

Origen

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In this lecture, we once again pick up the theme of Clement of Alexandria, and as you remember from our last lecture, we want to see how he handled the relationship between Christian faith and philosophy. We are reminded that Clement was opposed to those people whom he called the Orthodoxists, the anti-intellectuals of his age, those who believed that the Christian faith and philosophy should have nothing to do with each other.

We remind ourselves that he found that philosophy could be an attractive inducement to the Christian faith; that is, that those who first studied philosophy and philosophical thinking could see that Christianity is an alternative philosophical system. He maintained that even in philosophy “faith” is a prior act, and what does he mean by that? What he means is that even philosophical principles must be intuited by faith. Faith is, according to him, the basis for philosophy. Now what does he mean by the word *faith*? He doesn’t mean necessarily Christian faith, the way in which we understand it today. You don’t have to believe in Christ to have this faith, but the faith that is the foundation for philosophy is a general faith; that is, it intuites the basic principles of reasoning. It is a faith that knows the methods we have to follow to reason properly. Clement maintained that Plato and Aristotle and the other great philosophers all had this type of faith. As Clement saw things, both faith and reason come from God, both of them. Both philosophy and Christianity are God’s gifts. Philosophy is God’s covenant with the Greeks; the law of God is God’s covenant with the Jews. The river of truth is one with different tributaries.

Also important in his thought is that we can use Greek philosophy to understand Christianity. Clement is not here uncritical in his understanding of Greek philosophy. He is against that Greek philosophical school known as Sophism, for example, but he thinks that if we stick with Plato and Aristotle we’re doing okay. How should we respond to Clement and his ideas? First we should remember that there is some truth in Clement’s statement;

that is, that we don't want to be anti-philosophical. There's no imperative from biblical theology to say that Plato and Aristotle had nothing true to say to us, and we do maintain that what Plato said was basically false, and that his system taken as a whole is completely wrong. Yet he does say a few things that are true. Of course, even Satan has a few things to say that are truth. He confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. Yet it's my opinion that Clement of Alexandria had an inadequate view of the fall. What's the fall? I remind you that in Adam the human race fell from the original place of righteousness, and Clement did not understand entirely the implications of that fall as it affected the way in which human beings reason and reflect. Clement doesn't acknowledge as he should that the pagan philosophers are attempting to avoid God's revelation, as Paul makes so clear in the first chapter of Romans, especially around verse 18, that "they know the truth, and yet they hide that truth."

Clement doesn't seem to understand the antithesis between the Christian and the non-Christian points of view or the whole constructions of reality itself. But I don't want to be too harsh with Clement. Clement is living in an age that is not as theologically sophisticated as our own. Questions of anthropology, the way in which we understand human nature were not as well developed because the church had not the centuries that we have to reflect upon these important theological issues.

Who is God then for Clement? For Clement, God is the Most High; He is utterly transcendent. God is, in Clement's own words, "beyond being." God is so far above us that it's even improper to call God being. And the final analysis, you can't even speak of God since he has no name and cannot properly be called even Father or Lord. In Clement's system, as most analysts of his system observe, God can be known only through some type of a mystical experience. Our final analysis of Clement reveals a movement in the Eastern church; a pattern is being set in the Eastern church that will be eventually quite different from theological patterns of the Western church. Notice Clement's relationship between faith and philosophy. These two streams of the river of truth, to reflect upon Clement's own words, come from the same source, which is God Himself. These two sources, that is, God's covenant with the Greeks, in Clement's words, and God's covenant with the Jews, which is the law, have the same fount, and this merging of philosophical and theological articulations and conceptions will play an important role as we see the later development of theology in the Eastern church.

Come with me now to an analysis of Origen. Probably the most fascinating figure of the Eastern church, one of the most complex Christian fathers, and a Christian father who will be considered a heretic and beloved as a saint, Origen is one of the most fascinating figures we'll investigate in this course.

We know a lot about his biography. There are a number of whole books written on just his life. In 1944, J. A. Southwell wrote a book, *Origen: His Life at Alexandria*, and in 1946 another English-language book came out, as well as have a number of books later in our own century. His life is so fascinating that it's a subject almost of novels. We have more details concerning his life because of that great church historian we've mentioned before, Eusebius. A whole large part of Eusebius's church history deals with the life of Origen, and Jerome mentions his life as well in an extended tract. In our lectures on Origen, we'll first look at his early life and then his life as a teacher, and finally investigate him as a theologian and exegete of the Scriptures.

