

Chapter 5

Worship, Faith, and Life in the Early Church

This Chapter covers the period from Constantine in the fourth century to Pope Leo I in the fifth century. As we shall see, many elements of Church worship, belief and life became crystallized during this time period and many of these elements remain with the Church today. We shall give brief consideration to each in the following outline.

Worship

We noted in earlier lectures that the apostolic Jerusalem community continued to visit the Temple and gather in their synagogues. They were Jews, even though they were Jews who had become disciples of Jesus. The full implications of this discipleship, relative to their Jewish heritage, were not immediately clear. However, following Pentecost, the Book of Acts records that they practiced certain religious rituals - baptism in the name of Jesus; laying on of hands to invoke the Holy Spirit; anointing the sick and the “breaking of the bread” - that would later develop into some of those rituals which we now know as the seven sacraments.

Baptism and the Reception of the Holy Spirit - While there is no evidence that the apostles or other disciples of Jesus underwent baptism, from the day of Pentecost on baptism became the standard initiation rite for those who pronounced their faith in Jesus and wanted to join in the community of His followers. Most of the earliest baptisms were no doubt of adult Jews (and families?) who had heard the message about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, proclaimed their faith in Him, repented of their sins and were baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38). Later, perhaps in the 70’s or 80”, it seems the baptismal formula was changed to: “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”, which we still use today (Mt. 28:18-19).

After the ritual of baptism (not always immediately), the new converts received the Holy Spirit through the “laying on of hands” (Acts 8:14-17), although in some cases they received the Holy Spirit first and then were baptized (Acts 10:44-48). The reception of the Spirit was often manifested by the gifts (charisms) of the Spirit like prophesying, speaking in tongues, etc.

While we may call these “standard” initiation practices, we know of several unusual exceptions. People became Christians without knowledge of Christian baptism or without knowledge of the Spirit. A most unusual account is recorded in Acts 18:24-28. Some 30 years after Pentecost, a Christian disciple named Apollos from Egypt visited Ephesus. He is described as accurately teaching “the things concerning Jesus”. In other words, he was making Christian converts. However, “he knew only the baptism of John”. On hearing him preach, the Christians in Ephesus “expounded to him the way of God, more accurately”. So it seems that for some 30 years after Pentecost converts were being received into the Church in Egypt with only the baptism of John the Baptist.

In a similar example, in Acts 19:1-7, Paul comes to Ephesus and finds disciples (perhaps followers of John the Baptist?) who declare: “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” They also tell Paul they too had been baptized into the baptism of John. Therefore, Paul baptizes them “in the name of the Lord Jesus”, lays his hand upon them and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Anointing the Sick - Anointing with oil for the sick is mentioned in Mk. 6:13; “They (apostles) drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” and especially in James 5:14-15:

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the Church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned he will be forgiven.

The Eucharist - We know very little about what the celebrations of the Eucharist looked like in the years immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Synoptic writers and Paul recorded the command of Jesus to “do this in memory of me.” However, the exact way in which this was accomplished in the early apostolic community is not known, no complete description of these early memorial meals are left to us.

The early Jerusalem Church seemed to commemorate the Last Supper in conjunction with a weekly “fellowship meal”. All Jewish meals were reverential and included blessings. The Sabbath meal taken on Friday night (the Jewish day began at sunset) was especially so and could provide an appropriate setting for the early celebrations of the Eucharist. Sunday is also mentioned in Acts (20:7) as a time for “breaking bread” which could take place in the home (Acts 2:46). Again, we must remember that Sunday actually began on what we would call Saturday evening. Therefore, if the Sabbath rest was still being observed, then in the evening when the Sabbath was over, they could move around and assemble for the “breaking of the bread” which would now be Sunday as they knew it. We can assume that the usual breaking and distributing of bread and the sharing of the cup of benediction were now transformed by the words and meaning of Jesus and that in them He became sacramental present in His unifying, life-giving power to those present.

Later this fellowship meal was abandoned perhaps because of the abuses like those in Corinth (1Cor. 11:20) which Paul alludes to and also because this Jewish tradition was not part of the culture of Gentile converts and as time went on the crowds were simply too large to easily accommodate at a full blown meal.

One of the first full accounts of the early celebration of the Eucharist is given to us by Justin the Martyr (100-165). Justin was born of pagan parents in Samaria and converted the Christianity about the age of thirty. He was famous for his defense of Christian practices. In his *First Apology* he describes two kinds of Eucharistic services. First, one that took place annually with the baptism of new converts and secondly, one that was held weekly:

After we have baptized him who professes our belief and associates with us, we lead him into the assembly of those called the brethren, and we there say prayers in common for ourselves, for the newly-baptized, and for all others all over the world....After finishing the prayers, we greet each other with a kiss. Then bread and a cup of water and wine mixed are brought to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes it, gives praise and glory to the Father of all in the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and gives thanks at length for the gifts that we were worthy to receive from Him. When he has finished the prayers and thanksgiving, the whole crowd standing by cries out in agreement: "Amen". "Amen" is a Hebrew word and means, "So may it be." After the presiding official has said thanks and the people have joined in, the deacons, as they are styled by us, distribute as food for all those present, the bread and the wine-and-water mixed, over which the thanks had been offered, and which they carry to those not present.

