Evangelical Monasticism in a Postmodern World:
Preliminary Considerations

Evan B. Howard

(Presented to the Evangelical Scholars in Christian Spirituality gathering 2007, and slightly revised in light of their suggestions)

"New monasticism." What is it? A fresh expression of Christian community? A novel renunciation of the world's values? A living witness of an alternative culture? A vehicle for spiritual formation (or, shall we say, a "school of conversion")? An effective means of evangelism? In the past few years, the terms "monasticism" and "orders" have been used by evangelical Christians to promote all of the above.[1] Such are the ambiguity

---

1. See, for example, Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistable Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Win the West... Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000); The Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion: Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005); John Hayes, *Sub-Merge: Living Deep in a Shallow World* (Ventura, CA: Regal books, 2006).

and the potential of both the term “monasticism” and the forms of life suggested by this term.

Martin Luther, pioneer of the *Evangelische Kirche* in Germany, emptied monasteries. Protestants virtually eliminated monasticism from their midst. Evangelical Protestants on the Continent, in the British Isles, and in the United States have for centuries kept a careful distance from anything that smacks of “monastic” spirituality. Rather than an alternative culture, monasticism has been seen as an escape from the world. Rather than a vehicle of spiritual formation, it has been perceived as a form of “works righteousness.” Rather than a fresh expression of community, it has been interpreted as the perpetuation of an unhealthy “Christian elite.”

But we live in a different world today. A “postmodern” world. Perhaps today the Gospel is better expressed by a community than by a doctrinal formula. Perhaps monastic expressions are well-suited to stand against the superficiality of contemporary society (and contemporary Churchianity). Perhaps, just perhaps, our postmodern ethos has permitted evangelicals to see that while it had its problems, monasticism may always have had a legitimate place in the Church.

Is there a place for “monasticism” within the evangelical Church today? What would this evangelical monasticism look like? How would it relate to Gospel, Church, and world? And how would it differ from all of the other expressions of religious life that evangelical Protestants have known over the centuries? Why “monasticism” now? These are not trivial questions, to be brushed aside in the excitement of the present moment. Jonathan Wilson, in his influential call for a “New Monasticism” writes that,

> “the new monasticism will be undergirded by *deep theological reflection and commitment*. . . . by saying that the new monasticism must be undergirded by theological commitment and reflection, I am not saying that right theology will of itself produce a faithful church. A faithful church is marked by the faithful carrying out of the mission given to the church by Jesus Christ, but that mission

> can be identified only by faithful theology. So, in the new monasticism we must strive simultaneously for a recovery of right belief and right practice."[2]

Along with Wilson, I believe that some forms of monasticism (or religious orders) have a legitimate--even important--place in the evangelical Church in today's society. The present essay is a first look, a "scouting of the land," with regards to the possibilities of an evangelical theology of monasticism for a postmodern era. As I have considered this topic over the years, I have found myself confronted with a swarm of issues from all sides. There is the theological question of "works." There are the possibilities and dangers buried in the history of monasticism. There are the debates regarding the history of monasticism in contemporary scholarship. There are the practical considerations that arise through my relationships with new monastics (and my reading of their works). There are my own hunches about things monastic developed through my attempts to explore monastic life personally. It will be impossible here to address them all. Indeed, I'm not even sure at this point what all the right questions *are*. Nonetheless I am confident that a careful, informed reflection on these matters can profit new monastics, the evangelical Church, and the Body of Christ at large. I will review the issues by considering the three primary terms in the sub-title: "evangelical," "monasticism," and "postmodern." Then I will draw some conclusions to the subject as a whole.

A Monasticism that is *Evangelical*

Our first difficulty is defining what it means to be "evangelical," and to do so in the midst of evangelicalism's own reconsideration of its identity. Author Stanley Grenz summarizes this introspective context of evangelicalism, stating that "recent years have witnessed a seemingly never-ending epidemic of navel-gazing among evangelicals.

2. Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's* After Virtue (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 75–76 .

Theologians, historians, and practitioners have debated what *evangelical* means, and many people have even concluded that the designation is no longer useful."[3] While I have no compelling need to hang on to the label "evangelical" (as a child of the Jesus People movement of the 60s and 70s, I feel kinship with any who are sold out to Jesus), the term serves to identify a basic heritage and orientation--a *tradition*--that deserves place among other descriptions of religious community. And while I do not demand a slavish identification of the term with particular definitions given in various periods of history, theological texts, or scholarly societies (evangelicalism is a *living* tradition), I find that self-identification as "evangelical" obliges me to respect a set of concerns and to receive the friendship of a circle of peers that well-serves the kingdom of God. So I retain the identification, willingly.

A Set of Concerns

Whether evangelicalism is comprehended historically or doctrinally,[4] interpreters are in general consensus that evangelicalism characteristically embodies a set of

3. Stanley Grenz, endorsement on the back cover of Kenneth J. Collins, *The Evangelical Moment: The Promise of an American Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).
4. For interpretations of evangelicalism from within see, for example, Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1979); Richard Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987); Donald Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1988); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *Welcome to the Family: An Introduction to Evangelical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Evangelical Moment: The Promise of an American Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 2nd ed., reprint, 2000 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

concerns. To understand these concerns as a whole is to understand something of the core of evangelicalism. As this or that expression strays from one or more of these concerns, others question the authentically "evangelical" character of the expression.

1. The Laity - Evangelicalism has always possessed a heart for the laity. Indeed, I believe this overriding concern for the universal availability of the benefits of salvation is a key to interpreting the spirituality of the Lutheran Reformation and perhaps that of other Protestant traditions as well. We can see roots of this concern in the pastoral theologies of John Chrysostom, Augustine and, in the late medieval expressions of the *devotio moderna*. We see it theologically expressed in the Protestant doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." I suspect that the proliferation of different "styles" of doing church among evangelicals today is, in part, due to this concern to make the benefits of salvation available to the average lay person.

2. Scripture - Likewise, evangelicalism has always had a high regard for the authority of Scripture. Some have gone so far as to hold a near-dictation theory of the inspiration of the Bible. Others (following Karl Barth) see the Scripture as the primary witness to the Word rather than the inerrant revelation of the Word itself. Yet, however the doctrine of Scripture is formulated, it is considered central to evangelical identity. Even those (Puritans or Methodists, for example) who receive tradition, reason, or experience as legitimate guides for the Church generally regard sacred Scripture as a definitive statement of Christian truth; other guides functioning as necessary interpreters of Scripture.

3. Faith - Another concern of evangelicals is the place of faith in salvation. Evangelicals are cautious of any approach to Christianity that gives the impression of a program of "works" earning salvation. For evangelicals of all varieties, it is the welcome of the Lord Christ through a sincere trusting relationship (expressed in repentance and appropriate works) that is the key subjective vehicle through which the objective work of Christ is mediated.

4. Core doctrines - Evangelicals have generally been a confessional community. While the Arminian will disagree with the Calvinist regarding predestination, there has been, for the most part, a consensus with regard to the central doctrines of the Christian faith, a consensus that is neatly summarized in the Nicene Creed and in the basic narrative of "creation, fall, redemption." At times evangelicals will interpret one of these doctrines narrowly (for example, a "merely substitutionary" interpretation of the atonement or a "premillenial only" interpretation of Christ's return), insisting that evangelical identity rests on the narrow interpretation of a given doctrine. But the point is that there *is* a concern for faithfulness to key doctrines.

5. Conversion - Again, with roots in Patrick of Ireland, Bernard of Clairvaux, the mendicant friars, Meister Eckhart, and others, evangelicals have stressed the importance of personal conversion to the faith. Indeed, many have stressed the importance of a personal conversion *experience* into faith. Even those evangelicals who baptize infants are eager to raise those children into a converting realization of their baptismal identity and heritage. The transformation of life in Christ has always been the testimony of evangelical Christianity.

6. Mission - Related to the centrality of conversion is the interest in evangelism and missions. From the Celtic and mendicant missions of the patristic and medieval Church to the Moravian missions of the eighteenth centuries to the British and American Missions of the nineteenth centuries to the explosion of Christianity in the third-world today, evangelical Christianity has often expressed itself in an outward thrust, reaching out to those who have not heard, who are in need.