Origen, in contrast with many of the authors we've looked at so far or many of the church fathers, was born of Christian parents, not pagan parents. He was born around AD 185. His father faced the death of a martyr at around the year 202. Yes, Origen's father died as a martyr. Now if Origen was born in 185, he was about seventeen when his father died, approximately. Origen also wanted to die the death of a martyr, but his mother hid his clothing so that he couldn't go out and face the sword of the Roman soldier. Can you see the entire picture? There goes father facing death bravely, and Origen is ready to make at that young age, that tender age, the truest profession of faith in Christ, he too is ready to go out into the streets and publicly profess Jesus Christ before the armed guards, but mom, who's a little wiser, takes his clothes and hides them, and so he cannot run out of the house without any clothes on. And that's certainly an interesting story in the early life of Origen.

But this first moment, this first glimpse of his early life gives us an idea as to the character of Origen. He was a courageous boy, and he will be a courageous man able to stand up despite all the attacks that are going to be his. Not only was he brave, but he was very wise, or at least very intelligent. At the young age of eighteen, Origen was made the principal or the head of the catechumen school at Alexandria. Remember, Alexandria was the intellectual hothouse for Christianity at this time, and at the age of eighteen, Origen is made the head of the school.

Apparently he was not only courageous, not only brilliant, but he was quite an ascetic. We know that he was convinced that the Scriptures in Matthew 19 should be literally taken to be true. Pull from your memory banks what Jesus tells us to do in Matthew 19. There Jesus gives us the parable of our eyes causing us to stumble and they should, therefore, be plucked out. Origen believed that if a body part caused him trouble, it should be plucked out, and so Origen emasculated himself, following the literal teaching of Christ concerning that, which I don't think Christ meant literally. Anyway, that gives us another glimpse as to the early life of Origen, his courage, his brilliance, and his wishing to be a biblical Christian, at least to the best of his ability.

Origen then was a teacher. He was a teacher beginning in the year 202 in the School of Alexandria going to 231. Origen at first taught all of the courses that were preparatory for the Christians, that is, the first courses in Christianity, but when he found that to be too much of a burden, he found an assistant and eventually just taught what we would call the advanced courses. While he was being a teacher in that school, he also attended the lectures at the nearby what we would call university. He attended the lectures of the famous philosopher, Ammonius Saccas. He is the so-called founder of Neo-Platonism. That's the school that finds its basis in Plato and then becomes modified somewhat with some other teaching. And we'll see the influence of Neo-Platonism in the teaching and theology of Origen later on.

Origen was not ordained at this time, and that is going to cause him problems throughout the rest of his life, especially when he becomes famous, because those who are ordained are going to hold this against him. Later on he was ordained by bishops in Jerusalem and Caesarea, and that's going to cause even more of a problem in that he wasn't ordained by his local church. Again, if you remember with me the struggles the church is going through as it attempts to develop certain standards for ordination, standards for discipline, standards for church government itself. We in the twentieth century have many centuries to look back upon as we develop and expand our understanding of how churches should be run, so the ancient church time period is still struggling through these basic issues.

Origen in 231, and that's why we use that as a stopping point for the first part of his teaching, is going to be excommunicated by a synod, a local synod, and so he's going to have to move from Alexandria. The second part of his life is his time from about

232 to 253. There he is in the city of Caesarea, active as teacher. We know that it is during this time period that Decius and his persecution, sometime after 244, has Origen tortured for his faith in Christ, and that Origen dies in 253, having suffered torture in his body some perhaps nearly ten years prior to that, so he lives to be nearly seventy years old. Origen lived a ripe and rich and full life.

As we've seen already, he was a man who was not afraid to stand firm for Christianity. He is tortured for his faith. He is willing to die for his faith, and he does take certain passages of the Scripture literally, which caused him great physical pain. But not only was his life itself a monument of courage, but more important than his biography is the contribution that Origen makes to the development of theology and to especially the development of exegetical methods; that is, the way in which the Scriptures are exegeted.

Concerning point two of the life and writings of Origen, his writings. According to Jerome, a later figure we'll study, there were two thousand writings of Origen. In the twentieth century we do know the titles of eight hundred, so if Jerome is correct, we lost quite a bit, but what we have in these eight hundred titles is a tremendous corpus or body of writings. We know that as Origen lectured, he had certain times seven or more stenographers in his lecture room taking down every single word. Origen worked in textual criticism; he created what we call the *Hexapla*, or the Sixfold Bible. That doesn't mean that you fold the Bible six different ways; it means that there were six different columns in the Bible so that the pastor could read from the different texts. What were those texts? He had a Hebrew text of the Old Testament in Hebrew and a Hebrew text in Greek letters for pronunciation. He had the Greek translation of Aquila; another Greek translation; a third Greek translation, known as the Septuagint; and finally another Greek translation. And so he had, especially for the Old Testament, six different columns that could be consulted and compared to find the best reading of the Old Testament.

