- Missions and ministry viewed as holier than ordinary vocations.
- Renunciation valued more than presence and perseverance.
- Ordinary work, parenting, and civic life subtly downgraded.
- Echoes medieval assumptions about monks versus common laborers.

### Spiritual Minimalism and Ascetic Tendencies

- Virtue measured by what one has given up.
- Suspicion of comfort, beauty, or enjoyment.
- Simplicity becomes a marker of righteousness rather than stewardship.
- Asceticism appears without vows.

### Christian Subculture and Separation

- Creation of Christian only media, education, and social systems.
- Emphasis on protecting purity by withdrawal rather than cultivating discernment.
- Tendency to locate holiness in environment rather than in the heart.
- Becomes monastic when separation is treated as inherently more spiritual than engagement.

### **Conference and Celebrity Christianity**

- Special events treated as places where real spiritual renewal happens.
- Pilgrimage like expectation of transformation through atmosphere or personality.
- Emotional intensity valued over long term faithfulness.
- Spiritual vitality is sought somewhere else rather than in ordinary obedience.

### **The Reformation Correction**

- The Reformers did not reject discipline or seriousness.
- They rejected the idea that God is more pleased with extraordinary obedience than with ordinary faithfulness.
- As Martin Luther famously expressed it, changing diapers in faith is holier than fasting in pride.
- God is glorified in ordinary callings lived unto Him.

Where have you seen monastic tendencies in your own life or thinking, and what additional examples would you add to this list?