

Social Life Before AD 325

Richard C. Gamble, ThD

*Experience: Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*



In our last lecture, we have been examining some very difficult theological concepts. We've seen the struggles of the church as it has taken the information of the Bible and attempted to take that information and make a consistent theory concerning the nature of Christ. In today's lecture we're going to go backwards historically and begin to trace a new theme, a nontheological theme of great practical significance. In today's lecture and in the following lecture, we're going to examine three aspects of life in the ancient church which must be mentioned before we terminate our lectures on the ancient church.

We have investigated theology and politics and to a certain extent even economics, but we need to examine some other important aspects of church life to see how Christians lived in the first centuries, and so today, we will talk about worship, discipline, and social life in the ancient church period. And in today's lecture, we'll be concentrating only upon the earliest period of Christianity, the time before 325—the time period when the church, when Christianity was an illegal persecuted religion. So come with me in this more relaxing part of the lecture series in the ancient church. And we begin today with social life in the ancient church to the Council of Nicea. We'll go through this age by age.

Beginning point number one with the apostolic age. As we all know, the apostles gave quite a number of rules for living in the Bible. A general policy of Christian life developed after that time. By the end of the New Testament period, it was determined that Christians were to abstain from all lusts. They were to renounce heathen idolatry and sin, and they were to put on or cloth themselves with righteousness and virtue. They were to be watchful and in particular to pray. They were to subject themselves in a graded series of social relationships. Wives were to submit themselves to husbands. Children were to submit themselves to parents. Slaves were to submit themselves to masters. And all

were to submit themselves to civil power. The Christian church was called to be holy.

The church community from the time of the New Testament was set over against the pagan community, and yet within the church itself, there were to be no distinctions of class. There was, for example, no attempt in the time period of the Bible or in the time period that we'll be investigating to abolish the system of slavery. In the apostolic age, in the time of the writing of the Scriptures and in the time of the apostolic fathers, these principles are being worked out.

Christianity had a lot to say to a number of social issues. Again, we're talking about social life in the ancient church period. We'll focus in on a few of these important areas, and one that is fascinating and helpful for us to understand is the issue of work. Work took on new meaning in the Christian community. Here we're talking about the postapostolic times. The motive for working in the Christian church was that the Christians were not to be a financial burden to others. The Christians were to obtain the wherewithal to aid the needy, and that Christian workers were to work diligently so that they might make a good impression upon non-Christian workers and thereby commend the faith to them.

On the other hand, Greek culture saw work as in general a servile activity: if you could avoid it in any case, avoid it. If you could retire, retire. If you could avoid work, avoid it, because that's what slaves were meant to do. The Romans also regarded work as beneath the dignity of a citizen. I think this view of work is going to greatly contribute to the fall of Rome itself. A Roman citizen did not work and had a slave do the work that needed to be done instead of any Roman citizen. No Roman citizen could ever be a slave, for example.

The church in contrast both to the Greek conception and the Roman conception gives a dignity to work, even the lowest classes of workers, the slaves. The slave, although he did the most servile things, was filled with dignity as a Christian. Work itself becomes dignified. This has tremendous consequences for the whole history of Christianity and could be a theme that we could trace in a whole separate course—the idea of work and how that idea has been worked out through the centuries.

Moving on through the apostolic fathers and into the second century, there is a continuing emphasis in the Christian church upon right conduct, proper conduct. As I mentioned in an earlier lecture, actions such as abortion were forbidden in the Christian church. Christianity began to develop more and more injunctions in terms of life. They began to develop a system of precepts. The Christian life was beginning a process of developing a set of rules that the Christian needed to follow in terms of his or her life. And interestingly, we just talked about work, but some of those rules forbade certain jobs. In other words, if you were going to be a Christian, there were certain things that you can't do. For example, you couldn't be an interpreter of omens. You couldn't be an enchanter, and you couldn't be an astrologer. These activities, these jobs, were forbidden in the church, but interestingly, there was no prohibition from serving in the armed forces. At this time Christianity was still of the lower classes of life. Within the church, however, a humble origin was no hindering to advancement. We know of pastors of large churches who were formerly slaves. There's still no movement in the church up through the second century to get rid of slavery.