7. Ecumenicity - Ecumenism might not seem characteristic of evangelical Christianity, especially in light of the reserve taken by evangelicals towards the "ecumenical" movement in the mid-twentieth century. And yet a charitable joining together of like-minded believers is indeed characteristic of evangelicalism. An early model of this can be found in the evangelical unity of Protestant and Catholic alike in

Hernnhutt in the eighteenth century. The evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries forged important links between kindred spirits. The same ecumenicity links together believers from traditional, seeker-sensitive, cell, and emerging churches today. Evangelicals affiliate from a broader sense of basic doctrine and experience that transcends particular denominational association (at times transcending differences between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant).

8. Cautious approach to the world - Finally, there is among many evangelicals--and I think there is currently more diversity on this last feature--a hesitancy toward involvement in the "world." By this I mean that evangelicals, whether Puritans responding to early deism or fundamentalists responding to modernism or other similar expressions, are not quick to adopt the current cultural patterns. Intellectual trends are scrutinized, clothing fashions and artistic movements are resisted. Everyone knows that evangelicals are always behind in music style. For generations evangelicals have been conservative in their home economics. For most of the history of evangelicalism we have walked slowly and carefully into cultural life.

One could highlight other features. These are presented to give a summary feel for evangelicalism as a set of concerns. Yet further, they remind those of us who would pursue an "evangelical" monasticism for today of values that must not be forgotten in our eagerness to forge new communities. They give us reason to think carefully and deeply, respecting our own evangelical "tradition" as we creatively develop new forms for evangelical expression.

A Circle of Peers

While the term "evangelical" may designate central concerns, it may also encircle a community. From this perspective, we identify evangelicals by whom they fraternize with and whom they don't.

Generally, "evangelical" has been associated historically with developments in Protestant Christianity: the German *Evangelische Kirche*, the British evangelical Anglicans, American evangelical revivalism and so on. This history has meant that most who self-identify as evangelicals have been Protestant and evangelical gatherings have, for the most part, been Protestant gatherings. The term "evangelical" has also developed in tension with the term "liberal." The primary concerns of evangelicals have often set them at odds with liberals. Evangelicals have been conservative, though not necessarily fundamentalist. This generally conservative Protestant heritage has facilitated gatherings of peers where certain beliefs and interests can be assumed among those gathered, and where certain topics can be raised without undue explanation.

This way of "drawing the circle" around evangelicalism has generally permitted a healthy diversity within the community. People of different theology (Reformed - Arminian), polity (Baptist - Presbyterian), and practice (seeker-sensitive - traditional) have been able to explore together the meaning of their faith. And as the Church changes over the years, room has been made to welcome new expressions of evangelicalism (Pentecostals, Charismatics, the political evangelical "left" and so on), and the dialogue between these various streams of evangelicalism has been fruitful.

But things are changing. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics are frequently rubbing shoulders these days, symbolized by the milestone document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Tom Oden, Charles Colson, Richard Foster, and others (see the journal *First Things*, and the literature produced by *Renovare*) have encouraged evangelicals to draw the circle to include many Catholic and Orthodox Christians, and in doing so to reach back further in Church history to ground our own heritage. Needless to say, this encouragement has been received with mixed response by other evangelicals.

While some encourage redrawing the circle to include non-Protestants, others are calling for a reconsideration of the central concerns of evangelicalism. Folks like Stan Grenz, Brian McLaren and others are nervous about their identification with American

post-fundamentalist *Evangelicalism*. They affirm the central concerns of evangelicalism (respect for Scripture, missions, laity, and so on), but they feel that our portrait of evangelicalism may reflect our modernist heritage more than our Gospel heritage. They suggest that we retain, but reconsider, our understanding of the central concerns of evangelicalism. They also may self-identify by using neologisms like "generous orthodoxy," or "liberal evangelicals." And again, this call has been received with mixed response.

And then there are those who do not self-identify as "evangelical," but appear to be kindred spirits. The fact of the matter is, the face of liberalism is changing, and while it was easy to identify "evangelicalism" as opposed to "liberalism," that liberalism is not the same. What do we say about "postliberals" such as George Lindbeck or Stanley Hauerwas? Are they quasi-evangelicals in disguise? And what about "radical orthodoxy" such as we might find in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, or Graham Ward? Are they "evangelicals"? In James K.A. Smith (and perhaps in Carl Raschke as well) we find folks who self-identify as evangelicals who wholeheartedly support the intermingling of evangelical and radical orthodox. And while there are distinct similarities between traditional evangelicals and postliberals/radical orthodox, there are also differences. So once again we find ourselves wondering how to draw the circle, wondering who to invite to our gatherings (or whether we should start attending other gatherings). What *is* "evangelical," anyway?

It is worth noting that, if welcomed, all three of the shifts in evangelical identity outlined above (inviting non-Protestants, reconsidering the concerns, communicating with postliberal and radical orthodox) would likely have a softening influence with regard to the development of evangelical religious orders or a new "monasticism." Nevertheless, I think it would be unwise simply to appeal to the fringe, sensing a ready acceptance. Rather, I think we must go to the heart of the central evangelical concerns. We must thoughtfully and prayerfully work through each concern one-by-one, developing an

authentic evangelical theology of religious life.[5] My suspicion is that by checking our "monasticisms" against the concerns of "evangelicalism(s)" we may find both our monasticisms and our evangelicalisms healthier in the end.

Evangelical Monasticism

What would this evangelical theology of religious life look like? Of course, one can only discover this in process, but a few suggestions can be given by way of an outline of things to consider. **First,** there must be an examination of the *biblical and doctrinal foundations of religious life* (note the concerns of Scripture, faith and key doctrines). One does not spend long in the history of monasticism before one discovers the doctrinal danger zones of religious life. Monastic experience lies behind the spread of Encratism, Pelagianism, Quietism, and more. An authentically evangelical monasticism will need to be formed in conscious, accountable connection with Christian Scriptures and doctrine. In non-Protestant monasticism this connection is addressed in terms of a visible accountability to the Church. Currently young Protestant orders and new monastic expressions (there are also young orders that are mixed Protestant and Catholic) are exploring this accountability by means of connections with denominations or mission agencies. Evangelical monasticism must find both the freedom to invent itself from scratch and, at the same time, to be examined by Scripture and tradition.

But let me emphasize that the theological development of an evangelical monasticism must not be a matter of simply "falling in line" with traditional perspectives. As we well know, those committed to a religious life have offered much to theological

5. The term "religious life" is the technical term within the field of Christian spirituality for those who make special commitments to God (vows, covenants and such). "Religious orders" defines those institutions within which those who make such commitments dwell, and "monasticism" describes certain of those religious orders. See below under defining monasticism.

reflection (one need only think of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, or Thomas Aquinas). While evangelical theology has been developed overwhelmingly by scholars (and a few pastors and missionaries), I suspect that evangelical "religious"[6] may have much to offer the reconsideration of evangelical theology in the coming centuries. The point is to facilitate the dialogue between theologies arising from different settings without preferencing any particular approach.

A few issues will deserve special attention in the formation of an evangelical theology of monasticism. One might begin with the issue of salvation. What is salvation? How do we clarify the common Protestant evangelical understanding of salvation = justification with the Orthodox monastic understanding of salvation = deification or Catholic understandings of perfection? What is the relationship between "justification," "sanctification," and "glorification"? What is the aim of the Christian life? This, of course, leads to a consideration of "holiness" and the portraits of holiness we use as models for Christian growth. How do our ideas of holiness and sexuality relate? (The early history of monasticism was caught up with the idea of celibacy). And what is the balance between freedom for the laity and intentionality of discipleship by a mature sister or brother? Is there a legitimate distinction between those who commit to the life of the parish in general and those who wish to make special commitments? When does the abbot become hierarchy? When does the absence of an abbot become cheap grace? And then there is the question of Rule and grace. When does a monastic Rule become an imposed work earning salvation? On the other hand, when does failure to make use of particular means of grace express a lack of faith in God? I could go on and on.

Second, an evangelical monasticism will be forced, almost by definition, to *broaden its identity as a community of peers*. Hitherto evangelicalism has survived as a network of missionary organizations, theological meetings, publishing houses, and

6. Again, the term "religious" is often used as a noun to refer to those who have made commitments to a particular form of the religious life.

denominational associations. There are few examples of “religious orders” or networks of monastic communities in evangelicalism (although we are seeing some beginnings in this regard). Evangelical monasticism will, of necessity, be in dialogue with those who have gone before us in the religious life. Thus an evangelical monasticism will struggle constantly with “having a foot in both worlds”: on the one hand there is the heritage and tradition of the evangelical community, who may look suspiciously at our “Catholic associations.” On the other hand, we will appear to be wild and independent to those Catholics who might simply encourage us to join the Benedictine order. Some have taken that route. But I, for one, do not find that a legitimate “evangelical” option. We must allow ourselves to be wild and independent enough to experiment with a monasticism that is authentically “evangelical.”