Origen worked through all the books of the Bible, and we have commentaries on all of those books. He also was an apologist for the Christian faith. We have what we call apologetical works. Perhaps most important in that body of writings is his work which we'll examine entitled *Against Celsus*. Celsus was a pagan philosopher, and Celsus was an anti-missionary pagan; that is, he went about trying to convert Christians back to paganism. He used different

arguments against Christianity, and interestingly we get some good glimpses as to how anti-Christian argumentation went. He argues that Jesus was a magician and that he was hypnotizing his audiences and was an imposter, but Origen argues against Celsus that Christianity is vastly superior to any of the goods Celsus is selling.

And the third body of his works are his theological works, and perhaps the most famous of those written between the years of 220 and 230 is his book called *On First Principles*, and that is our first systematic theological textbook, and it's a big one, by the way. Concerning that book of first principles (by the way, it's in many different English translations), we don't have the original text but a number of translations from the early church period, and in that first principles book, we have four subsections. He first deals with theology itself, the study of the doctrine of God. Then Origen wrestles with what we call cosmology, how the universe was created, in what form it's structured, and how we should understand it. Then he has a section on anthropology, the nature of human beings, and finally a book on teleology, a study of the end times. It seems that those studies aren't new and are restricted just to the twentieth century, but the Christian church, and Christians in general, have been fascinated with these questions from the very beginning.

The book on first principles, which we could spend a long time studying, but we won't, and I'd like to suggest that you do take a look at it, has one main defect running through the entire work, and that is the predominant influence of Platonic philosophy in his construction of Christianity. He wrote other dogmatic writings as well as practical ones, works on prayer, for example. Concerning Origen's theology, I would once again remind you that the best source is our textbook written by J. N. D. Kelly, and that there are many pages that examine the theology of Origen in great detail. We're going to forego an extensive analysis of his theology at this point.

Let's move ahead and take a look at the Alexandrian interpretation of Scripture. So far we've talked about two main figures in the Alexandrian school, Clement and Origen, and if you remember from our earlier lectures, we've discussed Philo, the apostolic fathers, and the apologists. We've also talked about Tertullian and Irenaeus. Before looking at the Alexandrian interpretation in detail, we should make a few summarizing remarks.

Number 1, Clement and Origen represent the direct antithesis in their biblical exegesis or hermeneutic to Tertullian and Irenaeus. You see, Clement of Alexandria appeals to a secret tradition in the church and Tertullian denies its existence. Clement gives to philosophy a divine origin; Tertullian thinks that it's incompatible with the Christian faith. And you see from this early time period two different schools of biblical interpretation coming to the forefront in early Christianity. How does Clement understand the Scripture? Clement doesn't deny that the literal sense of Scripture exists, but that it only furnishes an elementary faith. The literal sense gives us only baby Christianity, basic Christianity, the most elementary Christianity. In principle, much of Clement's interpretation is identical to Philo, who was also active in the same geographical area. Clement even goes on to allegorize the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, and he allegorizes even the New Testament miracles as if they were parables.

Origen follows in that same school that we should call the Alexandrian interpretation. He has many similarities to Philo and Clement. Origen held to what we would call a strong doctrine of verbal inspiration. Origen held that the Scriptures came from the breath of God and would hold to what we could even call a modified view of inerrancy, and yet even given that good scriptural understanding of Scriptures, that did not keep Origen from very strange exegetical practices. Concerning the literal sense of Scripture, Origen associates that literal sense with what he calls Judaizing tendencies. It's only for the simpler folk, to use Origen's own words. He usually asserts that the literal sense should be retained, as well as the allegorical sense, but that sometimes the literal sense and the allegorical sense cannot be held at the same time and, therefore, the allegorical sense has priority because, again, the literal sense is for the Christian, the allegorical sense is for those who are more mature.

And then finally, Origen introduces what we would call the moral sense of Scripture; that is, in Origen's own words, "the application of the text to the soul." And this appears more in Origen's homilies, which are really what we call sermons, than in his commentaries themselves. So the Alexandrian interpretation of Scripture is beginning, and we'll see then from this time period different schools of exegesis which will continue through the Middle Ages, move into the Reformation, and that the Protestant church will make certain judgments as to which exegetical schools should be followed in the church and which shouldn't, but the roots of that discussion are found now.

