

## Ambrose and Victorinus

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Ambrose. First we'll look at his life. Ambrose was born somewhere around the year AD 340, and he was the son of a governor of Gaul, which is present-day France, and was educated at Rome, the capital city of this part of the empire. He was trained to be able to follow his father into the highest offices of Roman government and distinguished himself. He himself was elected as an official of upper Italy, sort of a provincial governor. As you know, sometime afterward, Ambrose ceased to perform government work, and he then moved to the episcopal chair at Milan, a city that was considered to be the second capitol of Italy. This occurred in the year 374. And Ambrose prior to his election as bishop was only a catechumen and had not yet been baptized.

This seems a little bit strange to us, and I need to put in a parenthesis. Do you remember the canons of the Council of Nicea in 325, that they dealt with some of the difficult disciplinary problems of the church, especially the problem of the lapsed, and do you remember the eleven years of penance that had to be done? One of those periods of penance was that the person who had previously been a full member of the church was treated like a catechumen. And perhaps in your church you have catechism classes, classes for those who are preparing to make an adult profession of their faith. Ambrose had been an upstanding citizen, had been a leader in government, but he was only a catechumen in the church, was not baptized, had not celebrated the Lord's Supper, and suddenly he's made bishop of the city of Milan.

We don't need to go into an ethical judgment whether it's right for such a thing to occur. I think that oftentimes it would be quite dangerous for someone who has not been trained extensively to become pastor of a main city church, but that's neither here nor there. What is interesting is to see the flexibility and the movement in the church, perhaps not unlike ours, that people who come from prominent positions in government or in business can immediately be made spokespersons for the church, even, for

example, a few months after their conversion, and we see that especially in the 1980s here in America, as prominent figures of government or business become Christians and suddenly they are thrust into places of leadership in the Christian church. That analogy that we understand from the 1980s was similar to what happened in terms of the life of Ambrose. Ambrose was also a good friend of the Cappadocian father, Basil the Great, and Ambrose had some ability in the Greek language.

Although this was a strange election, in my opinion, someone going from catechumen to bishop, nevertheless, his life was one of exemplary service. He was a fine bishop of the city. He was, as the son of a major Roman governor, quite wealthy and had made quite a bit of money himself. And immediately upon assuming the office of bishop, he sold all of his personal wealth and used that money to help elevate the sufferings of the poor. He did not attempt to win favors with the imperial government and began to develop a theory of the separation of the church and state. That theory is going to remain theory and still remains theory for much of Europe. In America, in some sense church and state are separated, but Ambrose, as he begins to develop this theory, never saw that theory actualized. But Ambrose played an important role for the Christian church in seeing that the great and mighty, the powerful emperor was in the church and not over the church. Let's face it, Ambrose had tasted the tinsel and tasted the power of great leaders in the Roman Empire. His father was a major figure in the Roman Empire. He himself had been groomed for assuming positions of leadership and power. And he knew the machinations of government, and so he was very helpful in developing these relations.

Ambrose was very active in his episcopal work, but besides that activity, he found time to write as well. To the emperor Gratian, who was later murdered by Maximus, he wrote a work entitled *On the Faith*. This work was a general defense of the divinity of the Son against the Arian attacks that were still going on at this time. This is after 381, but in various parts of the empire, Arianism was not suppressed, especially in the outlying regions and areas, and especially with what we would call barbaric tribes. Ambrose also wrote a work entitled *On the Holy Spirit*, a work that is not very original in that its theology is rather dependent upon Basil the Great's stuff. However, it's an important work in that, being trained for government, he was able to read the Greek language, and so what he did was take Basil's thought and translate it into the Latin language so that he provided the bridgework between

the East and the West, and that's going to be helpful later on for Augustine.

He delivered some lectures that were entitled *On the Mysteries*. He also delivered some lectures on the sacraments. These were taken down by scribes and have been preserved to us. These documents give us important information as to how the sacraments were understood in the town of Milan. There was not at this time a unified theory throughout Christendom concerning the nature of the sacraments, a topic that we'll be discussing later on in the lectures.

I need to mention something that will be interesting later on in the medieval period, but Ambrose of Milan was very concerned to have a good clergy in the city, a good college of pastors, and it has been the tradition from the time of Ambrose on to have only married clergymen. It's interesting for those of you who aren't married that there was a prejudice against single pastors and that they believed that to be a good pastor of a congregation you have to be married. I won't make any snide comments about knowing how to suffer being important to being a Christian pastor and therefore you need to be married, but the important point is that this was a tradition in the city of Milan and in the Middle Ages as the Roman hierarchy begins to establish a unified celibate clergy throughout the whole church. The Milanese pastors are literally going to riot, as is the city of Milan, as the attempt is made to make the clergy of Milan celibate. So that was an interesting part of the story of the town of Milan, but that's later on in the Middle Ages.

