

AN APPRAISAL OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM AND ITS  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY BAPTIST MINISTERS

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## ABSTRACT

Many movements have played significant roles in the history, development and stability of the church and Christianity in general. Christian monasticism is one of those earliest movements. For almost three decades, the church had lived under serious persecution by the Roman state. But the conversion of Emperor Constantine brought peace, tranquillity and wealth to the Church. It also brought along moral depravity corruption, laxity, and a mixed multitude. The Christians who could not stand this laxity took to the deserts and solitary places to seek deeper experience with God. These are the ones referred to as Christian monastics. The researcher is of the view that the church ministers of today can be enriched through a study of the lives of Christian monastics, hence this research. It is intended to draw lessons which can be of advantage to the present day church leaders, especially those of the Baptist persuasion. The researcher employs a historical survey of the movement right from its very beginning in the third century down to the middle ages. The study reveals the strong ideals and practices of the movement, which include disciplines of fasting, prayer, meditation, work, obedience, solitude, celibacy, poverty, scriptural preservation and exegesis. It was from the extremity of these ideals and practices that resulted in their criticisms; especially from the Protestant reformers. The study advocates a balanced position whereby contemporary Baptist ministers can appropriate the spiritual disciplines of Christian monasticism into their ministry for effectiveness, while avoiding the excesses associated with the practices as discussed in the study.

## 5.2 Conclusion

In over 2,000-year-old history of the Christian church, monasticism had a long period as a key means of expression. From its earliest manifestation in the fourth century, and by the sixth century when the Rule of Benedict was written, until the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, due to the Protestant reformation when the monasteries were suppressed in England and France, monasticism was often considered to be one of the highest forms of Christianity.

Stemming from this study, the writer is of the opinion that there are many positive principles that can be derived from the early Christian monastic movement by the contemporary ministers. Also, there are negatives that should be discarded because they cannot be scripturally affirmed. The monastic devotion, disciplines, ideals was of great importance in salvaging Christianity in the early century Christian era. The movement was an instrument of reforms and renewal of the Christian commitment. Church fathers such as Origen, Gregory, Augustine, Chrysostom, and many other great Christian leaders can be said to have been produced by this movement. They have also contributed to the formation of Christian cultures down the years, some of which are still been practiced till date by mainline Orthodox churches like the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, etc.

Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry exemplifies the spiritual disciplines of a minister. On many occasions, he retreated to the mountain or solitude to pray; he engaged in fasting for forty days and forty nights; he admonished that the would-be disciple must be ready to deny himself, carry his cross daily and follow him (Luke



9:23). However, he was always around the people, showing compassion to them, healing the sick, touching lives, relating the good news to perceived sinners such as tax collectors, publicans, Samaritans and gentiles.

Thus, a balance is advocated in this research for the contemporary Baptist minister. Spiritual disciplines that can make the ministry to be effective are encouraged while extreme legalistic tendencies, buffeting of the body, celibacy, self-abnegation and retreating permanently from the world should be avoided. Jesus and his disciples did not spend their lives permanently in solitary, secluded caves and deserts. He said "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). The apostles of the early church towed this direction. Their Christian lives, commitment and exploits were evident in the society to the extent that they were said to have turned the world upside down.

### 5.3 Recommendations

Having carried out a study on "An Appraisal of Early Christian Monasticism and Its Implications for the contemporary Baptist Ministers", the following recommendations are, therefore, given:

1. Ministerial training in the Baptist seminaries, colleges of theology, Bible colleges should be more spiritually inclined. The curriculum and the seminary program of activities should be well designed to fit this purpose.
2. The annual minister's conference should be a time of spiritual retreat for pastors. It should be less of business deliberations. This would be an avenue for ministers to regain spiritual vitality and strength for their ministerial assignments.
3. It is expedient that pastors have a time of personal or corporate spiritual retreat where they can reinvigorate and refuel for continuous ministry effectiveness.

4. It has also been observed that Baptist ministers have too many meetings to attend, thereby neglecting their spiritual responsibilities to the church. It is recommended that such meetings be reduced.
5. The Baptists have a culture of sound scriptural exposition and exegesis; this makes them to draw the appellation of 'the people of the book.' This culture needs to be revisited as Baptist ministers must ensure what is dished out on the pulpit is biblically sound.
6. Part of the distinctive and beliefs of Baptists are freedom and liberty of conscience; these should be practiced as believed rather than subjecting people to harsh rules and regulations, which may not have scriptural basis.