One matter deserves mention by way of similarity: the monastic interest in the laity. While the monastic structure at times became unwieldingly hierarchical (especially in the late middle ages), the primary thrust of religious orders has been a lay thrust. The origins of monasticism derive from widows and “fringe” dwellers who had no formal authority. The desert fathers and mothers had few priests in their midst. The expansions under both Celtic and mendicant monasticism were lay movements. The Franciscans explicitly called themselves “friars” (brothers) as an expression of anti-hierarchicalism. In exploring an evangelical monasticism, I suspect we will find ourselves discovering new ways to embody a central concern of evangelicalism, even though we will experience a degree of tension as we expand our peer community in order to articulate forms of life appropriate to an evangelical monasticism.

Third, an evangelical monasticism will have to see through the tension between the monastic tradition and the evangelical mission. The fact of the matter is, they are not as separate as we have made out in our evangelical (“monasticism = escape”) stereotypes. If we look back in Protestant history, it was a long time before the missionary thrust in Protestantism, and this thrust was initiated in the midst of a good deal of Protestant

protest. It was actually the Franciscans and the Jesuits (two Roman Catholic religious orders) which, during the modern period, led the way in missions. Ralph Winter from the Fuller School of World Mission has long advocated a conscious link between evangelical missions and religious orders. And if we look to monastic history we find that the preservation of the faith and the expansion of the faith into uncharted territory have been special ministries of religious orders. I think it is time we evangelicals shed our faulty stereotypes of monasticism (in the light of good scholarship) in an effort to see the ways in which both withdrawal and advance contribute to the mission of God's kingdom. We are just beginning to learn the value of personal retreats. Now, perhaps we are prepared to take this a step further and perceive the roles of the wide range of monastic forms and seasons of life for the sake of advancing the work of God's purposes on earth. This will require learning about the missional functions of solitude, of the kingdom value of the worship contained in the Divine Office, and of the meaning of "waiting for God's anointing." Perhaps charismatic evangelicals will be able to grasp this easier than others.

We will have to reexamine our understanding of conversion and its role in missions. Is conversion "praying the prayer" (examine this one in the history of (Protestantism)? Does it, perhaps, mean *more* than this? Gordon Smith and others have placed this question to evangelicalism already.[7] Where is the line between evangelism, and formation/discipleship? What *is* the mission of the evangelical Church, anyway?

And again, I think that evangelicals will find a kindred spirit in the history of monasticism when it comes to a cautious approach to the world. No, let me word it differently. Evangelicals will find a community that *outdoes* evangelicalism in that caution. Withdrawal from the world is almost a defining characteristic of "monasticism" proper. My suspicion is that evangelical theology has a long way to go in its

7. See, for example Gordon Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

consideration of issues of “Christ and Culture,” and that currently the history of monasticism might make a fascinating dialogue partner for this exploration.

A monasticism that is *evangelical* must face up to the concerns and the community which defines that tradition. It does not mean that new ideas and new relationships cannot be formed within the self-identification of “evangelical” (again, it is a *living* tradition). But they cannot be formed willy-nilly. An evangelical monasticism will grow from and will nourish those concerns and that community of faith. Again, for the benefit of all.

Monasticism that is appropriately *Monasticism*

We have now looked at what it might mean to pursue a monasticism that is authentically *evangelical*, that respects the concerns and the community that identify evangelicalism as we know it. Yet if we are to pursue an evangelical *monasticism*, we must also honor the history, tradition, and characteristics of religious life as it has been known throughout Christian time and space. It is not fair to this history simply to move into a house together, minister to needy neighbors, plant an urban garden, and call it a “new monastic” community. Thus, in order to insure that evangelical monasticism develops not as one more cheap fad, but rather as the society-transforming force it has been throughout Christian history, we must appropriate the distinctives and “marks” of historic religious orders. Our aim is not to imitate the particulars, but rather to live the essential life of order(s) with sufficient similarity that the term “monasticism” will seem the natural description to all who examine the phenomena. My suspicion is that evangelical monasticism will produce its best fruit only when historic monasticism is thus honored. I will treat this topic in terms of two steps: (1) historical recovery, and (2) finding order(s). The first allows us the grasp of monasticism we need in order to experiment with contemporary forms. The second outlines the distinctives of religious

life and suggests ways in which evangelicals might consider embodying them in contemporary practice.

Historical Recovery

In order to appropriate Christian monasticism, we must first understand what it has been throughout the ages. This is a matter of reading through the biographies, the histories and the Rules of various Orders. Part of this task is the sorting of context, charism, and core. Every movement arises from a context, and context changes with time and space. Furthermore monastic expressions often carry the distinct character of their founder or founding experience. This is called a "charism." The Franciscan charism differs from the Benedictine charism. But underneath charism and context one can identify a somewhat stable "core" which characterizes the Franciscan or the Benedictine Orders *as* orders. By reading through the history of monasticism, in light of the intellectual, social, technological, and ecclesial contexts of each expression, we begin to get a feel for "what it is all about."

But there are complications. The interpretation of monastic history is not all that simple. For example, scholars have seen that some later forms of monasticism (more formal Benedictine structures) have been "read back" into early descriptions of the origins of monasticism. Historians have shown that we must read monasticism within contexts of social forces as well as spiritual forces (factions, power circles, socio-economic roles and so on). Yet we are unfair to the phenomena if we read monasticism *merely* as the playing out of those forces. So while a historical recovery is necessary, it is not necessarily easy. And then there are the hermeneutical questions of context comparison. Are the heroic ascetical practices of early monasticism to be interpreted as vestiges of an over-spiritualization of the self or as wisdom of spiritual discipline that we have long forgotten?

The Forms of Monastic Life.

One of the tasks of historical recovery is the grasp of the variety of “forms” of religious life expressed in Christian history. This is of special importance to the evangelical, because some of the forms that are dominant in Christian history (like the Carthusian way or the structure of the monasticism on Mt. Athos) may have less relevance to the evangelical tradition and some of the forms that are on the fringes of monasticism in history (like Beguinages, Third Orders, Mission houses, *poustiniki* and such) may have greater relevance to our context as evangelicals today.

I have elsewhere suggested that the history of Christian spirituality offers models and perspectives for the fostering of our own relationship with God.[8] This is especially true for the history of religious life. It is, for the evangelical, like a smorgasbord of untasted options, complete with a record of the strengths and weaknesses of each option. Just consider the following list of forms of religious life:

Ÿ Early Family Monasticism - Some of the earliest forms of committed life involve arrangements in families in towns and cities in association with local churches.

Ÿ Anchoritism - The life of the hermit has been largely unstudied by the evangelical community, but a number of expressions are worth exploring.

Ÿ The Skete - A modified form of solitary monasticism is the skete, where individuals live in separate dwellings spending a good part of their lives alone, while periodically gathering together for common worship, support and other needs. This form is common in the East and in the Camaldolese and Carthusian monasteries in the West.

8. See Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Press Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), ??? [chapter 2 on history].

Ÿ Coenobitic Community - The monastic community is more well known (most commonly present in various Benedictine groups). Again, a variety of expressions are extant, each with their own blend of prayer, labor, and ministry.

Ÿ Urban Houses - A number of smaller monastic and quasi-monastic groups arose in the late medieval period emphasizing common life, ministry to the community, and personal devotion (for example the Beguinages and the houses of the Brethren of the Common Life). Much of what is described as “new monasticism” today reminds me of this style of religious life.

Ÿ Third Orders and Oblates - The mendicant orders found a way to include kindred spirits who wanted to make a commitment to a given way of life but who were unable to leave family and occupation. They did so by the creation of “third” or “secular” orders (1st - men; 2nd - women; 3rd orders - married). Members of third orders live the Rule and charism of the 1st or 2nd Order as appropriate to the conditions of family life and occupation. Other monastic communities have accomplished the same function with Oblates, who link themselves with the values and the life of a given community through both commitments and relationships.

Ÿ The Mission House - When the Religious community was not stable, but moved with the needs of ministry, the members frequently lived in mission houses (often simply called a “house”). Franciscan and Jesuit houses, for example, are common around the world, and I think that many examples of Protestant mission “bases” bear similarity to this form of religious life (for example, YWAM bases).

