Monasticism and Christian Discipleship

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Christian discipleship is about following Jesus and being conformed or transformed to become more like Christ. This means patterning one’s life after his life. The New Testament sheds light on the implications of living as a disciple of Christ.  
Discipleship begins with a call\(^2\) and a response as the disciple embraces a new lifestyle of mutual love, service, and humility.  

2 Mk 1:16-20.  
also includes abiding in the Word⁴ and a willingness to take up one’s cross.⁵ Disciples are called to imitate Christ and love as Christ loved, and even suffer and die.

In the fifth century, Benedict of Nursia (circa 480 CE) developed Benedictine monasticism as a shared life of discipleship⁶ in a monastery under a rule and an abbot.⁷ Benedictine monks made vows of stability (a commitment to a specific community and place), obedience, and *conversation morum* (a continual conversion of heart). They followed the *Rule of Benedict*⁸ as a guide to give structure to a shared life and to support seeking God together. The abbot served as a shepherd and spiritual leader, holding “the place of Christ in the monastery.”⁹ Monks were expected to seek God eagerly and yearn for the work of God, or prayer. Obedience and hardships led them to God.¹⁰ Benedictine life was thus a journey of disciples on a “road leading to salvation”¹¹ in hopes of Christ leading “all together to everlasting life.”¹²

Christians today can journey in discipleship by following the example of Benedictine life. Benedictine monastic life is a practical way to live as a Christian disciple because it provides structures that support the person in following Christ with opportunities for conforming one’s life to the life of Christ. A continuing practice of seeking God creates the pattern of Christ in the heart and life of the disciple. This essay will explore four hallmarks of discipleship as described in the New Testament: 1) responding to a call, 2) abiding with Christ, 3) living in community with mutual love and service, and 4) taking up one’s cross and imitating Christ. These hallmarks will be applied to fifth century monastic life as described in the *Rule*, showing that Benedictine life is rooted in practices

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⁴ Jn 8:31.
⁵ Mk 8:34-35.
⁶ Benedict referred to his monks as disciples. See Rule of Benedict 2:6, 3:6, 5:9, 6:3-5, and 36:10.
⁷ Rule of Benedict 1:1 (Hereafter, RB).
⁸ Hereafter, the Rule.
⁹ RB 2:2.
¹⁰ RB 58:7-8.
¹¹ RB Prol. 48.
¹² RB 72:11.
that help the monastic disciple follow Christ in community.\textsuperscript{13} The essay will demonstrate that Benedictine monastic life is a conversion process that is effective in transforming the disciple to be more like Christ.

The first hallmark of Christian discipleship is the response to a call. In the New Testament, Jesus sought out and called people to follow him. While walking along the Sea of Galilee, he met the fishermen Simon and Andrew and invited them to follow him. The brothers immediately left their nets to accompany Jesus. Responding to the call of discipleship meant leaving behind one’s former way of life, often including family, work, and possessions.\textsuperscript{14} Christians in the early community in Jerusalem also relinquished everything in response to the call to discipleship. They held possessions in common, provided for the needs of the community, and felt great joy.\textsuperscript{15}

Benedictine monastic life similarly began with a call and response. The call came from God who actively and continually invited: “Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: \textit{Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?}”\textsuperscript{16} As a young man, Benedict heard and responded to this call to seek God, and like the first disciples he left everything behind “to please God alone.”\textsuperscript{17} Like Benedict, a newcomer to monastic life was also expected to renounce his possessions, keeping nothing for himself. This helped the monk learn to depend on the community for his needs and detach himself from expectations,\textsuperscript{18} freeing him to seek God. The monastic practice of sharing everything in common followed the example

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\textsuperscript{13} Given that this essay applies New Testament hallmarks of Christian discipleship to fifth century Benedictine life, terms such as abbot and monk are occasionally used here for conciseness and readability to describe early monastic communities. The use of such terms is not intended to be exclusive to men’s communities and should also be understood to apply to women’s Benedictine communities. The past tense is also used to describe fifth century life; this is not intended to be exclusive of contemporary monastics who strive to live as Christian disciples today.

\textsuperscript{14} Mk 1:16-18.


\textsuperscript{16} RB Prol. 14-15. Benedict is quoting Ps. 33 [34]:13.

\textsuperscript{17} Gregory, \textit{The Life of Saint Benedict}, trans. Terrence Kardong (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), 1.