Ambrose also was concerned with ethics, and he wrote a work, *On the Duties of Ministers: A Helpful Pastoral Handbook*. This work was apparently modeled on the work by the same name written by the great Latin writer Cicero. So that was Ambrose as pastor. He had a kind heart. He sold all of his goods and gave it to the poor of the city of Milan so that they would be alleviated to provide an example of Christian piety and Christian charity. He wrote works on the sacraments, on the duties of ministers, and was a very successful pastor.

How about Ambrose as theologian? He's not as well-known as a great theologian. His fame can perhaps be drawn from his work as a bishop, but he's also important as the direct bridge and link and influence upon Augustine. What I would like to talk about in looking at Ambrose as theologian is the anthropology of

Ambrose, his study of human nature. His study of how human beings are created, how they fell from sin, and what the nature of that restoration is from the life of sin in Jesus Christ.

Ambrose had some unique theories concerning how human beings are restored from the state of sin and guilt. His conception has been labeled by historical theologians “a mystical conception.” This idea maintains that the soul of the human being is redeemed by immediate mystical union with the Redeemer as one becomes converted. The most elaborate conception that Ambrose gives for this relationship is the figure of the union of the heavenly Bridegroom with his bride. This idea is well established in the Scriptures. The church as the bride of Christ, Jesus as the heavenly Bridegroom, and this figure of the union of the bride and Bridegroom is talked about by Ambrose in terms of a mystical union of the soul of the Christian with the Savior, Jesus Christ. This idea is not a new one. It was popularized in the East by Origen; in the West, then, by Ambrose. And we see that theme in many of Ambrose’s writings.

This redeeming relationship with Christ is initiated by Christ Himself. Christ seeks out the sinner. He calls the soul of the sinner before that soul can come to Him. In one prayer Ambrose says, “Come, Lord Jesus. Seek your servant. Seek your weary sheep. Seek me, find me, take me, carry me. Come, for you alone can recall the wanderer. Come and seek your sheep. Not now through servants and hirelings, but in your own person. Take me in the flesh which in Adam fell, carry me in the cross which brings salvation to those that err, which alone gives rest to the weary and which alone whosoever dies shall live.” And yet as he maintains the sovereign movement of Christ toward the sinner, he also sees the necessity of the cooperation of the soul. The soul must in its turn seek and draw near to Jesus, especially by the practice of ascetic mortification. This is very important for a later understanding of the Middle Ages, the medieval time. This drawing near to Jesus is done by denying the flesh. Once again, listen to the words of Ambrose: “Let us die with Him that we may live with Him. Let there be in us as it were a daily practice of and inclination for dying. Thus the soul”—that ends Ambrose’s quotation.

So our soul may become one with its Redeemer, as Ambrose says again: “Made in Him, crucified in Him, buried together with Him, restored to life in Him.” Do you see this mystical relationship that Ambrose is trying to paint for us, this picture of the soul that is united with Christ by His calling and yet united in our suffering

with Him in our imitating Him in His sufferings in our denying ourselves and practicing ascetics?

What about Ambrose's conception of salvation and the idea of faith and works? We know that faith and works are both necessary for salvation, according to Ambrose. Faith in terms of bare intellectual acceptance of revealed truth, as well as something far more, faith in terms of a direct personal apprehension or taking of Christ as Redeemer, and works which come as a fruit of faith. Let's also talk about his idea of grace. Of the relationship of faith and works and grace for Ambrose, grace plays the most important role. Faith and works are dependent upon grace. "Faith without which no works are really good," says Ambrose, "is an endowment of divine grace. Love is the product of grace. Understanding of the divine laws and mysteries is the effect of grace." Grace, of course, being unmerited favor, given to us by God.

Even such things as the power to pray, to lift our hearts and minds to the Lord, is according to Ambrose an operation of grace. Conversion to a life of sin to righteousness, reformation of the life, and those things which follow, those good things especially, are made possible only by grace. The power to please God is granted by God, and deliverance from sin is given to us by the Lord's mercy. In short, all goodness in the creature is received, it comes from outside, and no ground is left for glory in spiritual or moral achievements. And yet this question brings us face to face with a difficult question: that is, the relationship in Ambrose between divine grace and human will. On this point, we find that Ambrose is not consistent. He's wrestling with anthropology, and let me note here as you are schematizing things in your minds, the progression in doctrinal development. Remember the apologists. What was their main task? To present Christianity as a whole, to defend such issues as an incarnation of God.