Ÿ The Family Commune - Moving from non-Protestant examples, we find the family commune, modeled by Anabaptist and Pietist communities in history (Amish, Moravian and the like). Many of these express similar values to religious orders. Is it possible to look at an Amish community as a form of “evangelical monasticism”?

This is not a complete list of forms of religious life. Indeed, I think it would be a fascinating project to explore what an evangelical "Sisters of Charity" congregation or an evangelical "Trappist" community might look like. Some religious orders tend to be more contemplative, giving priority to the life of prayer (Carthusians). Others give greater emphasis to the life of the community (Benedictines), and still others emphasize the apostolic ministry outward to others (Franciscans). Evangelicals have not even begun to explore how each of these emphases might be expressed in the service of the kingdom of God. It is an exploration well worth pursuing.

Defining Monasticism.

The reader will notice that thus far I have been using the terms "monasticism," "religious orders," and "religious life" almost interchangeably. The fact of the matter is, that there are *distinct* understandings of each of these terms within formal Western religious communities (Eastern monasticism has another way of looking at things and I will not get into that), and that evangelicals recently using the terms have blurred these distinctions.[9] So what do we evangelicals do in the light of all this? What terms will we use to speak of these new expressions we are exploring? And how will we relate our vocabulary to the tradition of Western religious life? I think we can do little about the popular use of terms. The course is set and I'm not sure we can change it, although we can help clarify things where we have some influence. I suspect that, for better or worse, we will be talking about new "monasticism" for some time. Those of us who are scholars, however, can be clear in the context of our teaching. The use of each term brings with it a set of questions and history that must be thoughtfully addressed.

9. I have addressed the terminological complexities of defining "monasticism," "orders," "religious life," and such in my essay "What Do We Call It?", currently published on the Spirituality Shoppe web site.

For example - if we are to talk about "orders," we must discuss structure and community. Again this is an important topic, but ambiguity of definitions has left discussion of this issue hanging. How much "holiness" or discipline should a community expect? How legitimate is the distinction between sodality and modality? What kind of legitimacy is there for the distinction between "ordinary" believers and "more committed believers," who desire and are expected to live up to higher standards than the rest of the Christian world? The history and theology of religious orders have much to offer these critical issues for communities today.

Another example - what is the role of "withdrawal" or solitude in evangelical ministry? Is there a place for committed solitude for seasons of an individual's life? For the majority of an individual's life? For a community's life? Again, the notion of withdrawal is central to the historic understanding of "monasticism." If we are to be faithful to the term we must address our own appropriation of the notion of withdrawal.

And we must also talk about being "religious" in the formal sense, about the place of the vowed life. What does it mean to address money, sex, and power today? Do the vows of poverty, chastity, conversion of life, stability, and obedience have value today? But, on the other hand, just think of all the twisted history that came from the identification of holiness with celibacy and renunciation. So what do we mean by calling ourselves an "order" or "monastic"?

It should be clear by now that an evangelical monasticism must clarify its own self-understanding in dialogue with the forms and the terms of religious life developed in the historic Christian Church.

My vote is to speak of an evangelical appropriation of "religious life" generally and a development of evangelical "religious institutions" more specifically (and perhaps some of these might be formally "monastic" orders). When we speak to a more popular audience, it may be necessary to use terms like "consecrated life" to avoid stereotypes and overtechnical language. Nonetheless, I think that the terminology of religious life

gives us more link with the historic West. It also offers some interesting models and perspectives. Consider, for example, the formation of an evangelical order of pastors dedicated to providing accountable support and encouragement to one another in the pastoral ministry (an evangelical "Theatine" order). Or what about an evangelical order given to the development of means of bringing together prayer, community and creative communication for the sake of missions (a kind of evangelical "Dominican" order made up of contemporary Christian musicians and other artsy folk?). Or perhaps we can think about the International Houses of Prayer started by Mike Bickle as an evangelical expression of contemplative monasticism. The possibilities are endless.

Finding Order(s): The Face of an Evangelical *Monasticism*

Having outlined the kind of historical recovery that is necessary for the development of an evangelical monasticism (or, should I say, for the re-formation of evangelical religious life: a re-formation that is familiar with the forms of historic Christian religious life and that clearly defines that life), we are now ready to look at the "core" of religious life. Apart from particular forms and various terms, what is it that makes religious life what it is?[10] And, consequently, what are we trying to appropriate in forming a new evangelical expression of religious life? If I could organize it all around one word, I would probably play with the notion of "order." But perhaps it would be better to adopt Dallas Willard's helpful triad of "vision, intention, and means" to summarize the core of the formal religious life.[11]

10. Needless to say, when we discuss "postmodernism" we will confront the problems of giving general or "essential" definitions to phenomena apart from pointing at specifics. My aim here is to indicate those features which will likely be most important to an authentic re-formation of religious life by the evangelical tradition.
11. See Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

Vision - the aims of religious life .

Generally everyone who joins a religious order--or everyone who *starts* a religious order--has some kind of aim or vision in that action. In fact there are often a number of aims going on at the same time. There are the institutional aims: what the larger organization hopes to see from this action. There are community aims: what the local religious community hopes to see. And there are individual aims: what the particular founder or entrant hopes to see in a given action. Our aims and our motives merge, for example, as a newcomer joins a community (or moves alone into the desert) to live as the angels and to flee the dangers of the world. Our views of self and God shape our vision of the religious life (for example, in contemporary society, the Platonic value of self-mastery does not inform our interest in religious life as much as a postmodern desire for community does). What do we *see* in the religious life? What images do we carry? Is it about "living with God," a "flight from the world," a "school for conversion," an "alternative culture" or a means of "living the Word"? All of these images (and more) have been used to describe the religious life. Why do people join? For lots of reasons. Such is the case with church and indeed, with the whole of the Christian life. I think of all of these as so many "proximate aims," particular visions that help us to take the step forward.

And then there is the "ultimate aim," the plan of God. Elsewhere I have described this plan in terms of a "restoration" and a "transformation" which is, in turn, applied to individuals and communities through programs of Christian "formation."[12] We can speak of "holiness," "perfection," "deification," "kingdom of God" or other terms. But for the sake of an evangelical synthesis of various proximate aims, I like to think of the terms "order" and "righteousness." Looking at the vision of religious life from the perspective

12. See Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Press Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), ??? [chapters five and eight].

of these terms, we comprehend it as a re-ordering of our lives around the Christian God: an ordering of our time, our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our virtues, our relationships (righteousness = right relatedness: to nature, God, others, self, spiritual realities) and more. I am not speaking here, of course, of a rigid machinization of personal and communal spirituality.[13] Authentic order possesses its own spontaneity. The aim of religious life is the fullest possible realization of our personal and corporate calling in Christ, comprehended in bits and pieces (smaller visions) with regard to *this* place and *this* time.

Intention: the rule(s) and vows of religious life.

I don't think that the vision of monastic life is really all that different from the vision of a Christian "secular" life. Ultimately holiness is holiness (here we touch on the much-debated question among Catholics early in the twentieth century about the universal call to holiness). There is a story in the Alphabetical collection of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* regarding Antony of Egypt that, "it was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels."[14] Charity and union with God. The aim is the same for all, in a sense. It is really, as the evangelical would say, about sincere faith in God. So what is the need for monastic life?

Sooner or later the evangelical will ask the question, "What is the difference between what you are calling new 'monasticism' and any other para-church

13. This is precisely one of the errors of "modern" religious life, wherein devout believers became so many Christian cattle. But the configuration of an authentically postmodern monasticism lies ahead.
14. Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publishers, 1975), 6.

organization?" We are very familiar with para-church organizations: Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, bible fellowships, mission teams, relief organizations and so on. Here we see groups of people gathering around a certain mission or purpose or community life in association with the Church, but not in direct association with a particular denomination. Why do we need to speak now of "monasticism"? Why not just talk of the formation of new para-church organizations?

On the one hand, it may seem trivial to change the language. The visions are nearly alike; the structures are similar. Why introduce strange words like "order," and "monasticism"?