\textsuperscript{18} RB 59:6.
of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Renunciation was a practical way of conforming one’s life to Christ and experiencing a change of heart.

A second hallmark of Christian discipleship is abiding with Christ. Jesus encouraged his disciples to abide in him, and he promised also that he would remain with them: “Abide in me as I abide in you . . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” To abide is to stay or remain; to make a home with another. Jesus chose to abide and make a home with humanity: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” When Jesus called his disciples, they left their homes to follow him, making their home with him wherever he went. Abiding involved remaining close to Jesus and is associated with prayer, for at the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked his disciples to remain with him, to keep watch, and to pray. Through being present to Jesus and listening to him, Jesus’ words came to abide within the hearts of his followers. Abiding in Christ resulted in bearing fruit, love, and joy.

In Benedictine monasteries of the fifth century, abiding with Christ happened in a variety of ways. Monastic life provided opportunities for community members to abide with the Word of God through regular communal prayer. Life was oriented around the rhythm of prayer. Monks gathered to chant and recite the psalms, listen to scripture, and sit in reverent silence. After community prayer, some members remained in the silence of the chapel for private prayer with “tears and heartfelt devotion.” They also encountered the Word by listening to scripture read aloud, and time was reserved each day for individual reading. These practices of daily close encounters with the Word were ways of remaining close and abiding with Christ. The practice of abiding with the

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20 Jn 15:4, 9.
21 Jn 1:14.
22 Mt 8:20.
23 Mt 26:36-39.
24 Jn 15:9-11.
26 RB 38, 42.
Word allowed scripture to seep into the hearts of community members, transforming them.

Abiding with Christ is also related to the concrete daily experience of recognizing and being present to Christ in other people. The Word is enfleshed in human beings, and Benedict encouraged his followers to see Christ in each other. Each person that one encountered became an opportunity to meet Christ and to be Christ for that person. Guests were received as Christ and welcomed with a bow or prostration so that “Christ may be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them.” Caring for the ill was a special opportunity to serve Christ. In communal monastic life, there was no shortage of opportunity for the members to meet Christ and be Christ for each other. Christ was always nearby, abiding within the community and among the members. These practices of being present with one another and striving to see Christ in one another incarnated a lifestyle of mutual love, service, and humility. This life was marked by joy and love, with the person’s heart expanding and “overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” Thus, abiding with the Word through prayer and community life led to transformation of the monastic disciple, leading to God’s kingdom.

Abiding with Christ leads to the third hallmark of Christian discipleship: a community with mutual love and service to one another. At the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated love, service, and humility to his disciples. He got up from the table, removed his garment, wrapped a towel around his waist and knelt to wash their feet. This was a menial task, given as an act of humility and of the love that he had for each of them. Jesus expected his disciples to love and serve one another in the same manner, and he gave them a new commandment: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

28 RB 53:1, 7.
30 RB Prol. 49.
31 RB Prol. 50.
33 Jn 13:34-35.
This love is central to Benedictine monasticism. Benedict calls for his followers to “love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”34 Benedictine monasticism requires the selfless love that Jesus demonstrated. The Rule describes a kind of love called good zeal, a sort of burning, fervent love “which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life.”35 Good zeal is not a love that comes naturally, but one that comes by daily choices and the intentional kindling of the flames of love.36 It happens by choosing to be patient, loving, and compassionate, through obedience,37 and by putting the other person first and choosing what is better for that person, rather than what is best for one’s self.38 These loving choices are practical ways for a life of love and service “prefer[ring] nothing whatever to Christ”39 and journeying together to everlasting life.40 This love embodies the discipleship that Jesus modeled for his followers and the love he invited them to show one another.

The fourth hallmark of Christian discipleship is perhaps the most challenging of all: the invitation to imitate Christ by taking up one’s cross. Jesus told the crowds and his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”41 This is a call to sacrifice and humility. Jesus’ disciples were to undergo persecution, suffering, and martyrdom, and taking up the cross became a way of imitating Christ. Christian disciples were called to imitate Christ by loving as Christ loved, and perhaps even die. Paul encouraged the Ephesians to “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”42

35 RB 72:2.
36 RB 72:3.
37 RB 72:4-6.
38 RB 72:7.
39 RB:72:11.
40 RB 72:12.
41 Mk 8:34.
By the time of Benedict, Christians rarely had to worry about martyrdom or persecution. Taking up one’s cross no longer meant following Christ unto a physical death, but rather monastic disciples faced the difficult martyrdom of giving up their own will. Benedict encouraged his followers, “Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ.” This renunciation was an ongoing death to self, a death leading unto a transformation. Benedictine monastic life encouraged members to follow the path of humility as a practical way to take up the cross and enter this transformation.