Then we have the pre-Nicene theology as once again the relationship between the Father and the Son is hammered out. Then the post-Nicene theology as we've seen the Cappadocians, a more complete doctrine of the Trinity, especially understanding the nature of the Holy Spirit. Now as those questions are less burning, as answers to those questions are found, so the church begins to focus its attention upon new theological questions, and we see this occurring especially in the Latin-speaking West. Ambrose, as I just mentioned, is a little bit confused. How can we expect Ambrose to have clear and complete statements on issues that have not been studied in great depth, and that new

issue was the issue of anthropology, the study of who we are as Christians. So I need to mention that so that we can look at Ambrose sympathetically, and if he is a little self-contradictory, we should not dismiss him as a fool, but we should understand that he's trying to take the complex material of the Scripture that speaks about anthropology and put that into a clear and coherent system.

What about then divine grace and human will? In some passages of Ambrose, he seems to refer everything that is good in man absolutely and unconditionally to the operation of divine grace, almost as though man himself had no real freedom in the matter. But in general, Ambrose maintains that even in fallen human beings, freedom is not entirely abolished, that the human will, though unable to act effectively for the production of good works without the assistance of divine grace, still has power to accept or reject this assistance. And that salvation in the case of the individual depends on his unconstrained acceptance of the grace which God offers to everyone.

It seems clear to most scholars that Ambrose's teaching on the relation between divine grace and human will is not strictly logical or even consistent, but as I mentioned a few minutes ago, it's hard to expect this of him. What we can say is that Ambrose is far from inculcating the view afterwards formulated by Augustine, according to which (according to Augustine), the very willing of any human work must be attributed to divine sovereign initiative and no praise or responsibility for that action can be given to the human will. To the point here, the bottom line is that Augustine is an innovator or an expander of the Bible's teaching concerning anthropology. Ambrose makes some beginnings. He's hard to condone; he's a little bit confused himself. He is not always consistent, but the point is that he's first one on the field of battle or one of the first ones on the field of battle wrestling with these complex and difficult questions.

As we talked about the biography of Ambrose, we mentioned that he was one of the first persons to articulate a theory of church-state relations and to maintain somewhat of an independence of the church from the state. His hallmark was that the emperor is part of the church, not over the church. Let's take a look very quickly at one of the closing and important parts of Ambrose's teachings, and that is his doctrine of the church itself.



We've seen his life, we've seen his doctrine of man or his anthropology or his study of human nature; now let's take a look at his doctrine of the church.

Ambrose says, "The church is the medium through which individual Christians are brought into vital union with the Lord and are made recipients of divine grace." The church is the medium through which we are brought into union with Christ. He calls the church a virgin. He calls the church a bride of Christ, the second Eve, the mother of all the living. He calls the church the city of God, and that will play an important role in Augustine as he writes a book with the same title. What are the characteristics of the church? Once again let me add a parenthesis. We've talked about the nature of discipline in the church. We've talked about the sacraments in the church, but little has been said concerning a formal systematic ecclesiology, a formal doctrine of the church. Once again the church is beginning to wrestle with its own self-identity. So what are the characteristics? Number 1, the church is one. There are many congregations throughout a geographical area or throughout the empire, but all together all of these congregations form one church. Outside of this church are heretics and schismatics. They are not a part of the church. Heretics, we understand who they are; those are, for example, the Arians, and schismatics are those who are part of the church but who leave the church. Why aren't they part of the church, Ambrose asks. The heretics have defective faith, and the schismatics have defective love. Faith and love are characteristics of the one church.

What also about the church? The church not only is one; it is also holy. This does not mean that the church is limited to the spiritually perfect. That was taught by the group called the Novatianists. She is not perfect, but she longs to be so. The church is holy, but it is a mixed body. Even though it's a mixed body, it's holy because its members are cleansed from sin by baptism, they abstain by God's grace from sin, and they exhibit faith, the virtues, and the grace of right conduct. What also is a characteristic of the church? The church is apostolic. It preserves the apostolic faith, and it preserves the apostolic doctrine. He maintains that doctrine, teaching, is understandable only within the church. And last, the church is eternal. It is the city of God, and that also means that the church, which will last forever, is the place from which eternal life is transmitted. Those are beautiful characteristics. The church is one, it is holy, it is apostolic, and it is eternal.