This spiritual sense of Origen is not easy to describe. It deals with the fulfillment of types and shadows and things to come, and inside the spiritual sense is what we would call the allegorical sense. What is this allegorical sense? We've mentioned it briefly as we've looked at Philo and other early church fathers. The allegorical sense, again using Origen's own words, "concerns the secret mysteries of God's activity toward human beings." He gives us some examples that we can cull from his exegetical writings, and as I've mentioned some of them briefly, we can elaborate them and understand this allegorical sense more completely in that it's relatively absent from the pulpits of the twentieth century and from commentaries of the twentieth century. For example, Origen maintains that every time the Scriptures mention an animal that we would call a donkey or a horse, that donkey or horse stands for the idea of a voice, or any time the word *today* is used as Christ speaks to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me," that doesn't mean today, that means the present age. Or one that's more familiar to us, the word *leaven* as Jesus tells us to beware of the *leaven* of the Pharisee means teaching, but Origen takes that principle, and any place that the word *leaven* is found in the Old or New Testament should be understood as teaching. And I think I might have mentioned in an earlier lecture the word *linen* that, for example, the priest in the Old Testament is to gird himself with *linen*, the word *linen* for Origen always means sexual chastity, and these are some of the rules that are being developed from the proper implantation of allegorical exegesis.

This ends our very brief analysis of the Eastern writers of the third century—Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, who was active for much of his life in Alexandria, and the new or not so new Alexandrian interpretation of Scripture. Later on we'll see how that will compare with the Antiochian school of interpretation of Scripture, and again how these schools are carried through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation.

The next part of our lecture discusses creeds in general, and we look first of all at the Apostles' Creed. In the twentieth century, churches are divided as to what type of a role creeds should play in churches. Some churches say that there should be no creeds, no creed but Christ. Others have extensive credal documents. No matter which position we take in the twentieth century, the role of creeds is an integral part of the history of the ancient church. Creeds played an extremely important part in the history of the time period that's our topic for lecturing. The Apostles' Creed and other creeds are going to play some important roles, and what

I'd like to do now is to introduce to you the development of the creeds and mention to you another important textbook that you may want to consult to fully understand this time period. This textbook is also written by J. N. D. Kelly, and this book is called *Early Christian Creeds* [1950; third ed., New York: Continuum, 2006], and there he analyzes in great details the beginnings of creeds and how those creeds develop from 325 on into 381 and then later in the church.

Lecture part A is creeds in general. How do we define a creed? That's not easy. One book that helps us to understand creeds is written by Oscar Cullmann titled in English, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, published in 1949 in London. As we wish to use the term, "creed" may be defined as a declaratory statement stereotyped in form and officially sanctioned by local church authorities. What's a creed? A declaratory statement stereotyped in form and officially sanctioned by local church authorities.

As we look historically moving on into the fourth century, going backwards in the second and third centuries, creeds were not used extensively in the church as far as we can reproduce. It's very hard to say that there was a creed of the city of Rome or a creed of the city of Antioch or a creed of the city of Alexandria, but there are, point two, what we would call baptismal interrogations. That sounds like a technical term, and it is; that is, a series of questions which would publicly be asked during a baptism of an adult, and there would be a set question and a set response. An interrogation, that is, a discussion between the pastor and that person who is about to be baptized. These are not really creeds but should be seen as forerunners of the creeds. From the very earliest literature of the ancient church, these baptismal interrogations were being used. We know even from the time of Justin Martyr that there was a settled form for baptismal questions or interrogations in the various geographical areas.

Point three: why were creeds developed? Mostly we think that creeds were developed to combat heresy; that is, that as someone was saying something is wrong, if you wanted to maintain that all the people in your congregation understood the correct teaching, you could develop a creed that would repudiate that false teaching. But not only was there what we would call a negative function, that is, negating certain teachings that were rampant in the church, but we note that there was a positive function for the implementation of creeds as well. The creed served the function of publicly expressing the churches reason for being.

As the church would memorize, and memory was much used in the ancient church period, as there was no paper at all, it hadn't been invented, and . . . you would use the skin of a sheep to write something, as paper was not used, some memory was used and the church had tremendous memory abilities. [This is] much as many of our Asian brothers and sisters do today, as we understand the Korean church, for example, that many members of the Korean church would memorize whole books of the Bible, so that was much more similar to the ancient church period. And the church would memorize a formula and recite that formula together, professing their common faith in Christ, so creeds served then as perhaps first as baptismal interrogations and then developed with both positive and negative functions in the confessing community.

