

Ancient Monastic Advice for Modern Cross-Cultural Workers

By ANDREW RICHEY

Andrew Richey is a spiritual director who has spent the majority of his adult life involved in cross-cultural ministry. He is the founder of Way Station Spiritual Development and the co-founder of the Second Half Collaborative.

The monastic impulse first expressed itself within Christianity around the third century, as intrepid characters such as Paul of Thebes and Antony the Great shifted to the Egyptian desert in pursuit of the ascetic life. These “desert fathers” inspired thousands, both men and women, to follow suit, leading to the establishment of numerous spiritual communities that became the model and inspiration for virtually all forms of Christian monasticism that were to come.

I was first introduced to the desert dwellers by means of their teachings and wisdom collected in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.¹ Truthfully, it was a rough introduction. I found most of their “words of wisdom” to be quite befuddling and their way of life rather unappealing. But as I slowly worked my way through the *Sayings*, I was finally able to pinpoint why this was the case, that is, why their adopted lifestyle and its resultant viewpoints seemed so very foreign to me as a modern-day cross-cultural worker. The bottom line was that our lives were oriented around differing chief priorities.

Since as early as I can remember, I was confronted with and motivated by the following call: “The message of Christ hasn’t gone out enough. Something radical must be done!” And so I’ve spent the majority of my adult life in the “unreached, unengaged” world, attempting to get the gospel out. **My chief priority: Gospel out.**

The ancient monastics, on the other hand, seemed to be responding to a different call: “The message of Christ hasn’t gone in enough. Something radical must be done!” And so they spent their lives in the desert, attempting to get the gospel in. **Their chief priority: Gospel in.**

For the desert dwellers, it was all about genuine transformation. It was “Christ in me” or bust!—whereas most of my life has been focused on “Get Christ out there” or bust, with my own character formation hopefully taking place as a happy byproduct. One can easily predict how that has worked out: lots of frustration at a hoped-for byproduct never making its appearance.

What advice, then, might the ancient monastics have for cross-cultural workers like me? I have a feeling they might say something like, “Good on you for wanting to get the gospel out, but let’s not forget that your first task is to get the gospel in. Nurture your inner life. Focus on your own transformation. Then, with Christ formed in you, yes, go to the nations. Yes, offer the gift of your transformed/transforming self. And, yes, offer the gift of companionship to others on their journeys of transformation. And though this may sound harsh, we desert dwellers are called to point out that you have precious little to offer the nations if the only version of faith you know is one that leaves you basically unchanged. For faith without transformation isn’t much of a gospel at all.”

Perhaps a fitting conclusion would be to quote Father Ammonas directly on this score:

Do not suppose that because the righteous were in the midst of men it was among men they had achieved their righteousness. Rather, *having first practiced much quiet*, they then received the power of God dwelling in them, and *then God sent them into the midst of men*, having acquired every virtue, so that they might act as God’s provisioners and cure men of their infirmities.² 📖

1 See Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984).

2 Ammonas, *Epistle 12*, quoted in Christopher A. Hall, *Worshipping with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 228–229 (emphasis added).



This article was originally posted here:
2hc.life/blog/ancient-monastic-advice-for-modern-cross-cultural-workers
and is used with permission. Photo by Dylan Shaw on Unsplash.