I think the reason lies in the two defining features of religious life: the Rule and the Vows. And behind these two features we can recognize Willard's notion of *intention*, an explicit commitment to order one's life around God in concrete ways. Para-church organizations have "mission statements"; congregations desire to live a life to the glory of God. Religious orders make explicit and particular commitments of their *way of life* in order to realize the vision. When InnerCHANGE decided to change their self-description from *a mission among the poor* to *a Christian order among the poor* there were reasons. Part of the reason was that "mission" communicated a task to be accomplished, while "order" communicated a kind of life to lead. It is this sense of a way of life, and the particular commitments that embody that way of life, which characterize the religious life.

The place to see this most clearly is through a study of the various Rules and constitutions of Christian orders and congregations. A careful study of these is vital to an evangelical recovery of religious orders. Consider, for example, a summary of the topics treated in these documents (here I am summarizing my initial analysis of about fifteen of these for communal or apostolic groups--solitary life is a different topic altogether):

Prologue

aim, chief values of order, doctrinal statement or assumptions

Leadership

titles and responsibilities of leaders, method of selection, qualities

term of leadership, administrative units, governing assemblies

Followership

how counsel is to be made, obedience, correction procedures

Admission and Early Formation

screening, membership qualifications (and dis-qualifications),

restrictions, process of early formation, recruitment, training

Departure and Dismissal

Common Spiritual Practices

silence, common prayers (The Divine Office), fasting, sacraments

Community Life

care, maintenance of community, waking, sleep, general schedule

Property, Private Ownership, and Money

clothing, cars, books, tools, income . . .

Care of the Sick

procedures, insurance . . .

Food and Drink

values, dis-allowed foods and drinks (special times for diet changes)

Labor

times, assignment, location, rotation

Travel

means of travel, limits, manner, temporary housing

Guests and Socialization

values in social life, unacceptable associations . . .

Communication

visitation with members, circular letters, reports . . .

Treatment of One Another

love and other values, conflict resolution

Virtues and Vices

treatment of chief virtues and vices

Ministries

included, excluded, management, limits, emphases, target populations

Housing

arrangements, limits

Spiritual Formation

instructions, relationships, practices, review and recourse

It is clear from the list above that religious orders are about "a way of life." Furthermore, for those of us who have been in relationship with evangelical communities and organizations over the years, a survey of these topics simply reminds us of the many features of common life and mission that could benefit from a little prayerful specification. We must ask ourselves, "What are we *intending*?"

When I first got to know the leaders of InnerCHANGE and discovered that they called themselves an "order," my first response was to ask them about their Rule. The fact of the matter was, they didn't have one, and there was some tension in our conversation. I'm thinking, "How can you call yourself an 'order' without a Rule?" They are thinking, "We want to adopt a way of life involving not merely missionary activity, but contemplative and prophetic streams of life along with a number of particular values. Things are evolving at this stage. Do we have to be so formulaic about things?" Actually, we were both right. Rules are indeed characteristic of religious orders and I was on target to look for some sort of explicit intention to values and a way of life (what are you intending?). On the other hand, the way of life of a given community or organization is

something that emerges out of the life of that group over time. Sometimes there are decades of living things out needed to discover and articulate just who we are. Again, in the Western Church the word "charism" is used to describe the unique character and gift that an order contributes to the purposes and Body of Christ as a whole. Our charism is birthed over time, and perhaps the Rule best follows that time.

But religious orders are not just about Rules, but also about "vows." What are we to say about this emphasis on vows in religious life? Should we just drop this practice as unbiblical (Matthew 5:33-37)? But if we do this, how can we say that ours is an evangelical "order" or "monasticism" when vowed life is so central to the definition of the term?

First, I think we must rethink the idea of a "vow" and vowed living again, without the legalism on either side. On the one hand, we must see how a serious and sincere commitment for a real and defined period of time (even a lifetime) shapes the character of our relationship with God itself and permits further shaping over time. These decisions are not made lightly, but after careful discernment. On the other hand, some religious orders strayed from the "greater works" of love by the requirement of meticulous conformity to a vow (and its particular interpretations) at the expense of a life of mercy and righteousness. In these cases authentic formation into Christ has been replaced with a "con-formation" to a false ideal of monastic living. Many evangelical Christian communities have already struggled to walk the tightrope on this issue, not only with regard to basic commitments, but also with interpretations of the "rules" of the house. God grant us discernment!

Second, I do not think it an accident that the early monastic institutions required vows concerning poverty, chastity, and obedience. If we look today at the areas in which religious leaders fall into moral failure we see money, sex, and power at the top of the list. I think the early monastic expressions saw the central dangers of these areas of life. Furthermore, I think that they saw, in these three areas, paradigmatic models of

addressing the whole subject of spiritual warfare with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Our life in the world is necessarily bound up with our possessions. Perhaps we could think of a commitment to "simplicity" or "generosity." Our relationship with our own body and the impulses of the flesh is ever present in our sense of sexuality. Perhaps we could play with the notion of a commitment to "purity" or "fidelity." Our own navigation of our relationship with others is addressed at the core as we learn obedience. Perhaps we could explore learning a life of "humility." Evangelicals have only just begun again to consider the place of the virtues in the Christian life.[15]

While we might not want to imitate the precision and legalism that some institutions in the history of religious orders have expected, I think that it is still appropriate for an evangelical theology of religious orders to develop ways of thinking about Rules and vows for our own contexts. The issue of intention is simply too central--and, I think, too valuable--to ignore.

Means: rhythm, details and more.

Finally, this vision and this intention are lived out in the realities of particular *means*. Of course, this is simply another way of describing "what it is all about." One way of exploring this is to ask what "a day in the life of ____" looks like. And I think that it will do well for evangelicals to explore, both in study and in actual visits to religious orders, just what religious life looks like in the flesh.[16]

15. The recovery of virtue in the Church is a dominant theme in Jonathan Wilson's Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's* After Virtue (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). His final chapter, "A New Monasticism" reflects on the kind of ecclesial cultures needed to facilitate virtues and an authentic witness to God's reign in the Church today.
16. This practice will help to correct our tendencies to idolize or demonize aspects of religious life.

Part of this “what life looks like” is a sense of rhythm. In my own explorations of religious life at its best, I see a blend of prayer, study, labor, and ministry appropriate to the charism of a particular expression. Indeed, when some appropriate balance of these is missing, the expression begins to look more like an “organization,” or a “plan.” Again, it is not a matter of rigid schedules (though, at times, I think these help), but rather the assumed *presence* of the rhythm of life. Puritans understood this rhythm, and they have been compared with monastics on this point. Oh, how evangelical scholars and pastors and businesspersons need to appropriate rhythm into their lives! Is it possible that a generation of evangelical religious orders could step forward and model this rhythm for the rest of the frantic world?

And then there are the details of life. The means of grace are the details of life itself, embodied in the way of life of the order and the sense of one’s own formation discovered in dialogue with spiritual directors, pastors and such. Here we deal with issues like food, clothing, sleep, travel, entertainment and on and on. These topics we have outlined above in the Rules. But we must remember: the Rules of the order are lived by individual *people*: “postulants” - those who are getting a peek into things, “novices” - those who are taking a step into the order, and finally, those who are taking “vows” (either first or final vows) and are making more serious commitments. The demands are adjusted to each. Some have weak stomachs, and the rules of fasting must be waived. Others simply cannot, at this time, handle so much silence, and the rules about not talking are waived. But then again, is it wise simply to have *no* consideration about fasting? What does this say about our culture and our progress in renunciation? All of these matters will have to be addressed in each community in the particulars. Nonetheless, I think in a general way they must be considered in an evangelical theology of religious life.

Conclusion and Implications

There are tightropes to be walked here. Monasticism is not simply a form of, for example, sexual renunciation. Part of monasticism's enduring character over history, I think, has been because of its comprehensive character. It addresses money, work, rhythm, time, sexuality, devotion and more. Yet there is, within monastic history and practice (for better and for worse) a recognition of the roles and means of renunciation that are important. We are, perhaps, unfaithful to monasticism to neglect these. What will it mean for an evangelical individual or community to form an authentically "religious life" (or "order" or "monastery")? It should be clear from the above that a wide range of models are at our disposal for consideration. Again, the possibilities are endless. At the same time, we cannot develop an evangelical "monasticism" or "order" without consideration of vision, intention, and means. By examining our aims, our Rules, our vows, our forms of life, our rhythms, and our details, we take valuable steps forward toward realizing an authentically evangelical religious life, a monasticism that is truly *monasticism.*

Monasticism that is *Postmodern*

It is interesting to think that from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries, Christian religious life played a significant role in the preservation, development, and spread of Christianity. The monasteries preserved Christian documents during the "Dark Ages." Advances in theology, in devotion, and in community life were pioneered by religious orders. The Christian faith was advanced significantly, as mentioned above, by various religious orders. Key theologians and leaders of the Church were members of religious orders. One could even argue that, when Christianity was at its best, it was *led*, in the premodern era, by religious.

