

Today, our concept for discussion is community, and how it relates to our Christian walk. So with that in mind, I'd like to begin with the exact opposite and explore an ancient religious practice known as *Asceticism*.

Asceticism

Asceticism was a religious practice going back to the earliest days of recorded history. Practitioners of it, known as *ascetics*, would isolate themselves from the rest of the world in order to grow closer to God (or to the gods, as it was also practiced by ancient pagans). This usually involved ritual fasting, little to no supplies and living in deserts and caves.

One of the most legendary examples was the Christian Saint Anthony, who lived in the 3rd and 4th Centuries A.D. According to legend, he spent years living in a cave fighting demons before relocating to a tomb, where he was viciously wounded by the devil himself. After being taken to a church to recover, he then spent twenty years living in an abandoned Roman fort, where he was repeatedly attacked by demons in the forms of dangerous wild beasts. It's a fascinating legend, but one which follows in a long line of ancient ascetics.

Question 1: What are the reasons why some would choose this lifestyle? What would be the benefits and drawbacks of it?

Question 2: Matthew 18:20 says that "where two or three are gathered in [Christ's] name, there [he is] with them." Would this suggest that Christ was not with the ascetics?

Question 3: Are there Biblical examples of the ascetic lifestyle? Who are they, and what were the circumstances of their practices?

Now in contrast to asceticism, there was a much younger religious practice called *Monasticism*.

Monasticism

Other religions had begun to develop the idea of living together in communal settlements for generations. However, this became much more rigidly formalized by a Christian named Saint Pachomius, who began to create the first Christian monastery in 318 A.D., when Saint Anthony – the ascetic we mentioned earlier – would have been in his 60s or 70s. Pachomius's system took off, spreading from Egypt out toward the Roman Empire as it steadily became Christianized.

The Monastic System was ordered around a group of men (and, later, groups of women) who sought to live with their whole lives focused on God. They took vows of celibacy, worked together and lived lives of quiet prayer, contemplation, simplicity and fellowship. They essentially became ascetics who were in perpetual fellowship, as opposed to perpetual isolation.

Question 4: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says that “two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” With this directive in mind, what may be the benefits and the drawbacks of the Monastic lifestyle?

In the 1960s Civil Rights Era, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Junior preached a vision which he referred to as the “beloved community.” While he certainly had a more racial mindset to this phrase (given the social issues present at the time), we might look deeper into his vision and see a return to the early days of Christianity, when all who professed a love of Christ were welcome at the Lord's Table. Does this mean only those who follow a particular denomination or creed? Or is it possible that we may see Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals, Independents and even Catholics enjoying fellowship with one another up in Heaven?

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Question 5: With these questions about King's beloved community in mind, is Monasticism similar to the true community and fellowship that we're called to live out, or is it more similar to asceticism in shutting out the diversity of other believers?

Hebrews 10:24-25 commands us to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Notice here that it says to "meet together," something which can only be done if we've first parted ways.

Final Question: What to you seems like the ideal Christian life? Is it one of these concepts, or somewhere in between?