

Decline of Discipline after the Nicene Age

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In our last lecture, we were examining some practical implications and investigating some of the more practical aspects of life in the ancient church period. We noticed how worship was being done, especially in the pre-Nicene age, what social life was like, at least as far as we can recreate it, and we've been talking about Christology. In today's lecture we'll continue discussion of some of those important practical questions and continue ahead chronologically looking at the post-Nicene age, taking a brief look at Christology as well once again, and continuing our examination of practical church life and Christian living in the ancient church period.

At the end of our last lecture, we discussed very briefly baptism and the Lord's Supper. Today I would like to continue our examination of the pre-Nicene age and very briefly look at church buildings, the agape meal, and penance. Although some of this information might seem self-evident, especially concerning church buildings, we should note that in the pre-Nicene age most worship was occurring in house churches. Sometimes a house was bought communally and certain architectural changes were made in the houses to help facilitate worship. There is a record of church buildings being constructed. For example, in the year 202, we know that a church was built in 258, and we usually know that these buildings were built because they were destroyed during the Diocletian persecution. So although most worship was going on in church buildings that were homes, there were specific buildings that were used exclusively for worship, but not very many before the time of Constantine.

What about the agape meals or the love feasts which we've talked about very briefly in the past? These agape meals, which had a semi-liturgical function, especially earlier, can be characterized as being quite similar to what we have in most of our churches in twentieth-century America as potluck suppers or sometimes called pot-providence suppers where the people of the church

get together and share a meal together and enjoy each other's fellowship. So the agape meals continued as the people would bring their own food, and there's very little unified worship service in association with these agape meals.

Continuing ahead, penance. Like everything else there is beginning to be some uniformity here in this time period. In penance there were three basic elements. First, the person would confess his or her sins publicly, and then they would perform some type of penitential exercise. They would do something to physically demonstrate that their confession was not just with their mouth, but that they were truly sorry for whatever the sin was that they had done. After the confession, the penitential exercise, then there was the giving of forgiveness by the church as church and then a reconciliation of the wayward church member to the Christian community once again. So penance is becoming somewhat standard. It is becoming a normal ecclesiastical function.

This idea of penance is quite important, and we should spend just a few more minutes analyzing it. For what we would call ordinary sins, common sins, usually there was prayer and giving of alms and mutual forgiveness, and that was all that was necessary for handling such sins. Public penance was reserved now for graver faults, for more severe sins. The definition of these and agreement upon a policy toward them took many decades. This is a slow evolutionary process. In the last years of the second century, such public sins as adultery, murder, and idolatry seem to have been treated irremissible. Now that should take you up short as you think about this.

Is any sin irremissible in the Christian life, in the Christian church? Does that mean that if someone is an adulterer, he or she can never be forgiven by the church? Obviously in the twentieth century we take a more lenient attitude toward these sins, and we're going to find that Callixtus of Rome, for example, pursued a more lenient policy during this time period. But it does seem apparent that through major portions of the church, these three sins were considered sins that could not be forgiven by the church. Here we have a serious theological flaw and error. The sacrifice of Christ was for all of our sins, both private ones that only God knows about and the great public ones such as murder or adultery. But given the context, again not trying to say that the action is correct in saying that these sins are unforgiveable, but given the context of a persecuted minority that found purity to be

of extreme importance, it is somewhat understandable why the church took the policy they did.

Cyprian says that things had deteriorated; that is, that discipline had deteriorated by his day, and that sexual sins were regarded now as remissible and that idolatry too as a result of the persecution associated with Decius was included capable of being forgiven. Certainly I don't think any of us would think that that's a bad theological development, but Cyprian thought that it was. He thought that these things, especially sexual sins and idolatry, were of so grave a consequence that a Christian who's really converted could never do these things. I mention this as a springboard for discussion which you might be able to have among friends and colleagues as to the nature of discipline and penance and what role it plays in the twentieth-century church. Certainly this would be a fascinating discussion topic.

As a major section of our course lecture, let's talk about the decline of discipline in the post-Nicene age, the decline of discipline. As we have seen, the union of church and state had both positive and negative consequences, and if you remember an earlier lecture, we talk about the secularization of Christianity as a result, as a direct consequence to the taking of Christianity as the state religion by Constantine. There were, as we can see, important consequences upon discipline as well. We saw that the crisis of Arianism and the following crises within the empire served to solidify discipline in one area, and that being the area of the lapsed. We had this as a special lecture section earlier, and I outlined for you the way in which the lapsed were brought back into the church, how many years it took, and what the various ceremonies were that the person who had lapsed had to go through to come back into church fellowship. A prescribed way of coming back into the church was created.