In the modern period, from the sixteenth through the twenty-first centuries, religious life has played less of a role. The foundation of the Jesuits and the development of a wide range of apostolic congregations led to an expansion of compassionate and missionary activity led by religious. But in both the Roman and the Orthodox traditions, modern religious life appears sequestered off into the idealized fringe of the Church. And in the Protestant tradition, there is, in the formal sense, no religious life to be found. Outside of a few Anglican, Lutheran, and ecumenical orders (and some of these more recently founded), there has been no voice of religious life from the Protestant tradition.

Until just recently. Here we are, at the onset of what many are calling a "postmodern" era, and here we are exploring monasticism again. Protestant evangelicalism grew up without any models of religious life in its own tradition, and yet the institution of monasticism was vital to the life of the premodern Church. Is there a place for an evangelical monasticism in a postmodern Church?

What is Postmodernism?

If you think there are complications with the terms "evangelical" and "monasticism," just try defining "postmodernism." We are bombarded by "postmodern" everything, and yet everyone gives a different understanding of just what "postmodern" *is*. How postmodern! In an effort to sort though some of the confusion, I will divide my attempt to clarify the idea into three parts. First I will introduce postmodern-*ism*, a set of particular reactions against modern practice and their influence elsewhere. Second I will discuss postmodern-*ity*, a broader shift in the character of Western culture.[17] And finally I will see how these two influence each other.

17. The distinction between postmodern-*ism* and postmodern-*ity* are not officially standard distinctions, though I have seen them used elsewhere. They do, however, clarify distinctions of referent.

Postmodern-ism.

The term "postmodernism" was coined in 1949 to describe an approach to architecture. As opposed to the "modern" approach to architecture wherein urban planning removes decoration and difference in order to maximize efficiency and unity, "postmodern" architecture argued that inefficiency, eclecticism, difference, and decoration have value. Buildings don't have to fit a "plan." And with architecture, "postmodernism" was born. What I am calling "postmodern-*ism*" is a technical term referring to reactions within particular cultural arenas to what was considered a distinctly "modern" way of doing things or understanding things. Architects looked back at the way buildings had been built and saw in them more than just structural design, but a philosophy of life: things must be rationally ordered, efficient, machine-like, and unified by means of a master plan. This was the "modern" way of doing things, of looking at life. And buildings did not need to be that way. "Modern" was not necessarily "right."

Then other fields of endeavor articulated similar critiques of the "modern" ways of doing things and thinking about things. Stories did not have to fit a precise plot structure and character development to be regarded as a novel. And "postmodern" literature was born. Music did not have to express particular development from tension to resolution and melodic structure did not have to flow as Western modern music had defined. And postmodern composition was born. In all of these early expressions of postmodernism, the prefix "post" communicated "anti" = *against* what was perceived as dissatisfactory. What was interesting--and what others noticed all too soon--was that the concerns of the "post" modernists about modernism were similar from one field of endeavor to another. Rationality was criticized in favor of feeling and intuition. Order was jettisoned in favor of dis-order. Clarity gave way to ambiguity; hierarchy gave way to anarchy; optimism gave way to pessimism. And I could go on and on.

In the field of philosophy, this critique of the "modern" became something of a thoroughgoing demolition of the foundations of the Western philosophical enterprise since the sixteenth century. Martin Heidegger argued that there was no "neutral" place from which to adjudicate reality. Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin argued that language does not communicate by means of representing reality, but by doing something to people, thus putting an end to the "propositional" basis of logical analysis. Jean Francois Lyotard argued that there are no longer any overarching "meta-narratives" that can guide our movement toward scientific or philosophical truth. Michel Foucault argued that knowledge--and the language of knowledge--is embedded in power structures that shape the way the reality is conceived in terms of those in power. Jacques Derrida argued that there is no stable "text" to be interpreted by others, and, consequently no normative interpretation of texts. And Richard Rorty claimed that the "foundations" of truth that Western philosophy had been built upon were ultimately illusions that must be dismissed. The universality of truth or any given presentation of truth was called into question. The determinability of any presentation of truth or reality was called into question. And finally the communicability of any presentation of truth or reality was called into question. What was ultimately communicated through all this philosophical discussion was that the portraits of reality presented to us (what is true, real, good, important, meaningful, right, or beautiful) and communicated by the institutions of contemporary society (business, military, church, educational, government, media) were, in fact, distortions of reality, distortions which were created or shaped by the interests of people in power.

As these critiques of the perceived modern approach gained acceptance, new, non-modern ways of doing things and thinking about things were developed. New architectural forms, new ways of writing literature, new ways of considering the questions of philosophy were imagined, and "postmodern-*ist*" (or simply "postmodern") forms of life were born. Here the prefix, "post" does not mean merely "anti," but truly

"after." *Postmodern* film was a form of production that followed "after" *modern* film. And, as with film, other fields developed their own critique of the modern way of doing things in their field. Thus developed postmodern law, postmodern education, postmodern theology, and much more.

And so postmodern-*ism* spread as a critique of the modern in a wide range of life. In fact, so much so, that perhaps we can say that postmodernism effected (or, more correctly, is beginning to effect) a change in our basic sensibilities about things. For example, many today no longer have hope in the Enlightenment project of a single unified understanding and mastery of the natural world. We "celebrate diversity" in society rather than forge conformity through a "melting pot" of society.

Needless to say, the postmodernist critique of the modernist way of thinking and doing things creates some tensions with evangelicalism (and with historic monasticism). It also opens up some possibilities.[18] We will address a few relevant matters below as we look at what a postmodern evangelical religious life might look like.

Postmodern-ity.

But to say that some people are reacting against what they call "modern" ways of doing things, does not describe a shift of era. And for this latter phenomena, people often

18. For a spectrum of perspectives, see, for example, Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994); Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub, 1996); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Carl A. Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005); James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

use the term "postmodern~-*ity*." We speak of the "ancient world," the "medieval world," "late medieval culture," and "the modern world." By these terms we identify major divisions of Western history. And, of course, scholars will debate how and when one period ended and another began. There is always an overlap of things. But generally, people agree that there *is* a distinction between the ancient and medieval, and medieval and modern. And we can even recognize characteristics of "late" medieval culture, features that, while part of the medieval, led to the transition into the modern period. Late medieval persons themselves could feel this shift.

It is proposed by some (and I am in substantial agreement with them) that we are currently on the edge of one of these major shifts in Western history. The "modern" era has ended, or is ending. A new era is beginning. We now live in a "post" modern world, the prefix "post" clearly meaning "after." But--and here is an important point to me--the prefix "post" with "modern" simply identifies what this time in history *is not*. We do not know what lies ahead. The term only indicates what we are leaving. What we call "post" modernism may actually be interpreted a few hundred years from now simply as "late modernism," wherein things began to change significantly while still bearing much of the fundamental character of the modern period. Who's to say? But what we must see in this is that the term "postmodernity" identifies only that we are in-between, only the gap between eras. It is not the presence of a new character, but the absence of character (*a-nomie*), that is perhaps most characteristic of postmodernity. We are in-between.

While postmodern-*ism* reflects particular attitudes within particular cultural arenas, postmodern-*ity* involves the mutual interpenetration of a host of *factors*. Changes in family patterns, employment, and education; developments in agriculture, medicine, and physics; transformations in communications and transportation; shifts in ownership, management, and consumption; the rise and fall of nations; changes in habits of entertainment and the use of technology; shifts in philosophical sensibilities; all of this and more contribute to a major shift from one era to another. And just as the movement

from feudalism to nationalism, the development of the gun, the transformation of communication through the printing press, the philosophical principles of Francis Bacon, Descartes and others, and so on, all together led to the birthing of the modern era, so similarly significant changes appear to be leading us into a new era once again. The term "postmodernity" identifies this transitional space between the modern era and what lies ahead. While postmodernism can be grasped--at least in its particular expressions--by an examination of the precise arena of culture in view, postmodernity can only be grasped only through a sense of the whole acquired by an exposure to transitions taking place in a wide range of fields.