The last remark that I want to make about Ambrose's doctrine of the church concerns an important passage of Scripture, for which in this course we need to pay special attention. It comes from the gospel of Matthew, the sixteenth chapter, verse 18. Do you know that passage? Jesus makes a pronouncement concerning Peter to Peter that says, "You're the rock, and on this rock I will build my church." This will prove to be an extremely important passage for the development of the doctrine of the church.

What is that rock? Is Peter declared to be the foundation of the church? In the time of the Reformation, there's going to be a different answer to that exegetical question than the one given in the time of the Middle Ages, but listen to Ambrose wrestling exegetically with this question of exegesis. As Ambrose wrestles with this passage, sometimes he believes that the rock is Peter, that Peter himself is the rock upon which the church is going to be built. Sometimes as he analyzes it, he knows that the rock is the confession of faith in Christ made by Peter prior to that pronouncement by our Savior. Other times, the Rock is Christ Himself who gives the name Rock to all of His disciples. So what do we conclude from Ambrose? We conclude that there's no decisive answer given by Ambrose as how precisely to exegete this passage, but you can see the development that will be of great concern in this course and then especially in the medieval church of the development of a hierarchy, a complete hierarchy, which will evolve into what we will call the Roman primacy.

That ends our analysis of Ambrose and his life and his teachings. It's a preliminary analysis. We could say a lot more about Ambrose, and there are some important books on Ambrose that you'll see in your bibliography. Before moving on to Augustine, we still need to study two other church fathers—one Latin-speaking and one Greek-speaking. Let's turn our attention to a Latin church father who is of greater importance for the development of Augustine's theology than is Ambrose, and then we'll also finally turn to the Greek church father, Chrysostom, or also pronounced Chrysostom, who also plays a role, although not as a decisive role in the development of Augustine's theology.

Turn with me now to our analysis of Victorinus—Victorinus. Victorinus was born between AD 275 and 300 in Africa and dies at about 362. And he is perhaps the link between Greek thought and Latin theological speculation. In his Trinitarian works, he attempts to use Neo-Platonic philosophical concepts. Victorinus is not very well known, but my own study of the theology of



Augustine has brought me to the conclusion that to understand Augustine, one must first understand Victorinus, and to see the philosophical influences in Victorinus helps us to understand the whole Latin Christian theological tradition. The purpose of Victorinus's Trinitarian speculation was to support the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son; however, for us his importance lies specifically in his direct relation to Augustine's Trinity teaching.

Most scholars maintain that we have in very brief outline some fifty years before Augustine what we call the psychological doctrine of the Trinity. What is the psychological doctrine of the Trinity? Do you remember in the Cappadocian fathers, they wrestled with the human analogy of the Trinity, that you have three men who are all three men and yet they are identifiable as individuals? Augustine is going to take that analogy and modify it to relate human psychology to the Trinity, and Augustine is quite famous for this what we call psychological doctrine of the Trinity, but we find that he's not the innovator of that teaching. Rather it's seen earlier in Victorinus, and we know that the works of Victorinus were available to Augustine. So fifty years before Augustine, Victorinus has worked out many of these Trinitarian questions, but also we need to emphasize that there are differences in their Trinity teaching as well.

Beginning with Victorinus's doctrine of God, it's immediately apparent that new terminology is employed for expressing His various qualities. For example, Victorinus denies that God is included in one of the four modalities of being that is talked about by Greek philosophical culture, but rather He is above all being. What does that mean? As you look at your friend or as your dog comes running in to the room as you're listening to this tape, that dog has being, you have being, I have being. Rocks even have being; they exist. What Victorinus wants to say is that God as we try to understand Him is beyond all being. There are four levels of being, according to Greek philosophical thought. We begin with things like rocks, and then you go to the highest being, human being or perhaps celestial angelic being. Victorinus says that type of discussion is not very fruitful for us as we try to talk about God, because His being as Creator is so beyond creaturely being that we shouldn't follow that path of discussion at all.

How do we know God then, if He's beyond being? As nonbeing, as beyond being, this might sound strange, but He's only known, according to Victorinus, through ignorance; that is, God for

Victorinus is some type of an omnipotent power, which means that God is beyond truth; He's even beyond all perfection. We can't even call God the most perfect being for Victorinus. Now what is this like? What type of a model is Victorinus falling upon as he describes God in these terms? Here we have an almost exact parallel to the One of Neo-Platonic thought, the supreme deity of Neo-Platonism, and so Victorinus as we analyze him is taking a philosophical definition and using Christian terminology and in a sense baptizing that Neo-Platonic deity.