What about the issues of food and dress? These are hot issues in the twentieth century in certain parts of the church, and they were important issues in the ancient church time as well. From the apostolic fathers through the second century, we begin to notice certain themes immediately apparent. There was great emphasis placed upon restraint in both food and clothing. There was a movement against luxury in either case. We also note that the Christians refused to participate in many pagan festivals. The public shows were to be avoided, and we know more what was forbidden in terms of what was to be done with leisure time. There's not much information concerning what was positively suggested in terms of any leisure time. In other words, we know that you weren't supposed to go to gladiatorial shows, we know that you weren't supposed to go to theaters, we know that you weren't supposed to go to pagan festivals, so what were Christians to do? We have one description of the life of some Christians in Rome or near Rome, and we know that oftentimes Christians took walks. For example, some of the Christians in Rome would walk to the seashore and observe the beauty of the ocean. They were to go swimming at the seashore. They were also then supposed to spend their time in what is called "godly conversation," and they were to enjoy creation. So they weren't to do certain things, but as of yet, a positive theory is not available to us except for godly conversation and enjoying of nature in general.

In the third century, moving on, we see further developments. I had mentioned earlier that Christianity had an important impact upon work theory. There were also some rules that had forbidden certain forms of work, as I had mentioned. The church as it continues to advance theologically continues to advance in working out the details of a Christian lifestyle. Interesting is the more complete list of social changes necessary upon conversion to Christianity, and I have an extensive quotation that I'd like read to you from a work that is called *The Apostolic Tradition*. Remember, put yourself back historically, that Christianity is spreading like wildfire through the Roman Empire. There are tremendous conversions; thousands of people are coming to faith in Christ. Remember also this is before the time of Constantine, when coming to Christ was an extremely perilous conversion; that is, conversion experiences were not something easy, there was no social prestige that comes with it, so here we have a number of mass conversions as Christianity is becoming more popular. And as you think about these problems, once again it's in many way different from much of American Christianity, but how do you deal with people who in their pre-Christian life were quite pagan in their activities? Let me read an extensive quotation from this apostolic tradition, as I mentioned, and here is a rule or a set of rules for how newly converted people were to handle themselves. The tradition reads like this:

You might ask about professions or trades that are difficult as people are admitted to the faith [and excuse the direct language of this apostolic tradition, but they had to deal with some difficult and questionable issues]. If a man is a pimp, he must desist or be rejected. If he is a sculptor or painter, he must be charged not to make idols. If he does not desist, he must be rejected. If a man is an actor or pantomimist, he must desist or be rejected. A teacher of young children had best desist, but if he has no other occupation, he may be permitted to continue. A charioteer likewise who races or frequently races, must desist or be rejected. A gladiator or a trainer of gladiators or a huntsman or anyone connected with this shows or a public official in charge of gladiatorial exhibitions, must desist or be rejected. A heathen priest or anyone who tends idols must desist or be rejected. A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if commanded, and to refuse to take an oath. If he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected. A military commander or civic magistrate that wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If a catechumen or believer seeks to become a soldier, they must be rejected, for they have despised God. A harlot or licentious man or one who has

castrated himself or any other who does things not to be named must be rejected, for they are defiled. A magician must not even be brought for examination. An enchanter, an astrologer, a diviner, a soothsayer, a user of magic verses, a juggler, an amulet maker must desist or be rejected. A concubine who is a slave and has reared her children and has been faithful to her master alone may become a hearer, but if she has failed in these matters she must be rejected. If a man has a concubine, he must desist and marry legally. If he is unwilling, he must be rejected.

This is a fascinating clipping from the newspapers of the ancient church, some practical advice given to church leaders in how to deal with those who are newly converted to Christianity. These questions came up all the time, and this was an unwritten rule for the various occupations. Certainly this is a fascinating list, and we see the seriousness with which the Christian church in this time period dealt with questions of morality. Certain situations are not ones that we deal with regularly, and it would be fun to spend a long time examining all the various professions which are mentioned. I want to mention especially this one so that none of you are led astray. "A teacher of young children had best desist, but if he has no other job, he can continue." That does not mean you should not be El Ed majors or teach in kindergartens, but rather oftentimes in the pagan community, the association with young children also meant sexual encounters, and that was the reason that this occupation was frowned upon. And likewise we don't have many charioteers, but as you know from movies, oftentimes charioteers risked their own lives and oftentimes killed others as they were racing around the track.

So there are some cultural differences between the list that we have in the apostolic tradition and things which occur now. For example, I don't think jugglers would be automatically excluded from Christianity as they were during that time, but the cultural connotation of this type of pagan entertainment was frowned upon by a church that was convinced that it must stand against the pagan culture which was persecuting it.