The *Rule* describes humility as a process of giving up one’s own will and dying to self with concrete practices that help the disciples take up their cross. Humility begins with an awe of God and a remembrance of always being within God’s presence, hearkening back to abiding in the Word. Humility encouraged the monastic disciple to imitate Christ’s words and actions, following not his own will but the will of God. This involved submitting in love and obedience to the abbot of the monastery, just as Christ “became obedient even to death.” The monk was expected to embrace suffering with patience and obedience under difficult and unfair situations. Benedict described this as turning the other cheek when struck, giving up one’s cloak, going the extra mile, and giving a blessing when cursed. These were practical choices that needed to be made repeatedly, with opportunities to be gracious, loving, and patient rather than responding in anger and hatred. Over time, the anger and hatred within the monk’s heart were shorn away in a death of the self-will. Suffering refined the heart, conforming him to Christ’s life and shaping him into a loving and humble person. Benedictine humility was challenging, but it was effective in bringing about this transformation, and the change in the disciple was visible in this life as

43 RB 4:10.
44 RB 7:10, 14, 23, 50. See Humility Step 1 and Step 6.
45 RB 7:31-32. See Humility Step 2.
46 RB 7:34. Benedict is quoting Phil 2:8.
47 RB 7:35. See Humility Step 4.
he began to live and act naturally out of love of Christ, from force of habit, and joy.\textsuperscript{50} The practice of humility was a way of taking up one’s cross as a disciple of Christ.

In summary, fifth century Benedictine monasticism was a practical way of discipleship because it provided practices and a community that supported the monk in following Christ and patterning his life after the life of Jesus. Community life provided companions with whom to journey and seek God. The practices of being present to and seeing Christ in one another incarnated a life of love, service, and humility in the community. Monastic life corresponded with New Testament hallmarks of Christian discipleship—namely a call and response, abiding in the Word, a community life, and a readiness to take up one’s cross and imitate Christ. The life was effective in transforming and shaping the disciple into the image of Christ and leading him to everlasting life.

While Benedictine monasticism provided an effective and practical path for Christian discipleship, it was rarely an easy one. Benedict knew that the challenges of this path were likely to cause discouragement in newcomers and even in experienced monks. Monastic life was strict; to ensure the good of all it was necessary “to amend faults and safeguard love.”\textsuperscript{51} Yet even with these challenges, Benedict provided compassionate and intentional supports for those who struggled in the monastic life,\textsuperscript{52} enabling the weak to persevere. Special care and concern were to be shown to those who struggled, for they were sick people in need of a physician.\textsuperscript{53} Benedict would have been inclined to be especially attentive to treat them as Christ.\textsuperscript{54} Wavering monks were to be loved and prayed for\textsuperscript{55} and the abbot sought them out with compassion as lost sheep.\textsuperscript{56} These supportive practices helped ensure the effectiveness and practicality of Benedictine monastic discipleship.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[50]{RB 7:68-69.}
\footnotetext[51]{RB Prol. 47.}
\footnotetext[52]{RB 27.}
\footnotetext[53]{RB 27:1.}
\footnotetext[54]{RB 36:1-2.}
\footnotetext[55]{RB 27:4.}
\footnotetext[56]{RB 27:8-9.}
\end{footnotes}
The example of fifth century Benedictine monastic life gives insight into how modern Christian disciples can continue to follow and imitate Christ. Christian discipleship today is challenging, no less so than it was in the fifth century. In addition, living as a vowed member of a monastery is not possible, or even appropriate for all Christians. Some are called to marriage, family, or the single life. The wisdom of the monastic life can be adapted for any Christian in a life of discipleship. Christians today can gather in supportive communities to help each other along the way, just as monks and nuns in Benedict’s time did, and just as contemporary monastics do. We can abide in the Word and practice mutual love, service, and humility. We can, each in our own way, take up the cross and follow Christ. As Christians, we can trust that Christ will lead us “all together to everlasting life.”

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57 RB 72:12.
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