The co-interpenetration of these factors leads to a basic *condition*, the condition of postmodernity.[19] But we must remember, when we describe the condition of postmodernity we are describing the character of a space in-between, a gap in history. We are not describing an "alternative culture," or the "next wave" or anything of the like. We are simply describing the condition of the liminal period between periods. But this liminality, this postmodernity, *does* have characteristics. For example, there is a de-centeredness to postmodern culture, a kind-of ephemeral character. We shift from an industrial or "machine" age to a cybernetic or "information" age, where information itself is a commodity. "Image" is important, and not just for computer screens; people hire their own "image management consultants." Again, I could go on and on. In this way we can speak of these conditions as so many features of a "postmodern" era, as features of postmodernity.

And then there are the *responses* we make toward the conditions in which we find ourselves. Here we speak of our own chosen life *in the midst of* postmodernity. On the one hand, there are those who live unconscious of the ephemeral characteristics of

19. See, for example, Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

postmodernity or consciously choose to dive into it. These people live from connection to connection, from image to image, living at an ever faster pace perhaps without hope of any stable sense of ultimate meaning. On the other hand there are those who react (consciously or unconsciously) against various aspects of the postmodernist milieu. Perhaps they choose to identify with a particular locality, remaining even when career opportunities are scarce. Perhaps they choose to opt out of consumer expectations, making transactions through bartering instead. On the one hand we can think of these responses as two separate expressions of the postmodern condition--perhaps we could call label them "hypermodernity" and "postmodern realism."[20] On the other hand we might want to think of a "postmodernist" response to the condition of "postmodernity" (which is really a response to late modernity as it is experienced in the present). So is "postmodern" a description of the shallow and ephemeral hyper-individualist present, or is "postmodern" a description of the traditionalist, communitarian response to what they feel is a shallow and individualist world? The answer to this question is *both*. The term is used in literature about postmodernism to refer to both. The point, however, is not the terminology but our understanding of the phenomena. And we must realize that part of the era itself are the living responses to it. So it was with the modern world, and so it is with the postmodern. The configuration of models of life--and how they navigate their differences--are one of the best signs of the character of the historical period itself.

The interplay of the postmodern .

As we have suggested, there is also an interplay between postmodernism and postmodernity. Our postmodern-isms help to create the character of the postmodernity in which we live. Similarly, our postmodern-isms are often taught to us not by narrowly

20. For this distinction and these labels see, Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

specialist architects or philosophers, but through the ways in which we begin to do things: through patterns of consumption, our use of technology, or our habits of relationship, through the medium of postmodernity. Just as most modern people did not learn their hope in science and reason to solve the problems of the world by a thorough reading of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, but through switching from a crossbow to a gun, so a postmodern person does not learn postmodernism through reading Derrida, but by watching Television commercials. There is an ongoing dialogue between modernity, postmodernity and postmodernism (and modernism, as well) that is simply part of the culture we live in. This interplay, I think, has great significance for our own sense of "self" and "meaning": concepts that have immense implications for evangelical and religious life. Each element of this interplay (modern, postmodernism, postmodernity) introduces different nuances to the contemporary person's or community's sense of self and meaning. The evangelical and the religious have their own core understandings of self and meaning that are part of their own traditions. The challenge, then, is to find how they relate.

The interplay between postmodern-ism and postmodern-ity has, however, made use of the term "postmodern" problematic. Is ephemeral individualism "postmodern" or is communal tribalism "postmodern"? Literature from sociology, culture studies, philosophy and theology use "postmodern" (and its related -ities and -isms) variously. I suspect that the term does not currently have sufficient consensus surrounding it to function as a clear referent. Perhaps in the future I will use other, more specific, terms to refer to the condition (or particular features) of contemporary Western culture and to our reactions to perceived modernism. For the remainder of this paper, however, I will continue with the distinction between postmodern-ity and postmodern-ism as presented, whatever their specific characteristics may be.

Postmodern Evangelical Monasticism

We have explored our three terms separately. We have examined "evangelicalism": concerned for laity, scripture, faith, doctrine, conversion, and mission; Eager to welcome kindred spirits, yet cautious about involvement in the world. We have learned about things monastic: "religious life", a life given over to God; "religious orders," concrete institutions designed to facilitate and embody this life (complete with rules, vows, rhythms and such); "monasticism," a particular religious life of withdrawal. We have also learned about things postmodern: first postmodern-*ism*, a (nonrational, skeptical, concrete, pessimist, listening to the marginalized) reaction to the modern way of seeing and doing things; then postmodern-*ity*, a (decentered, rootless, ephemeral, image-oriented, surface) in-between culture in which we now live. We are now ready to put our three terms together. What might a "postmodern" evangelical religious life/monasticism look like? What would it require? Needless to say, only a few tentative musings can be given here.

Postmodern -ist *Evangelical Monasticism.*

First we might consider postmodern-*ist* evangelical monasticism, our own responses to the modern way of doing evangelicalism or monasticism. For the evangelical, I think, the very presence of monasticism would be a postmodern act. First, it states that Christian "discipleship" is more than reason, more than information transfer. In one sense it is a return to our evangelical emphasis on conversion *experience*.[21] Christian discipleship in a monastic setting is formation into a life and a particular life-style. True, there are theological components to this, but academic training must be placed side by

21. One need only recall the intensity of Puritan "conferences" designed to confirm the precise character one's of experience and the dynamics of the divine-human relationship and compare this with the overly cognitive expectations of initial and ongoing conversion in evangelicalism today.

side with devotional progress and practice in the virtues. Consider how the Jesuit order describes the formation of its members:

> "There should be an organic unity in the entire formation, so that from the beginning of the novitiate and throughout the entire course of studies, spiritual formation, the work of study, and apostolic activity should be closely integrated. All who have charge of the training of our members, either in government or in teaching, should diligently and harmoniously work together for this integration.[22]

Evangelical seminaries, for example, have been slow to develop this kind of harmony of spiritual formation, the work of study, and apostolic activity. Consequently, in our modern approach to learning we have left off important, less rational aspects of Christian conversion and discipleship.[23]

Second, I think that a new evangelical monasticism will be somewhat postmodernist in that monasticism is generally an expression of the laity rather than the hierarchy. Religious orders are not started by the hierarchy of the Church. The founding and developing of religious orders is left to the spontaneous leading of individuals and small groups. That is part of their character or charism. The assumption is that we expect Christians in general to grow in their relationship with God, but that God invites some to make more demanding commitments. While this approach can become distorted into an unhealthy elitism dividing "special" or "holier" Christians from "ordinary believers," I think it is still reasonable to assume that God will lead various people into different ways of embodying their relationship with God. To permit and even encourage the spontaneous

22. John W. Padberg, ed., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), Norms IV.66,#1.
23. For a reflection on monastic learning and its differences from university learning see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd, trans. Catherine Misrahi, reprint, 1961 (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

development of random monastic communities would speak directly against the modernist "comprehensive control" approach to Church growth.[24]

A third reflection regards the views of postmodern~-*ist* thought. As mentioned above, the primary concerns of postmodernism and evangelicalism are not necessarily easy friends. Some careful reflection is needed to sort out the wheat from the chaff in, for example, postmodernist philosophy. We must both learn from and critique postmodernism, identifying the dangers of the Western modern philosophical system, as well as those of the alternatives suggested by some who have reacted to that system. The term "scholarship" has etymological roots in the Greek word *scholadzo*, meaning leisure, unoccupied, devotion to something. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican friar, and therefore having the freedom to devote himself to the prayerful reflection on and the communication of the Christian faith (part of the specific charism of the Dominicans, the Order of Preachers), was able to explore and reconsider Aristotelian and Muslim philosophical principles and their application to the Christian faith in a way that transformed the history of the Church. Here was a true *scholastic*. Oh, the need for such scholastics today, who give themselves to the prayerful evaluation of current philosophical notions for the sake of the kingdom of God!

And we must apply this postmodern-*ist* approach not only to evangelicalism, but also to monasticism. While Protestant evangelicals are generally unfamiliar with monasticism, for many Roman Catholics, the errors of modernist religious life are only too well known. They have been addressed to some extent in the *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life* in the Second Vatican Council. The call for the return to Gospel living and for the re-appropriation of the vision of the founder of each order in the unique contexts in which religious find themselves was not just a matter of

24. Some of this is already present in the cell church movement. With religious orders, however, we find (1) an assumption that the pioneers are making special commitments, and (2) that while pioneering they retain accountable relationships with the Church at large in some fashion.