Also during this time period, I have a few remarks on leisure time and food and clothing. As the church continues to wrestle with and deal with how they should walk in pagan culture, more rules were determined. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, for example, give even a complete list of which foods should be eaten. For example, if Christians are to eat meat, they should eat it boiled instead of roasted. Some of these rules will seem rather funny to us, and

once again, I could give you some extensive rules, especially by Tertullian. He even tells women how they are to wear their hair. The rules are humorous to us today, but there's an important lesson, once again, to be learned. Christianity as seen from the beginning is not just a set of beliefs but is, in fact, an entire way of life, and the Christian church has from the beginning been concerned to stand against its pagan culture.

Concerning clothing, the church is saying at this time that there should be no extravagance in clothing, and interestingly, and this would have been very helpful for the 1960s and 1970s; Christian men were not to shave, but they were to let their beards grow naturally. Of course, the Romans prided themselves on their clean-shaven faces. Also we note from this time period there was to be no dice playing or card playing, and theaters were to continue to be forbidden, and positively people were enjoying to have quiet conversation in each other's homes and to read the Scriptures.

Move with me to a second area of discussion in the pre-Nicene church, and this concerns worship, worship in the persecuted church. Once again, in the twentieth century there are various ways in which worship occurs in the Christian church. If you travel to England, you can worship in the Church of England, which is in many ways quite different from a Baptist church in the south of the United States, or you can go to churches throughout the world which have quite contrasting methods of worship, even within one denomination. Some churches are considered traditional and others are progressive. How did the ancient church worship their Savior? Let's take a look especially in the first of the apostolic fathers and apologists and look at the sacraments. There's no discussion in the twentieth century as to the sacraments. Everyone completely believes the same thing, especially concerning baptism. That was another one of the little jokes of the course. There is tremendous discussion concerning baptism, whether we should be followers of believer's baptism or infant baptism and how baptism is to be administered.

What does the ancient church provide for us for examples? Baptism, as you all know, is a sacrament whereby the individual is admitted to the fellowship of the church. There is great discussion among New Testament scholars as to how baptism was administered at the time of the New Testament, but not being competent to lead you in that discussion, we leave it behind and leave that to the New Testament scholars. But there is no doubt

that in the time period of the apostolic fathers, baptism is seen as the rite of initiation into the church. In the second century, baptism was usually preceded by a period of instruction and fasting. After some time of fasting and instruction, those who are to be introduced to the church were brought, according to the testimonies that we have, to a place of water. The actual manner of baptism is not given to us in the accounts. *The Didache*, one of the important pieces of literature from that time period, says that “baptism is to occur in running water, and if that’s not attainable, other water is allowed but you should always use cold water instead of warm water.” If there’s only a small amount of water available, then water was to be poured on the head three times. Baptism was always in the threefold name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. And then oftentimes the new converts after their baptism were clothed in white robes.

As time progressed, sometimes the rite of baptism, the sacrament of baptism became more elaborate. In the East, there were places where the baptized were apparently crowned with a garland, symbolizing the presence of Christ, and once again, the newly baptized converts were dressed in special robes. However, the very few records which we have cannot demonstrate that this was a universal practice throughout the Eastern church.

The second-century church fathers believed that baptism was a means of conveying the Holy Spirit. It provided weapons for spiritual combat. It mediated the remission of sins and illumination. It initiated the convert into the chosen people and was therefore called spiritual circumcision in counterdistinction to the carnal circumcision of the old Israel. Baptism is a means of rebirth and was the seal of eternal life. This final term “seal” was applied frequently to baptism during this period. The word was used of a mark to identify property, like a brand as cattlemen brand their cattle. Since to be initiated or brought into the church by baptism is to be stamped or branded or marked with the name of Christ, baptism meant that they had become God’s property.

How about the Lord’s Supper? From the accounts of Justin Martyr, we learn that after the baptism of the convert, the Lord’s Supper was usually celebrated. How was it celebrated? We have a rather complete account of how it was done, at least in the city of Rome, and it was remarkably similar to present-day practice. The order as related to us by Justin Martyr goes this way. The church met together on Sunday because it is the first day in which God, says Justin, “having wrought a change in the darkness and light made

the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.” We don’t have time in this course to have an extensive discussion on how the Christian church chose Sunday as their day of worship, but we know that that was immediately the chosen day from the time of the New Testament, and this information could be very helpful as we interact with those who hold Saturday as the day of worship. But from the beginning of the ancient church period, we know that Sunday was the day of worship because this is the day of resurrection. So the church meets together on Sunday, according to Justin, and begins with what he says is the reading from the memoirs of the apostles or writings of the prophets. And the memoir of the apostles is the letters, the different writings that we have in the New Testament. The writings of the prophets are generally seen as the writings of the Old Testament.