And this food itself is known amongst us as the Eucharist. No one may partake of it unless he is convinced of the truth of our teaching and is cleansed in the bath of Baptism....For not as common bread and common drink do we receive them; but even as Jesus Christ our Saviour, being made flesh by the word of God, took on flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise we are taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word....is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have delivered unto us what was imparted unto them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks said: "This do in remembrance of Me, this is My Body"; and that after the same manner He took the cup, and giving thanks He said: "This is My blood"; and that He gave it to them alone.

This description was followed by a similar description of the Eucharist, but it indicates other elements contained our modern celebrations and it is noted that the usual day for the celebration of the Eucharist is now Sunday:

On the Day called the Day of the Sun, all of us who live either in cities or in the country gather in one place for a communal celebration....We hold our common assembly on the Day of the Sun, because it is the first day on which God, having transformed darkness and matter, created the world; and on the same day, Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead.

And then the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as time permits. After the reader has finished his task, the one presiding gives an address, urgently admonishing his hearers to practice these beautiful teachings in their lives.(the description continues as presented above.) ...Those who are well-to-do give whatever they will.

What is gathered is deposited with the one presiding, who therewith helps orphans and widows...

It is interesting to note that in this early celebration of the Eucharist the chief features of the service have remained fairly constant to this day. He mentions the readings from the Old Testament, a reading from the "Memoirs of the Apostles" or "Gospels", then a sermon, prayers, the offering of bread and of wine mixed with water by means of a formula in which the idea of thanksgiving (Eucharist) predominates, then communion and the sending of the Eucharist by the deacons to those who are absent. Belief in the real presence, articulated in the words of Jesus as His body and blood, is clearly stated. Finally, it is on the day of the Sun, Sunday, that the liturgy is celebrated in memory of the Lord's resurrection.

(One page 41 in our text, another Eucharistic liturgy from Hippolytus in the third century is illustrated)

Following the time of Constantine the place where the Eucharist was celebrated became important. Constantine constructed many church buildings (basilicas) and larger meeting places were necessary due to the rapid growth of the Christian populations in the cities.

With the large numbers of Gentile converts, some pagan customs also became part of the liturgy - the kiss as a sign of reverence for holy objects, genuflections as a sign of reverence, the use of relics, candles, and incense. The congregation and the celebrant now faced the east during the liturgy.

The early liturgy as described by Justin Martyr proclaims an identification of the blessed bread and wine with the body and blood of Jesus. This early belief in the "real presence" was stated and proclaimed rather than explained. It was not until the Middle Ages that an attempt to "explain" the real presence in terms of Greek philosophy was attempted in the formulation of "transubstantiation".

As time went on the Eucharistic prayers became more uniform and less and less was left to the discretion of the celebrant. Regional liturgies - three in the East and two in the West - became more or less standardized.

Liturgical calendars were also established to celebrate Easter, Pentecost, the Epiphany and later Christmas. There was a serious controversy between the Churches of the East and West over the date of Easter. Finally, after threats of excommunication from Pope Victor (d.198) the Western calculation prevailed- the Sunday after Passover. To replace pagan practices and festivals, the Epiphany was celebrated on the pagan new year and Christmas was celebrated on the pagan feast of the birthday of the sun, December 25.

Penance - Other rites which became part of the seven sacraments also began to appear in primitive form. As in all historical development, clear lines cannot usually be drawn. In

the primitive Church, Baptism was the only ritual act for the forgiveness of sins. Yet by the second and third centuries there is some mention of deathbed prayers for those who sinned seriously after Baptism. The early Church expected the newly baptized to take conversion seriously. Serious sin was not expected after converts had taken on the new life of Jesus (1John 3:6-9). Yet people did sin as clearly indicated in 1John 1:8-10 and the Church had to deal with the issue. The result was the development of a specific ritual, the Sacrament of Penance.

In the first six centuries of the Church, this development took the form of a public rite that was available for serious sin, but *only once in a lifetime*. The list of transgressions identified as *serious sins* was generally restricted to apostasy, murder, heresy and adultery.