"removing habits." It communicated a profound sense of freedom for individuals and communities to find themselves anew, not merely as members of the "holiness factory" of the modern church, but as authentic believers in Christ. Since the council, religious orders have experienced the strengths and weaknesses of this new freedom, and a careful study of the history of religious life from 1950-2000 would yield much fruit for those who would desire to found religious orders today.

This postmodern~-*ist* evaluation of monasticism would involve a reconsideration of the vision of monasticism. How have the aims of religious life been perceived in the ancient world, in the medieval world, in the modern world? How do those aims reflect the times or the structure of religious orders more than the Gospel itself? These questions always return in times of monastic renewal. We must also look at the Rule, and at the very nature of a Rule. On the one hand, both postmodernism and postmodernity are cautious about too much order. But on the other hand, in the midst of a chaotic postmodernity, the fundamental sense of order in monastic life is attractive. I suspect the resolution(s) of these tensions between order and disorder--insofar as we *need* resolution in a postmodern world--will come in the midst of reflection on the notion of "intention," and through prayerful and lived experimentation with a re-appropriation of monastic Rules. And finally there is the sense of the "means" of religious life, the particulars of housing, clothing, work, and so on. Once again a dialogue between postmodernist sensibilities and the history of religious life will make for a productive environment for the development of a viable "new monasticism." Interesting enough, as we explore these matters, I suspect we will find ourselves reappropriating in new ways, the evangelical cautious attitude toward the world.

Finally, I believe that an evangelical monasticism would be somewhat postmodern-*ist* by its very nature in that it is about a way of life. Perhaps one of the basic principles of postmodernist sentiment is "don't tell me; show me." It is the Gospel lived,

not explained (or at least, not *merely* explained) that a postmodernist appreciates. And this is what monasticism is all about.

Evangelical Monasticism In Postmodern -ity.

And then there is the place of evangelical monasticism in postmodern-*ity*, our role in the midst of an in-between culture, a culture that is leaving a modern era behind, yet growing from it into something new and unknown. Here it is a question of how we reflect the contemporary culture at large, or how we speak to that culture. It is a question of contextualization or inculturation. What might appear as we imagine an evangelical monasticism in the midst of postmodernity?

The first thing that comes to mind for me is the place of stability in a very unstable world. The very nature of postmodernity is "decentered," "unstable." Yet the very character of monastic life is very centered, very stable, grounded in the Gospel of Christ and in the history of the Church. So once again the very idea of the renewal of religious life is postmodern. The rhythms, the ordered relationships, and the freedom for experimentation (never too much order!) exhibit and invite others into a stability and rootedness and freedom that are compelling in a culture of *anomie*. Just as the monastic institutions provided a stable center that preserved the Church through the collapse of the Roman empire and the centuries of the Dark Ages, so they can do so today.

And in so doing religious orders provide models or images (remember "image" in postmodernity) of alternative cultures that are neither slavishly "modern" nor slavishly "postmodernist." Authentically evangelical religious orders provide real meaning rather than a cheap modern "answer." They are able to demonstrate righteousness (= right relationships). Communal monastic expressions can welcome and absorb the marginalized into their life. Communities of urban religious can plant urban gardens, reconciling people with the land. Entire networks of evangelical religious can engage in

spiritual warfare against the spirit of runaway greed by volunteering to live at a much reduced standard of living (remember the vow of poverty). Again, the possibilities are endless. One danger we must face in this process is trying too hard to make it happen or to do it "right." I must confess I have this fear of "new monasticism" being simply an expression of the privileged opportunities of progressive evangelicals. Oh, just as in Egypt, may God raise up religious movements of the proletariat, and let us welcome them with open arms!

While some of the ministries of religious life in the midst of postmodernity owe to its stability, other ministries open up because of the freedoms of religious life. A sodality (select group with special commitments) is configured differently than a modality (general group, all come). Neither is more valuable or holy than the other, and in fact I think the heart of God in Scripture cries most deeply for the local congregation. Nonetheless God raises up those in various times and places, who have a freedom (by nature of their special configuration and commitments) to explore aspects of Christian living that is simply unavailable to a modality. A community that shares both a commitment to simplicity of life and many of their possessions requires much less money or time in employment to "survive." Consequently a good deal of time or money can be released for use in kingdom experiments.

Michel Foucault, a historian of ideas who has been oft associated with postmodernist thinking, argues that the role of the intellectual today has been somewhat co-opted by economic interests. Whereas in previous centuries, the presence of the ivory-tower intellectual who could view the world from a distance and pronounce upon the nature of things was known and respected, in our late modern world intellectuals are more often hirelings of special interest groups (pharmacological companies, energy cooperatives, universities with tight tenure requirements . . .). What we see and how we see it are shaped by the forces surrounding our economic/intellectual life. But is Foucault right? At least in one particular case, I think he is not. The hermit, needing nothing,

having no responsibilities, answerable to few (and here is the tension) has the possibility of near "neutrality" in Foucault's categories.

I have this phrase I throw around here and there. It is that *late modern society has produced many collections, but few real communities; many individuals, but few real solitaries*. My suspicion is that evangelical religious orders will be forced to (and will be free to) discover community and solitude all over again. This is a desperate need today. My conviction is that we are looking too much to the world to provide cheap imitations of these, and that only by rooting ourselves in Christ and allowing ourselves to go deep over time can we develop viable means of embodying community and solitude today. But again, this kind of experimentation is especially available to those who have few responsibilities in terms of family (there *is* a place for celibacy), money, employment and so on. Vowed living has its advantages, yes? And again, I think all this exploration will come not from some overly rational plan, but from local foundations, from particular monastic foundations with all their inefficiencies and decorations (how postmodern!).

One final comment: religious life will confront postmodernity also with regard to renunciation. And, I think, this area will be uncomfortable for all of us, eager new monastics as well. Late modernity in the West has made a god of comfort, convenience, accomplishment, and safety. If we look at the history of monasticism we must reckon with the fact that monks are generally not comfortable. Nuns do not enjoy modern conveniences. Most do not accomplish much. Their life is not always safe. The religious life is a commitment to realize the most we can be in Christ, and to do this we must face our own dysfunctional desires at their roots. Intentional renunciation has always been a part of this process in religious life. I'm not sure we will be able to speak with power against the violence or the perversion or the greed of postmodernity apart from a fundamental confronting of our own self-centeredness, a confrontation that employs the means that religious have used for millennia.

Conclusion

In 1982, when I was a student at an evangelical seminary, I had a meeting with one of the deans. There I made a proposal that our "advisee group" structure be revised. My impression was that these groups had degenerated to cheap small groups sharing a Bible study and prayer such that few people regularly attended (feeling the pressure of studies). While not harmful in themselves, I felt they contributed to the fragmentation and decenteredness of seminary life (family over here, church over there, school over here, advisee group over there, etc.--each with their own demands). I proposed that students do something I had been doing for a while already. I suggested that each student write, in dialogue with their adviser, their own Rule of life. Each student would make a review of their own priorities in light of the call of the Spirit on their life at that time. Then each week we would ask each other how we were doing with our Rules.[25] This way we could together support each other in an evaluation that brought the whole of our lives under a single way of life: concretely lived in the realistic details of our lives, and yet oriented to the glory of God. My idea never made it beyond that meeting, but I always liked the idea.

And then, a few years later, this group called Renovaré started. They have a common covenant and encourage a practice of examining one's life regularly together in the context of a small group. An expression of evangelical religious order?

I believe we are now ready to move beyond Renovaré covenants to bona fide evangelical religious solitaries, communities, and orders. There will be lots of practical considerations to work out, considerations that were also addressed in the history of monasticism. Where do we "go to church"? Who makes decisions about things, and how? What are the best lines of authority for solitaries, individual communities, or general

25. Without knowing it, I was encouraging something close to the Methodist Class Meeting ideal.

orders? How do we regulate such matters as simplicity or sexual purity? Do all orders have to be fully formal? What about evangelical groups of Oblates or Third Orders?

These can all be worked out in time, and, I believe, in harmony with the primary concerns of the evangelical tradition. It will require prayer, study, and practice. Hey--prayer, study and work/ministry--sounds a bit like the Benedictine Rule. My hope and prayer is that through a renewed and authentically evangelical presence of religious life in the very midst of contemporary culture we might be a witness to the presence and power of Christ in worship to God, in support of each other, in transformation of the earth, and in demonstration to spiritual forces in the heavenlies.