After coming together and reading of Scripture, there was a sermon, in Justin’s words, “a sermon given by the president,” the president of the congregation, the head of the congregation, and then there was a time of public prayer. In twentieth-century America during prayer usually we’re all seated and we bow our heads and fold our hands. Not so in the ancient church, and not so in most of the European churches to this day. If you go to the continent and worship in continental churches, when it comes time to pray, that’s the time to stand up, so this follows the practice of the ancient church. As prayers were offered, normally people would stand and raise their hands oftentimes in following the Old Testament practice. So people stood for public prayers in Rome during this time.

Then there would be a time period of a kiss of peace. So suggest that to the congregation some time, pastors, that we have a kiss of peace after public prayers instead of a holy handshake. Then the bread and wine, and by the way, the wine was always mixed with water, the bread and what they called the mixed wine was brought out, and the pastor would offer prayers of thanksgiving, and after that prayer of thanksgiving, interestingly enough, the congregation would answer with an “amen.” The “amen” is an early part of liturgical use in the Christian church, so once again for the traditional churches, one like my own, a general shout of “amen” is quite ancient in action, although not practiced by all Christian churches in the twentieth-century. Then the cup and the bread would be passed around.

Something else is found in the ancient church which is not seen very often in twentieth-century America. If it is seen, it’s greatly

modified, and it's called the agape feast, the love feast, the agape feast. Once again as we remember way, way back in the lectures, as we discussed the history of persecution, the Christians were accused of incest, and you can imagine how this would also apply to a love feast among brothers and sisters. This agape feast, this love feast, however, was not sorted at all. The agape feast in the ancient church was what we could generally consider a quasi-religious gathering. It did not occur during what we would call a formal worship service, but regularl, perhaps on Sundays, perhaps on other days of the week, the church would gather together and together eat a meal. We know that there would be a time of prayers of thanksgiving and a time of drinking wine and eating bread, and a final thanksgiving at the end of this meal. And these are some of the early accounts of this agape feast or love feast, and perhaps these feasts were already occurring in the time of the New Testament.

Another part of the worship life of the ancient church is the idea of penance—penance. Once again, a formal penance structure is rather far from the twentieth-century American church. In the time of the writing of the Bible, we know that there was clear teaching that Christians are not entirely free of sin, and if you've been going with me lecture by lecture, especially as we've seen the actions of the Christians in the various councils, we know that Christians are not free of sin. There will be sin in our lives, and we are admonished in the Scriptures to confess our sins to each other. In *The Didache* we are exhorted also to confess our sins in the church and that before the Lord's Supper, the people were to gather together to confess their sins. There's a very limited amount of information concerning an idea of a public penance, and it's difficult to recreate what is happening in the earliest times of church history, but it is at least a good conjecture that during the period of the apostolic fathers that before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, part of the worship service would include the public profession of sin.

This *Didache* also speaks about prayer, and I've mentioned that prayer was a common part of celebrating the Lord's Supper. *The Didache* exhorts us to prayer, as does the Bible. We are told in *The Didache* that the Christian life should be one of a daily reciting of the Lord's Prayer and that if we could during three times during the day, we should remember to have a time of prayer.

Another part of worship life in the Christian church involved the idea of fasting. Once again, fasting is not much in vogue in the

twentieth century, especially in America, but the Bible does speak about fasting. We know that our Savior fasted, and apparently so did the early church. Fasting usually occurred on two days of the week—Wednesday and Friday. We know that from the accounts of the time period, and we know that those two days were chosen because the Jewish community usually fasted on Monday and Thursday. The idea of fasting was in the early church period both of disciplining the body and of using the money that would normally be spent on food to provide for the poor. If you budgeted \$8.00 for food for that day and you fasted that day, then those \$8.00 could be spent on providing for [the poor]. Practically speaking, and this is important to remember, that as the ancient church talks about fasting, we should understand that fasting did not mean the complete abstinence from all food, but fasting meant eating only bread and drinking water. So as the church say fasted twice a week, it wasn't that the men and women went with no food at all, but rather they were able to supply some of their physical needs, but on common bread and water, so that is the context of fasting during that time period.