As we commence our investigation of Victorinus's Trinitarian theology, it will become apparent to us that we are dealing with an essay, not so much in Trinitarian thought, but an essay in metaphysics that is based upon Neo-Platonic ontology. What's that technical word mean, ontology; that is a study of being. Victorinus can speak of a Trinity in that for him you have this one great beyond being and with that one great beyond being is also a Logos. That word *Logos* is used in the gospel of John to describe the Son, which can be translated Word or Reason, but for Victorinus, a discussion of the Holy Spirit as we understand it is not quite possible, but for him this Logos is forming a duality structure, it is twofold, the Logos, the Word of God, is both Son and Spirit. So the Godhead is in a unity which transcends number because number is inherently that which is created, so you can't talk about a number, you can't even talk about three persons, and yet you can talk about the Godhead, again according to Victorinus, as existing in triplicate. And so the being of God exists in a state of staying the same, that would be equivalent to the Father, going forth, that would be the Son, and coming back from the Son, that would be the Spirit. This doesn't sound very familiar to us. This is different from what we see in the Cappadocians. This is not easy to understand, but you don't need to understand it in the same depth as we understand the Cappadocians. Can you see the radical discontinuity between the Trinitarian formulations of the East and West? Victorinus seems like a step backwards, and in many ways he is, although he's doing things at the same time as the East.

So how is the Godhead explained for Victorinus? He finds in the human soul the best analogy to the Trinity. Let me say that again: he finds in the human soul the best analogy to the Trinity. In the human soul, according to Victorinus, there are certain triadic structures. We all exist, we are alive, and we can think. We have within ourselves, the triad of Victorinus . . . we have being, we have life, and we have intelligence. These three elements in our

personality are the best analogies to the eternal unity and yet diversity within the Godhead. If our intelligence were taken away, in other words, if our heads were cut off, we would cease to be. If we stopped having life, we would cease to be, and so these three parts of our personality are consubstantial. They have the same essence. Take one away, and we cease to be. This beginning of psychological speaking is very important then for Augustine, as you can imagine.

Let's take a look at these three persons of Victorinus's Trinity. For Victorinus, the Father, as God, as I've mentioned, is beyond all knowledge. How is He described then if He's beyond knowledge? How can you describe that which you don't know? Victorinus tries. He's described as essence, as silence, as rest, and immobility. The Father, being beyond all knowledge, is then revealed and manifested in the Son. In his writings, Victorinus . . . does admit that the Father has some type, although He's beyond being, He has some type of being, but this being can only be described in terms of negative theology. What is negative theology? At this point, you might be so tired of theology that you consider all theology to be negative theology; the whole thing is negative. That's not what I mean, and that's certainly not what Victorinus means. What Victorinus is beginning is this idea (actually he's not beginning, we've seen in the apostolic fathers and apologists), but is the idea of the *via negativa*, those two Latin words, the negative way. Since God is beyond all being, we can only describe Him in terms of what He isn't. And again, we see the complete marriage of Christian theology and Neo-Platonic philosophy. So that's the Father. It seems a little foreign to us.

Seeing his doctrine of the Father moves us directly to his doctrine of the Son. How does the Son relate to the Father? Since the Father's beyond all knowledge, the Son must reveal and manifest Him. The Son is, according to Victorinus, also called the Logos, the first wisdom. This Logos is distinct from the Father, yet they are unified. The distinction between them is between being and species, or the difference between substance and form. Or as Victorinus himself describes it, the difference between potency and act. A great athlete might be sitting on the bench and there's tremendous potency in that athlete to jump high or to run fast, and the athlete sitting right next to him might be of lesser ability, but during the time of the performance of the athlete next to him, he is acting while the other athlete is in a state of potential action. That's one of the ways in which we can understand the relationship between the Father and the Son. This relationship,

though, of potency and act, in contrast to the example I used of athletes, is a consubstantial relationship. That is in a sense it's as if the one athlete sitting there sends out the other athlete. The Father engenders the act and the act then proceeds from potency and each is both. And so the Father is seen as the source of being; the Son is understood as the activity of being and the source of creation. They are one substance, one consubstantial image of potency in the Father and act in the Son.

From this analysis of the relationship between the Father and the Son, Victorinus was able to develop a theory of the eternal generation of the Son, and that theory was able to avoid the charge that such eternal generation necessarily implies change. This is not easy, and I hope you've been able to come with me in these last few minutes of studying Victorinus. In our next lecture, we'll pick up with John Chrysostom.