As the church and state became more closely related, so civil penalties began to be associated with church penalties. The death penalty was decreed against the heretical sect of Christians known as Priscillianists. It was determined that heresy was the worst crime against society, and we've talked about that in detail in an earlier lecture. However, with the zeal against heresy that we see in the post-Constantinian church, we see very much like a seesaw a laxity in terms of practical errors and morals. In other words, as we have an increase in persecution against those who are considered to be heretics, so we have a concomitant proportional decrease in discipline in cases of practical errors and morals. Also,

with the marriage of church and state under Constantine, this entire secularization process takes place; therefore, with the rise of numbers in Christianity and the decline of general morality, the crisis of discipline is going to become great.

Remind yourselves once again what would happen in your own country, probably here in America, if suddenly Christianity was the official and only allowed religion of the United States. That certainly is an interesting topic, and there's been a lot of debate in Christian circles as to whether this is a good idea or a bad idea, and I have no intention of addressing that question now. However, let's imagine that it's happened. That suddenly millions and millions of non-Christians in the United States were forced to become Christians if they have any religion at all. And even encourage those who don't want to have any religion to have Christianity as their religion. What would happen to the churches? There would obviously be certain beneficial results for the churches, but obviously there would be detrimental results as well, as those whose hearts truly were not converted to Christ, as those who did not want to carry the burden of Christianity came into the church, so we would notice in the church as whole a great decline in discipline, a great decline in terms of morality.

And so we have the same thing. As the church aligns itself with the mass of heathendom in the fourth century, that mass of people who had not yet experienced any type of change in the heart, that tremendous change, that overnight change in Christianity produced changes in church leaders. It affected them. And we see this also in certain large churches in the United States as well. For example, back in the fourth and fifth centuries, the bishops of large areas became more concerned with worldly favor than having the courage to pursue discipline, especially with the rich and powerful members of the church community.

There are important exceptions to this rule. We see that famous church historian John Chrysostom, whose example of even pursuing the empress with discipline, stands out against the general laxity of his age, and although we didn't get go into a lot of detail concerning the life of John Chrysostom, we know that he was persecuted for his pursuit especially of the empress. The other clergymen did not want him pursuing those in high places, did not want him pursuing the powerful. On this regard, Chrysostom gives us some very practical information that is helpful to us today, and I include this quotation from Chrysostom for all of you who are church leaders to listen to what he has to say, because in

many ways his advice is quite timely. He says, “Though a captain or a governor, nay even one adorned with the imperial crown approach the table of the Lord unworthily, prevent him. You have greater authority than he. Beware unless you excite the Lord to wrath and give a sword instead of food. And if a new Judah should approach the communion, prevent him. Fear God, not man. If you fear man, he will treat you with scorn. If you fear God, you will appear venerable even to men.”

Another great exception to this rule is found in the church father Ambrose in the West. You know the story of Ambrose’s life. He was the son of a very powerful provincial governor and was prepared for a life of service in the state government as well. And the year is about 390, and wait until you hear the story of Ambrose—talk about bravery. Ambrose refused the theologically orthodox emperor Theodosius I communion. Let’s remember what’s happening in 390; 390 is immediately after the crisis of Arianism. It’s in 381 that finally we have peace, that we have a theological answer to the question of Arianism. And here we have a very good emperor, Theodosius I, he was fully orthodox, he supported the cause of orthodoxy against Arianism. So here’s a good emperor. However, about the year 390, the emperor in a fit of rage had seven thousand persons executed in Thessalonica after some type of a riot broke out. Upon hearing that, as Theodosius I is about to come forward to receive the Lord’s Supper, Ambrose shouts forth, “Stop! You may not come forward. We will not give you the Lord’s Supper in light of your grievous sin.” Here again, the courage of Ambrose is quite apparent. An orthodox emperor is the one who ushers in orthodoxy against Arianism. The emperor is an extremely powerful person for good as well as for evil, but it doesn’t matter at all to Ambrose. He forbids him to take the Lord’s Supper.

Eight months later, Theodosius repents, and this is what’s also quite interesting, repents of what he had done publicly. He publicly goes before the church and says that what he’s done is wrong and that he’s sorry, and that he announced that he would wait thirty days before inflicting the death penalty ever again so that nothing would be done in the heat of rage, and that if it was an unjust law, he could revoke the penalty before it would be executed and with fatal consequences.

