



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 12 – The Origins and Spread of Monasticism

Not all Christians agreed with Eusebius of Caesarea that the church under Constantine was stronger than it had been in the days of persecution. In their view, the bishops were becoming more interested in prestige and advancing their position than in the spiritual condition of their flocks. The standards for membership seemed to be lower than before. Those who were supposed to be followers of Christ seemed to be no different from others in their beliefs and in their lives.

Therefore, some who wanted to be sincere followers of Christ made the mistake of choosing a kind of self-persecution instead of simply confessing Christ and enduring the consequences. According to Scripture, marriage is something that has God's approval. Even bishops were expected to be married like Peter. The apostle Paul, although he himself was unmarried, did not insist that others follow his example, but encouraged young widows to get married and young men to get married rather than burn with passion. Jesus did not follow the outward way of life of John the Baptist, but He mixed freely with all kinds of people in the world. He told His disciples that they were *in* the world but not *of* the world. Paul said that people would have to leave the world altogether if they wanted to avoid sinners (1 Corinthians 5:10).

But some early Christians, such as Origen, went to extreme lengths to punish their bodies and deprive themselves of ordinary human comforts. When the persecution came to an end, some Christians believed that it was necessary for them to separate themselves from the wicked world by living the solitary life without marriage, without possessions, and without external temptations. Greek philosophy also had an influence on their thinking, since it was widely believed that the body was the prison of the soul, and that the body must be controlled by following ascetic principles, that is, by following severe self-discipline and severe self-denial.

Two of the earliest men who practiced the solitary life were a man named Paul and a man named Anthony. Paul is supposed to have lived by himself in the Egyptian desert, devoting himself to prayer, sustaining himself by eating dates, and enjoying almost no human company at all for days and weeks on end. Anthony had wealthy parents, but he gave everything away to live in the Egyptian desert, living on the bread that others gave him from time to time. Since others came to consult him at times, Anthony moved further into the desert to get away from all others. Only seldom did Anthony leave his desert surroundings.

In the last years of his life there were other such hermits who lived with him and formed what was called a monastery. The residents were called monks.

Monks like Paul and Anthony were considered heroes of holiness by other Christians. Christian leaders like Jerome and Athanasius later praised the lives of such men. Thousands of Christians believed that the best kind of Christian life was to follow such hermits into deserted areas and imitate their habits. Some earned their living by planting gardens or weaving mats from reeds. They possessed as little as possible. They even considered books as an unnecessary luxury that contributed to pride of ownership. They wanted nothing to do with the busy lifestyle of priests and bishops who led the large urban congregations, taught the young, preached in large congregations, and visited the sick and weak. Since these hermits lived alone, it is obvious that they went for years without partaking of the Lord's Supper with their fellow-Christians. Despite their isolation, they were unable to avoid the temptations of Satan in the wilderness. In fact, many of them came to believe that since they lived outwardly "holier" lives than others, they were the ones who should be making the decisions on what was true teaching and godly living rather than the called servants of the Word. They were in danger of spiritual pride like the Pharisees.

It was not long before those living as solitary hermits saw an advantage in living together with other such monks in monasteries. One of the earliest monks to move from the solitary life to community life was Pachomius of Egypt. His first attempt at gathering others to live with him ended in failure, for the others failed to follow his rules and he had to expel them. In his second attempt, he succeeded. Those who wished to join him had to give up all their earthly goods and promise to obey their superiors. They all had to work with their hands and serve one another. Pachomius' sister Mary founded a similar community for women, and the women were called nuns. In a short time, there were many such communities, each with several hundred members.

The monk's days were devoted to work and prayer. They were able to sell some of their produce to obtain some income, but mostly they took care of their own needs. They ate more substantial meals than the solitary hermits. Each monastery had an abbot who was in charge, and his authority was absolute. The monks and nuns attended worship at nearby churches, or a priest would come to bring the Word and Sacrament to them in their monasteries or nunneries. Many who applied to live in these communities were not even baptized Christians nor instructed Christians, but they were attracted to the lifestyle, and they learned to know something about Christ in this way.

The monastic life became especially popular in Egypt. People from other areas visited the monasteries in Egypt and went back to their own lands to establish their own monasteries. Church leaders, such as Jerome and Athanasius, encourage people to do this. Athanasius often consulted monks regarding church work. Jerome himself became a very scholarly and influential monk. Some monks went to extremes, like those who spent their lives on top of

pillars, where they wanted to make a show of their piety. It is hard to imagine how such monks served God or other Christians by their actions.

The monk Martin of Tours was particularly influential in the spread of monasticism. His biography called *The Life of Saint Martin* became one of the most popular books among Christians for centuries. At a young age Martin became a catechumen contrary to his father's wishes. After he was baptized, he chose the monastic life. Because he was always giving away what he had to others, he was known as being "usually dirty, dressed in rags, and disheveled" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 148). Nevertheless, he was chosen to be a bishop, and even as a bishop he continued to live the monastic life. His example led many other church officials to abandon ordinary living in the world to become more monastic in their lifestyle.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to become a monk or nun and adopt the monastic life?
2. What does the apostle Paul teach about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7?
3. Why did Christians become hermits and live solitary lives in the desert?
4. Why did Christians consider the hermits Paul and Anthony especially holy?
5. Why is it true that such hermits and monks cannot escape sin?
6. What new way of life did Pachomius and his sister introduce and promote?
7. How did monks spend their time in the monasteries of that time?
8. In your opinion, why did the lifestyle of monks and nuns become popular?
9. In what ways does the monastic life pose a danger to true Christianity?
10. Is monastic life common in your part of the world? How is it carried on?
11. How would you discourage a friend from becoming a monk or nun?