In the first three centuries, the development was gradual and there is little direct evidence of any specific sacramental rite until the middle of the third century. This lack of evidence strongly suggests that no rite of Penance, as such, existed in the Apostolic Church. However, an early Christian document “The Didache” (Instruction of the Apostles, 75-100 AD?) mentions a confession of sins in the assembly and before participation in the Eucharist, but no details are given. Also the Epistle of St. Clement (96 AD) recommends submission to the presbyters for those guilty of causing dissension. Only scattered references can be found in this early period.

One important second century source, entitled “The Shepherd of Hermas”, alludes to a strict theory of repentance held by some in the years 100-140 AD. This position held that the single rite of forgiveness of sins was Baptism. After Baptism, the Church demanded a holy life with no further forgiveness of serious sin by the Church. This theory claimed support from the Epistle to the Hebrews 4:6 and 1John 3:6-9. The writer of “The Shepherd of Hermas”, however, disagrees with this stricter view and declares that sins after Baptism can be forgiven through penance, but it is available only once in a lifetime.

During the persecutions in the middle of the third century, many denied their faith. Later some of these Christians asked for pardon. In many communities this pardon was finally granted with the requirement of severe penitential practices. Those holding the stricter view of repentance (like the earlier Donatists) would not accept such clemency and broke with the Church to form the Novatian and Montanist sects. They held that the sins of apostasy (denial of faith), adultery and murder were unforgivable.

In all this it is well to keep in mind that the question was not that God would not forgive these offenses, but rather that the Church did not have the power to forgive, so that the serious sinner would have to wait in uncertainty for the judgment of God and wait outside the community of the Church. This was the general view of the entire Church, the only difference being that those with the less strict view held for a single act of post-baptismal repentance after which no Church pardon for serious sin was available. This less strict view was adopted by the Church when the Council of Nicea condemned the stricter view in 325 AD.

For those who submitted themselves to this ancient form of the Sacrament of Penance the subsequent penalties were severe. Penitents could not be accepted into the clerical life, could not serve in public office or the army and, if married, could not engage in marital relations. Because of these rigors few Christians participated or put off Penance and even Baptism until the moment of death. It was given to the Irish monks in the early Middle Ages to introduce the custom of frequent, private Penance (confession) which continues today.

Belief

As we have seen, beginning with the early apologists, Christian thinkers were challenged to explain their beliefs in a culture which was not Jewish. Of course, the focus of Christian belief was Jesus. Who was he? For Jewish converts Jesus had to be explained in terms of their Jewish heritage - Jesus was Messiah (like David), Son of Man (from the Book of Daniel), Suffering Servant (Isaiah), etc. For the pagan converts Jesus had to be explained in other terms, - Logos (Divine creative Word), Son of God (a divinity), etc..

However, Jesus was and remains as mystery. Thus, it is understandable that questions arose within the early Christianity: Is Jesus divine? Is He only divine and not really human? Is He only human, but beloved of God and exalted, but not divine? Is He two persons, one divine and one human? Is he one person with two natures? Many of these questions concerning the concepts of “person” and “nature” could only arise in a Greek philosophical cultural context.

There were many answers to these question and not all of them could be true. Thus the Church entered into the theological discussion called Christology (who is Jesus). This process produced great Christological controversies, many of which were “solved” only in ecumenical councils. The first such controversy we noted briefly in an earlier chapter. We recall that Constantine called the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicea in 325, to answer the Christological question posed by Arius - is Jesus really divine and equally God with the Father? Arius said no and the Council said yes. That yes to the divinity of Jesus has remained a foundational belief of the Church throughout history.

The bishops at the Council of Nicea now recognized the need for a creed to express the basics of Christian belief. Thus, they formulated the Nicene Creed which, as modified by the Council of Constantinople in 381, is still recited in the Eucharist today.

In passing, it is well to note that while history has dubbed Arius and others as heretics, these were men of faith (strict monotheists) who had real questions and their answers, while judged wrong in the light of history, were not without foundation. Arius asked a legitimate question: If Jesus is truly divine, do we not posit then two Gods? The answer was “no” and the explanation would later developed into the Trinitarian formula - three persons in one nature - , but that statement itself is the stuff of profound mystery. So we ask for some sympathy for the heretics.

While the teachings of Arius had been condemned by the Council of Nicea, some of the wording of the new creed was disturbing to a number of bishops, some whom continued to follow the thought of Arius. The Nicene Creed had stated that the Son was begotten, not made and was “identical in substance” (Gk. *homoousios*) with the Father. This non-biblical Greek term was deemed too “philosophical” and not biblical enough. Those who objected wanted to substitute the Greek term *homoiousios* which connoted that the Son was not identical in substance, but only “of a substance like the Father”. These objecting bishops gained some imperial support from Constantius, the son of Constantine, who became emperor in 350. Constantius favored the Arian bishops over the Nicene bishops.