Commenting on this act, one old church history book says, and I think properly, “Thus did the church prove in a time of unlimited arbitrary power the refuge of popular freedom and saints assumed

the part of tribunes of the people.” Ambrose was a tribune of the people crying out for justice against an emperor who was a member of the church. Apparently in great contrast to earlier practice, in the Eastern church, which had previously guarded the Lord’s Supper as we have seen with Chrysostom, there is a movement to permit, and this will sound very familiar to us, permit everyone to take it who felt himself or herself worthy.

And so in about the year 390, about the same time as Ambrose’s dealing with the emperor, the Eastern church officially abandons its earlier practice of having prescribed penance under the supervision of a deacon or a minister, and that that deacon or minister would be in charge of permitting or not permitting those people who are under discipline to take the Lord’s Supper. So there had been a prescribed way in which this was done. It went something like this. If a person had committed sin and that sin became known to the church, in part of the acts of penance, that person would be denied the Lord’s Supper for a time, and there was a deacon or a minister who was in charge of this part of church life in a given congregation; he would be the one that would determine the length of penance and how long the person would be forbidden the Lord’s Supper and when he or she could come back. In 390 this what they call a penitential priest or the deacon in charge of penance. That position was taken away from the church because it had been abused, and so anyone who felt him or herself worthy to take the Lord’s Supper was then invited to partake.

This is the way in which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in 99 percent of American evangelicalism, and I note that prior to about AD 400, that was not the way in which the Lord’s Supper was practiced. Once again, I mention this information to you as a catalyst for further discussion, debate, and contemplation on how the Lord’s Supper should be properly administered. What role does discipline play in the administration of the Lord’s Supper? Should anyone be forbidden to partake who is in good standing in the church? What role does the Lord’s Supper play as a disciplinary tool to current church life? The example of the ancient church provides for us some interesting ways in which we can create bridges, theological bridges, between the fourth and fifth centuries and our own.

Let’s turn our attention once again to worship after Nicea, and continue ahead chronologically, step by step analyzing practical Christian life in the ancient church period. As we mentioned in the

previous lecture, the treatment of baptism in the ancient church is quite different from what we experience in the twentieth century. The sacrament in contrast to evangelicalism becomes quite elaborate. Adult converts follow different ceremonies in different geographical parts of the church, but there are some basic lines of continuity through the sacrament. We know that those baptized were immersed in water, these adult converts often descending three times into the water symbolizing Christ's three days in the tomb. As far as I can ascertain, all adult converts were baptized naked. They then dressed in white robes. They were all anointed with oil by the minister. They all made a confession of faith in Christ and usually renounced the devil.

There were other formalities added in different areas such as carrying candles and being exorcised of evil spirits, and the whole study of how adult baptism was done is an exciting area of research in the ancient church. Different books have been written on it, and once again, what I'm trying to do is summarize those principles or themes which are found generally throughout the ancient church—full immersion in water (oftentimes three times). Being anointed with oil was very important, and I should mention this anointing because it is not found usually in the twentieth century. Oftentimes the persons were fully anointed with oil, their entire bodies. Obviously in the case of women that wasn't done by the minister, but more often than not, the ears were touched with oil and the nose or mouth, and the symbolism with that anointing with oil was that now that they are converts, their ears have been opened to hear the truth, their mouths have been opened to speak the truth, and hear, and especially to partake of the heavenly mysteries. There was no partaking of the Lord's Supper prior to baptism, and especially the anointing of the mouth was now your mouth is ready to partake of those heavenly mysteries. So that was the symbolism of anointing with oil.

Concerning the Lord's Supper, moving ahead, as we've noticed that baptism is rather different from how we celebrate baptism here in the United States, and we've noticed that earlier the celebration of the Lord's Supper was much more familiar to us, was much more similar to what we have in twentieth-century America, we note the changes occurring in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. We should see what I would call a liturgifying of the sacraments. It becomes more liturgical, especially when Christianity becomes a state religion. It is from this time period that we have actual texts of liturgies; that is, we have some old church bulletins as to how they celebrated the Lord's Supper in various parts of the empire.

We don't have time to go into the full liturgies themselves, and once again there is a whole series of books written on these questions, there is a whole academic subject of studying liturgies, and we won't go into the liturgies. But what I want to do is say that the simplicity of the Reformation's celebration of the Lord's Supper, which is that which is familiar to most American evangelicals, that simplicity of celebration stands in very stark contrast to the way in which it was celebrated in the ancient church. And we mentioned that baptism was a little bit more elaborate than what we're used to, so in the post-Constantine time period, in the post-Nicea period of the church, the liturgical developments around the celebration of the Lord's Supper is very quick and very complex.