So we've talked about worship life, we've talked about celebrating the Lord's Supper, we know that it was done from the very beginnings, we have investigated the literature that we have, which is limited on the nature of baptism, and we can see certain important themes, that baptism is the act of initiation into the church. We know what the ancient church fathers thought about what happened to the convert as he or she was baptized, but as we move chronologically into the third century, we have more information, and a more clear picture is able to be painted in terms of the worship life of the church.

Let's turn our attention now to the various things we've mentioned concerning earlier time period and begin with the idea of baptism—baptism in the third century. Quite honestly as we look at baptism in the third century, we'll see that it takes on a rather different form from what we're used to, whether we come from a Baptist tradition or a Presbyterian tradition. In our own times, there is one burning issue, at least in America, and that is the issue between adult baptism and infant baptism. Concomitant with that debate is the debates within the two main groupings in America, that is, those who hold to believer's baptism and in that group of believers in the United States, there's debate as to the nature of that baptism. In other words, is total immersion the only biblical way that believers should be baptized? Within the community of believers that hold that infants should be baptized,

there is a debate as to the precise nature of that baptized person in the sight of God, in other words, whether or not an infant who has been baptized is fully regenerated. So there are two major issues within the two major groups.

As we examine the history of the ancient church, usually there is great help in providing a bridge between the ancient church period and the twentieth century. Our analysis of baptism will not be quite as helpful for the complex questions that we have in twentieth-century America; nevertheless, it should provide some help, but as I describe baptism in the ancient church, I'm afraid that whatever position we hold to in twentieth-century America, baptism itself is going to sound a little bit strange to us. It is going to be quite different from how we do baptism here in the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most important introductory comment that I should make is that what is normal for the church in the twentieth century is not necessarily normal in the ancient church period. We have good accounts of the nature of baptism in Tertullian, Cyprian, and Hippolytus. In general we observe that there was an immersion of the adult convert, or a dipping. Whether it was a full body dipping or not, we don't have sufficient information, but we do know that the person was placed in water. We also know that the convert gave a confession of his or her faith, and these are the central two points where these authors agree, but there's going to be a lot of disagreement concerning other areas on the nature of baptism.

Usually in the ancient church period, baptisms occurred once a year. There was usually one set time in the various geographical locations for baptisms, usually at the time of Pentecost or at the time of Easter. In preparation for the event, the converts were to spend a day in prayer and fasting. After they were baptized, they were anointed with oil and then hands were laid upon them to receive the Holy Spirit. We know that in the city of Rome, the path from heathendom to Christianity took three years of instruction prior to baptism. In other words, if someone wanted to be a convert to Christianity, they had to go to Sunday school for at least three years before any of the pastors would permit them to be baptized.

Again, these are basic elements, but some of the rituals in the various parts of the church became quite elaborate with, for example, some parts of the church anointing the entire body, the entire, nearly naked body with oil. Some parts of the church

performed exorcisms, casting out of demons at the time of baptism, and some churches already began to sign the body with the sign of the cross from this early church period. So again, there are differences, not a general uniformity in the acts, yet there is a core of belief that is seen throughout the empire, the Christian church in the empire, that Christianity is the initiation into new life, that generally immersion was the action, the way in which the adult converts were baptized, that there was this idea of new life and resurrection that you see in the giving of robes, for example, and we do see unified action in terms of what we would call in twentieth-century America, an extensive period of instruction prior to baptism.

What about infant baptism? We also know that infant baptism was practiced during this time period, but that it did not receive universal approval. Cyprian notes that it was the general practice of the church in his area to baptize infants within a few days of their birth. Tertullian also notes that this was the general practice, but Tertullian is against infant baptism. He says that it's in vogue, but that it's unfortunate. He didn't think that it was proper. So the picture is clear concerning the nature of adult baptism and that at least in certain parts of the empire, infant baptism was being practiced as well.

Finally, let's talk briefly about the Lord's Supper. We have more information as to how the Lord's Supper was given in this century. Worship services were once again more similar to what we have in twentieth-century America. There was always a reading of Scripture, there were public prayers, and those prayers by the way included prayers for the emperor and peace in the church, and we also notice now the singing of psalms in the worship service that included the Lord's Supper. Sometimes we note throughout the empire, the kiss of peace as well. Bread was distributed by the deacons of the church, and wine mixed with water was also passed out. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is once again basic continuity, and we do have a good amount of information to recreate how the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the ancient church. It's surprising the similarity between the ancient church period and our own.

We have more information that we'll cover in our next lecture as we look at discipline and as we look at the agape meal and penance, and the further development of practical life . . .