How about this Apostles' Creed? Point B. The Apostles' Creed is a grandchild of an earlier creed which we call The Old Roman Creed. Its source in Latin is a text called the *vetus symbolum romanum* or *The Commentary on the Apostolic Symbol or Creed*, and that was published in the year 404. That's the earliest Latin text that we have; however, in the Greek language a virtually identical text is given in 340. And the *Texas Receptus*, the received text of the Apostles' Creed, is finally published in the sixteenth century. So we see, though, that from around AD 340 to 400 both the Latin church and the Greek-speaking church are saying a creed that are virtually identical and that creed is what we call today the Apostles' Creed.

This Apostles' Creed was confessed certainly before the first printed text, was confessed throughout the Middle Ages, and is used in the time period of the Reformation. Luther made one important change in the Apostles' Creed. He changes the confession of believing in one holy Catholic church; he changes that to read one holy Christian church, just to make sure that everyone understands that the Roman Catholic Church is not the only church. This important Apostles' Creed was said then in the early church period after baptism. It was a declaratory creed as the new Christians would come and be baptized and the church with the new Christian believers would stand together and confess this creed, that they believed these things together. We know this to be the case certainly corporately in corporate church worship in the eighth century, much later than the time period of the ancient church, and yet we also know that Augustine of Hippo, whom we haven't looked at yet, who was born in 354, advises his people to recite their creed daily, and we know that by the year 650 many monks in the monasteries are each night reciting

the creed together. Certainly this Apostles' Creed performed an important function both in the individual piety of the church and the corporate worship of the church.

As individual Christians would have a time of devotion to their Lord, a time of reflecting upon their Christian faith each day, so Augustine advises people to commit this creed to memory and to constantly rehearse it in their minds. And again, as I've mentioned, it performed an important function positively of pronouncing to each other the church's reason for being.

I just have a few more comments that I'd like to make about the development of the Apostles' Creed. There is one part of the creed that is the subject of great controversy in the twentieth century by those churches which implement this creed, and that's that phrase "the descent into hell," Jesus descending into hell, and it might prove instructive for those of you who do use this creed to see the origins of that famous phrase. The phrase makes its first appearance in the creed in a printed text in the year 359, so it does have an early origin. In that publication of the creed, it affirms that Christ died and that he descended to the underworld. And in that creed we see that He descends not to hell but to the underworld, but the descent figuring prominently comes from the East and not from the West, and the West, the Latin church, admits it through Eastern influence. The descent is mentioned by people like Polycarp very early in the church, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others as well, and so the phrase "the descent of Christ" has a very early origin in the church, although whether Christ descends to hell and what exactly that means is still an area of great discussion in the twentieth century, and we see that the earliest mention of the descent is a descent to hades or a descent to the underworld.

We move to a new time period in our church, the time period that is generally called the Nicene age. We've looked in our timeline at the apostolic fathers, those who come immediately after the writing of the New Testament, and then we've moved into the apologists, those who are struggling for existence, those whose main work, literary works, are writing apologies or defenses for the Christian faith. Then we moved into a third time period as we analyzed the Eastern and Western writers, as we've seen the Latin and Greek writing beginning to develop Christian literature, the development of the first systematic theology by Origen, and now we move into the specific time period surrounding the council of Nicea.

That council, by the way, is in 325, and that should be one of the few dates that you try to memorize as you attempt to understand the ancient church.

The ancient church period is a complex one as we understand history and theology and political theory, as for example, the rise of the emperor Constantine. And so as you try to arrange this material in your own minds, think in terms of this development from the apostolic fathers through the apologists and now to this age known as the Nicene age. Put that date of 325 in the memory banks, and these few dates will provide a skeleton upon which we can hang the flesh, the skin, and the muscles of the theological writings on to this bare bones of history so that we can understand the development of historical theology.

Before we enter into a discussion of the Nicene age in our next lecture, we should remember what we have seen so far. We should remember that the church is struggling with important practical questions. The church is struggling with persecution and the lapsed. This important phase of church history is going to fade into the background as we enter into the period of the Nicene age, because in 325 the church is legitimate; that is, the Christian church is going to go from the time period of being illegal and punishable by death to the actual religion of the Roman Empire, almost overnight as the new emperor Constantine takes control in 312; in 313 there's going to be this radical transformation in societal structures as the church goes from the church of the catechumens to the church of the cathedrals, and that's why we make this important time break at the time of the Nicene Council. And the theology which we've learned so far is going to be fully developed, and a theology of especially the relationship between the Father and the Son is going to come into full bloom as we discuss the various characters and the various controversies surrounding the Nicene Council and the Nicene age, which we'll do in our next lecture.