Many churches in twentieth-century America are very uncomfortable with liturgies at all. Liturgies became quite complex depending on various geographical locations. Certain fixed formulas were pronounced by the congregation. These things would be memorized by the people and said together or in terms of a give and take between the leader, the pastor, and the congregation. And again, we could study the various formulas that were given in different geographical locations, but I'll pass by that and refer that information to the bibliography that you have with your course.

We should also note that there is not sufficient evidence to substantiate that at this time of the church's development, its theological development; that is, the time period after Nicea, there is not sufficient evidence to substantiate a doctrine of transubstantiation concerning the celebration of the Lord's Supper. That word *transubstantiation* is an important one. You should be taking it down in your notes, and especially as you get into the course on the Reformation, there will be extensive discussion of that word, extensive discussion of how the Lord's Supper is to be understood.

Very briefly, I mention historically and then we can go into some more theological analysis again, very brief theological analysis. In the time of the Reformation, Luther disagreed with the teaching of the Roman church at that time that in the celebration of the supper a miracle occurs, a miracle called transubstantiation. Together with that idea of transubstantiation comes the notion that the Roman priest in effect resacrifices Jesus Christ upon the altar, so that the communicants receive the blood of Christ in the wine and the body of Christ in the bread. The Reformers,

Luther and Calvin, said that that notion of the Lord's Supper was incorrect. They developed their own theories which Dr. Godfrey I'm sure makes very clear in the course on the Reformation. What we need to note is that this idea of transubstantiation, which is the received Roman Catholic teaching on this important point of church life, is not yet to be seen in the ancient church. However, we need to acknowledge that beginning in the fourth century the idea of transubstantiation is beginning to develop. There is no denying that in the medieval church period this doctrine of transubstantiation was the received one in the church, and especially the Cappadocian father, Gregory of Nyssa, begins to develop the idea that there is a resacrifice of Christ and that the communicants, although they drink wine, are in fact, for example, drinking the blood of Christ. We'll be able to discuss that later on.

What about the church calendar? Following the conversion of Constantine, much in the church changed, including the church calendar. Many, at very best, nominal Christians now flock to the church, and the church had to necessarily develop new ways of instructing these people. Remember, prior to the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion, for a pagan convert to be baptized usually required as a rule throughout the ancient church period, at least two years of instruction before baptism could take place, but suddenly everyone had to become a Christian, and so how is the church to accommodate these masses of new converts who perhaps are not really converts? The church wanted to respond to this change in a creative way, and I think that we should be sympathetic to the church attempting to adapt and attempting to move in the direction of accommodating the new influx of people.

One of the ways they wish to do it was establishing certain times through the calendar year that corresponded with important events of the Christian church. For example, the birth of Jesus Christ as truly God and truly man, the incarnation of the Son of God by the virgin Mary is of extreme importance. Without that fact, there would be no Christianity. Another important event of the Christian life is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what we call Easter, and so at least these two important celebrations, these two important facts of Christianity begin to become celebrated in a special way in the church calendar.

So, for example, Christmas, the coming of Christ, is celebrated on a fixed day.

As I've spoken with some people on this topic, and I'm sure it's not the case with those of you taking this course, but with some people as I've talked to them about the celebration of Christmas, they truly believe that Jesus was born on December 25. But as probably is known to you, there is absolutely no historical evidence to demonstrate that Jesus was born in the month of December. It's very difficult to determine the month of His birth. It's rather difficult even to determine the year, and the precise day of December 25, there really is very little historical evidence to demonstrate that that was His birthday. So why is December 25 the day in which we celebrate Christmas? Why is that Jesus' birthday?

The date was deliberately chosen and principally, and here's what radical but true, it was chosen to draw converts away from pagan holidays associated with that same day. In the year AD 274, the emperor Aurelian established that as the day to celebrate the birth of the sun, but not the S O N, the Son of God, the S U N. This was the day that has a Latin festival day for the birth of the sun, December 25, and that was established in the year 274. So the Christian church establishes the same day not as the birth of the S U N but the birth of the S O N, so as the Gentile congregations, as the pagan converts were used to celebrating on the 25th, now they can continue to celebrate, only this time it's the birth of Jesus Christ that they're celebrating rather than the birth of the sun god.

So by the year 336, almost immediately after the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion, the Western church, especially in Rome, is celebrating December 25 as the birth of Christ, as Christmas. So this is an interesting historical precedent, and as I'm giving this lecture right now, we look forward to the time of Christmas and the holiday season. I hope this doesn't dampen your joy for the coming of the birth of Christ, but the fact of the matter is December 25 was chosen as an alternate holiday to move the pagan society into Christianity.

