

# *The Question of Monasticism*

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Monasticism: a life of seclusion or ascetic simplicity.<sup>1</sup>

Early in the third and fourth centuries the winds of change began to fill the sails of Christianity. With the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of the Christian Empire came great changes for the individual Christian. No longer was one's life in a state of constant threat. The swords of the Roman Guard remained in their sheath and the fires of the Coliseum have long since extinguished.

This new era of comfort and affluence birthed a new breed of Christian. This was a person who had freedom, peace, and the support of the governing power. Unfortunately, this person was also mired with indifference that was expressed through incredibly lukewarm faith. The church quickly began to see how its walls were being breached and its members being corrupted, something had to be done. The solution presented at the time was Monasticism. As the immorality of the nominal believers increased, so did the righteous hunger of the true body.

Yet, perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. Constantine's conversion may have resulted in the official Monastic Movement, but it was a long followed lifestyle that was simply pushed to the surface in his day. There are documents dating as far back as 140 AD that purport the dichotomy of a lower and higher morality in regards to the believer's life,<sup>2</sup> and this was truly the foundation for the monastic calling. The Monastics themselves had to cease the endless trials of the lower way in this world, and embark upon a new path – a path considered to be the higher way. Of course, the only means to truly live a life on the higher way was to remove yourself from the world altogether. This began through the individual, a person who would assume the life of a hermit. In order to do this, one must throw off the pleasures of this world, whether they are found in objects or people. Once “free” from that which binds, one can truly begin to live in a higher moral fashion. Yet, this wasn't required of everyone; this was for those who aspired to be more than an “ordinary Christian”. It was only a matter of time before this race of “extra-ordinary Christians” began to clan together

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<sup>1</sup> [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)

<sup>2</sup> Shelley pp.117

and form communities dedicated towards their mutual lifestyles; hence, the birth of the monastery.

Upon first glance, the pull that some must have felt towards this movement can be easily seen. Humans are always trying to induce righteousness through their own efforts. Yet, aside from that, even with such a limited overview of the Monastic lifestyle we can already easily observe some of its pitfalls.

As the Monastic movement continued on with great popularity it brought with it a sort of Christian class system, represented through this higher and lower path of righteousness. Martin Luther himself spoke out against this teaching, reminding people that Scriptures state there is only one path to salvation, and it is by faith alone in Jesus Christ. Not only did this confuse the issue of salvation, but it also brought division amongst the brothers and sisters of the present day church. Another obvious detriment to those who ascribe to this lifestyle is encapsulated beautifully in the following statement, “Temptations of the outer world were replaced by temptations of the inner world: pride, rivalry, and eccentricity”<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of all other factors, this one statement can be used to settle the entire issue of Monasticism within the church. When everything was said and done, the ultimate goal that this lifestyle was created to achieve was not being attained. Men would remove themselves from the objects of their undoing, but neglected to consider that these objects were mere symptoms of a far greater issue. That which was their greatest weakness was truly found within themselves. As they fled from wealth, people, and luxuries, they simply took away that which their sin was able to best express itself outwardly. Yet, in all this poverty and abstinence they neglected to deal with the true origin of their failures -Sin, an inward corruption. Now, as they live lives free of the world’s distractions and the Devil’s toys, their sin will only be expressed through different means.

In conclusion, we can see that when one wants to know more about the monastic lifestyle there are certainly many factors to consider. Its birth was of good intention, that much we know. People honestly longed to be set apart as unto the Lord. Yet, the means by which they sought to achieve this goal were not appropriate. As the Monastics burrowed deeper and deeper away from the society they were called to disciple they neglected the foundation of their Christian beliefs: righteousness that comes by faith – not by works!

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<sup>3</sup> Shelley pp. 118