

But of all the things I've been doing this spring, the most significant to me is the re-writing of my Rule of Life. A Rule of life is a written expression of how you want to live your life. Some of it is more general, but some can be quite specific. Consider Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Matthew 10 and Luke 10 as he sends them out. Some of his comments are general ("Proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of God has come near'," "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves"). Others are very specific ("Do not take a purse or bag or sandals," "Do not move around from house to house"). Some of the instructions deal with their attitudes and the ways in which they relate to others ("freely give," "if the home is deserving let your peace rest on it," "be on your guard"). Others deal with particular actions ("heal the sick," "search for some worthy person and stay"). Jesus was giving a temporary "Rule of life" to his followers, a practical way of living out his own heart and mission insofar as they were living as itinerant ministers.

Followers of Jesus have been writing down their practical ways of living out the Gospel life ever since that time. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century Puritans would record their "resolutions" and monitor how they kept them. Other Christians made private "covenants" before God about this or that area of life. The practice of writing and following a Rule of life is most common, however, among the monks and nuns of Christianity. Sometimes a monastic leader would come up with an idea for a way of living and others would just join in and follow. In other cases a community would develop and over time, as they paid attention to their life together, they would collect their thoughts on paper which would end up becoming their Rule. Sometimes individuals or families would develop their own private Rules of life expressing how they wanted to live in wholehearted devotion to Jesus' leadership. Rules of life seem to originate from as many different circumstances as there are communities and individuals to explore them.

Though there is a lot of variety in Rules, covenants and such, they tend to have two parts. One part is often called the "prologue." This part of the Rule describes the vision of the community or

individual - what we are *about*. Sometimes this includes a statement about very general values (for example, Basil's Rule begins with a discussion of the great commandments to love God and others). Sometimes it includes a statement about why a particular group or individual has chosen to live this way at a particular time and place (the prologue of Benedict's Rule includes a statement about establishing a "school for the Lord's service"). I divided the "general vision" portion of my own Rule into four sections: (1) *What* is God doing? What does God want to do?, (2) *Who* does God invite? How does this invitation affect spiritual formation and Rule formation?, (3) *Into what* does God call/invite people as God does what God is doing?, and (4) *How* do we respond to God's invitation? What part does humanity play in what God is doing? By answering these questions I was able to express my sense of God's big vision and how human beings fit into that vision generally. Thanks to the class I taught this winter on the Bible's message, I felt like I was able to express this as clearly as I have ever done in my life.

I followed my "general vision" section of the Rule with a "particular/personal vision" section of the Rule, describing my sense of how *I* personally fit into this big vision of God in my life here and now. I summarized the values and style of life that Cheri and I have come to treasure in our years of marriage (what monasteries often call their "charism"). I described the particular circumstances of my life here in Montrose (key relationships, central activities, deep concerns). I also described a few matters regarding which I have sensed the Holy Spirit's invitation in the past few years: God's desire to "remake my wants," a call to "fast from oppression," and a freedom to "dive deeply" into the various streams of the Christian faith.

After the "vision" part of the Rule comes the "practice" part of the Rule. This part simply describes how a community or individual intends on living out the vision expressed above. Rules will specify times and programs for common worship. They will give instructions for eating, working, and study. They will encourage particular virtues to be pursued. They will describe the procedures for becoming a member of a community or for choosing leaders. Indeed, in an effort to order *all* of our

lives in harmony with God's will, Rules may address any aspect of life. I have summarized the tables of contents of over twenty Rules, covenants and such on my website (Go to Resources =>"Old Monastic Wisdom for New Monastic People" and click on [A Collection of Rules, Constitutions, Covenants and Such from Monastic Communities and Other Similar Groups](#) ). The point is to link the call of God upon our lives with the practical details of our everyday life.

In my own Rule I found that I had to identify different seasons and types of "days." A day spent at the ranch is very different than an "open" day around home, which is different than a day with guests or a day of travel. My schedule varies according to season and type of day. Now that I have thought through what is realistic to expect for each of these kinds of days, I can pursue God's will in a way that fits the realities of my life.

Then, after describing the different kinds of days and how my schedule would adjust to each kind of day, I address the primary activities of my life: prayer, manual labor, study, and relationships. I describe what habits I will pursue in each of these areas, given the general and particular visions I outlined above. For example, when I describe my plans for morning prayer I write, "One component of remaking my wants is the role of resting in stillness and emptiness. It feels to me like my own re-orientation/habitation will require a bit of de-orientation/habitation. Given that the most fundamental dwelling-place of my life is in prayer and the most fundamental place of my prayer is morning prayer, it seems appropriate to make space for "just sitting" in God's presence, even if that presence is never tangibly experienced. . . . I must also make time for fervent intercession. Again, extended morning prayer is the best place to do this consistently."

Then, like many Rules of life, I address a wide range of external matters of life: eating, sleeping, money and possessions, travel, entertainment, and things like that. I have found it valuable to prayerfully reflect on these areas because they really do affect my life. After paying attention to myself for a while, I have discovered that my patterns of eating and sleeping, for example, affect me more than I had imagined. Best to admit that influence and prayerfully to explore how best to order this area of

life to God's glory.

I also added a section on the "values and virtues of life," describing the kinds of attitudes I felt God was leading me into or certain virtues that I needed to pursue in certain areas of life. Some Rules integrate this kind of discussion with the more particular rule regarding each area of life, but it seemed best for me now just to identify them separately, particularly since this area was kind-of new to me and I only had a few bullet-points about a few areas (for example, with regard to my conduct toward Cheri when we are working on music together, I wrote "offer feedback and don't just sit pouty").

I closed the Rule with a few random notes to myself. I gave it to a few close friends for feedback. And then I took it with me to church on Easter and made a special commitment to follow it seriously. I have revised a couple of details since that time, but I must say, after having written personal Rules of life since 1982, this is as clear as I have ever been about my call and practice. And what makes it work especially well is that my use of a Rule is integrated with two other practices: regular self-examination and accountable relationships. I review my own practice and experience of the Rule regularly and I report that review with another older brother in the Lord. The point is not to become a modern-day pharisee. I have already spent too much of my life doing that. The point is simply to follow a realistic way of responding appropriately to the leading of Scripture and the Spirit in the midst of the practical details of my life.

Perhaps you would like to try a Rule of life. Sit down and dream a bit. What is God's vision for the life of your own community, or just for you? What steps might you take to fall in line with that vision? What practices could you play with "just to see" how it might work to follow God in this or that way? Do you have a time when you can evaluate your practice? Could you find a friend who might listen to you review your living faith regularly? Go on, give it a try. I have provided a brief starting outline to writing a Rule of life on my website. (see Resources => Resources for christian Living => [My Spiritual Agenda](#); or just Google "My spiritual agenda" and follow the top link)

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.