Other events become established in the calendar. We see that the season of Lent becomes established in the church. Lent is not very well celebrated by the Protestant churches. The Roman Catholic Church to this day is well-known for celebrating Lent. This was observed probably prior to the establishment of Christmas. Lent was a period of about forty days of nominal fasting.

There were other extensions of the church calendar as well—the earlier establishment of the date of Easter, which is much easier to establish. Then forty days after celebrating Easter, the church celebrated a feast time at the time of the ascension, and the ascension feast became established in the Christian church as a special time of remembering the ascension of Christ to the right hand of God the Father. Then ten days after the feast of ascension, the church began to celebrate Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church. So we have in the fourth century a rather well-defined church calendar that is swinging between the points of Christmas and Lent and Easter and Pentecost and the ascension—a time of well-established church celebrations.

Let's continue to move ahead chronologically into the fifth and sixth centuries, and once again talk some more about issues that have been briefly discussed, beginning with baptism. Baptism is becoming as each century draws to a close more and more regular in its observance, and we can determine six various functions which are constant still in the celebration of an adult baptism.

First, the new convert to be baptized is undressed. Then they are anointed with oil. Then they make renunciation of the devil and all his works. And fourth, a sort of new element that is a little disturbing, there is a blessing of the font. What is a blessing of the font? We are reminded that immersion is going to be the manner in which these adult converts are baptized, and they descend into a tub, a fountain, a font, and before the persons are placed in that water, the water is blessed. There's no biblical warrant for that at all, but that is a development in the church. Then the new convert makes a declaration of faith and is baptized, and then after that baptism they put on white robes.

Perhaps the most interesting difference between twentieth-century baptism and the baptism of the fifth and sixth centuries is the renunciation. Again, this is not as far as I know a normal policy in most twentieth-century adult baptisms. The convert in the fifth and sixth centuries renounces the devil and all his works, as I've mentioned. But in some parts of the church, this general renunciation is not only done of the devil and all his works, but also the world and all of its pleasures are renounced by the person about to be baptized. Oftentimes in some parts of the church, there was a spitting as well. As they would renounce the devil and his works, they would spit on the ground in a sense to spit in the face of the devil. A very visual, a very symbolic act in a society that basically has no books, cannot read. Here you can see the

disgust of the church with the devil and in many places a disgust with the world and its pleasures. Perhaps you could suggest that to your church then the next time you have an adult baptism, that there's a renunciation as well. You'd be following the lines of the ancient church if you did that.

What about the Lord's Supper? Since the nature of the congregation changed after Constantine, so the formal celebration of the Lord's Supper changed. As I've mentioned, the Lord's Supper especially becomes quite liturgical. Remember, before Constantine there were listeners who were interested in Christianity but had not yet made a profession of faith, and were interested outsiders who would come to the worship services but not be permitted to this part of the worship service. Now the doors are more open, and the ceremony becomes even more formalized. There were more prayers being said before partaking of the Lord's Supper, and the prayers in the Eastern part of the church became memorized litanies.

Some other things that can be established as part and parcel of celebrating the Lord's Supper at this time is that usually there was a collection of gifts and a singing of a song during the service. So the policy of having a special collection say before the Lord's Supper or after the Lord's Supper goes back to the time of the ancient church.

What about the theology of the Lord's Supper? Still in the West, the idea of transubstantiation is not predominate. Augustine distinguished between the bread and wine as a sign and a reality. The elements are effective symbols that convey the invisible grace. That is much more in line with what we understand in the twentieth century. Yet that grace is not to be identified, says Augustine, with Christ's historical body. It is the gift of life. In the East, however, Chrysostom does talk about eating Christ and that the wine is identical with the blood that flowed from Christ's side. For him there is a type of change in the nature of the wheat and grapes, and therefore we have the beginning of the doctrine of transubstantiation, and that teaching in the Eastern church will eventually spread and develop into the Western church.

So once again, let me emphasize the slow and gradual process of theological development that we see also in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It becomes much more liturgical in the fifth and sixth centuries, the doctrine of transubstantiation is beginning to be taught, especially in the East, but at this time especially with the

time of Augustine that Eastern doctrine has not yet come into the Western church. These are some of the very important practical parts of church life that we see immediately after Constantine up into the fifth and sixth centuries.

In our next lecture, we'll once again pick up the same topic and begin a discussion of social life in the church after Nicea.