After a long theological struggle, which now included the question of whether and how the Spirit was consubstantial with the Father and the Son, the matter was finally resolved in 381 at the Council of Constantinople. This Council modified and reaffirmed the Nicene creed with its use of *homoousios* and further affirmed that the Spirit was consubstantial with the Father and the Son.

This same Council also condemned the views of Apollinarius of Laodicea, who in reaction to Arius who held that Jesus was human, but not divine, taught that Jesus was divine, but not human. This was akin to the second century theological doctrine of Docetism which held that Jesus only seemed (Gk. *dokein*) to be human.

Again, we must have some sympathy for these theologians who were struggling with the questions: “Who is Jesus?” and “How are Father, Son and Spirit related?” They were trying to articulate the answer to these questions within the system of Greek philosophy. The final formulations which the great Councils produced - Jesus is one person with two natures and Father, Son, and Spirit are one God in three Persons - were not explanations that solved the mysteries of Christology or the Trinity, but important formulations that set the parameters for further theological/ philosophical discussions of what would forever remain a mystery. In truth, these “heretics” did the Church a great service.

Life

Ministry - An interesting aspect of early Church ministry was the role of the deacon. As noted earlier, deacons were selected to work directly with the bishop. As the “right hands” of the bishop they came to play an important role in the ministry of the Church in the second and third centuries. At that time their role eclipsed the role of the presbyters.

Deacons were elected by the community and held positions in administration, financial responsibility, works of charity, preaching the Word in the liturgies and leading prayers at the Eucharist. Often bishops were elected directly from the deacons without first becoming presbyters.

As the Church grew and dispersed into the countryside, bishops commonly had to assign to presbyters their roles in presiding at the Eucharist, preaching and reconciling penitents.

This was the beginning of the diminution of the status of the deacons. Other developments contributing to this decline in the importance of deacons were the role of the monks and monastic centers in works of charity and the growing emphasis on celibacy for Church ministers. Gradually, the order of deacon became a stepping stone on the way to ordination in the redefined role of presbyter as priest.

The evolution from presbyter to priest was gradual. In the first three centuries most of the clergy were not socially separated from the laity. They were married, had families and worked for a living. Later, especially with the changes brought about by Constantine many became part of the imperial bureaucracy and were often paid for their ministerial efforts. Thus they became somewhat separated socially from the laity.

Another important factor was the assumption of the title priest. This was resisted in the early centuries in an effort to set Christian clergy off from the Jewish and pagan priesthoods. The early emphasis was on the preaching of the Word and the “sacramental rites” were not at the center of their ministry. The clergy did not want to be called priests.

As time went on, the identification of Jesus as High Priest in the Book of Hebrews led to the identification of the clergy with Jesus, as priest. The adoption of certain aspects of pagan religious culture also tended to set the clergy off as sacred persons. Also with advent of infant baptism as a common form of the sacrament, preaching of the Word for the purpose of conversion was becoming less important. Maintaining the church, rather than making converts was now a major function of the clergy.

The growing emphasis on celibacy and the beginnings of monastic life cut many the clergy off from the laity. They not only cut the clergy off, but tended to set them “above” the laity in holiness and stature - a far cry from Paul’s description of the Church as the Body of Christ with members having different functions by equal status.

Moral Life of the Laity - The emphasis on celibacy, coupled with the influence of dualistic philosophies such as neo-Platonism and Gnosticism that viewed the body as evil and sexual intercourse as at least somewhat sinful, had a significant effect on certain aspects of the moral lives of the laity. Celibate theologians soon taught that sexual intercourse in marriage could only be justified if the sole intention was to procreate. St. Augustine was later to link the transmission of original sin to sexual intercourse.

After the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the empire by Constantine, Christians came to view that what is good for the empire is good for the Church and thus changed their view on military service. The early Christian avoidance of military service was initially based on the sayings of Jesus about loving one’s enemies and of Jesus’ rejection of the use of force when Peter drew his sword and cut off the servant’s ear. Jesus remarked that those who take up the sword will perish by the sword (Mt. 26).

Early Christians saw their role to be peacemakers and looked forward to a day when all would live in peace in the Kingdom of God. They recalled the words of Isaiah (2:4) and

Micah (4:3)

He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

In the middle of the second century Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* wrote:

For twelve men, ignorant and unskilled in speaking as they were, went out from Jerusalem to the world, and with the help of God announced to every race of men that they had been sent by Christ to teach the word of God to everyone, and we who formerly killed one another not only refuse to make war on our enemies but in order to avoid lying to our interrogators or deceiving then we freely go to our deaths confessing Christ.

Not only did early Christians object to killing their fellowman, but entry into military service required an oath to the emperor and one's commander and, more disturbing, it often required an occasional sacrifice to Roman gods and to the "divine" emperor. Near the end of the second century, Tertullian concluded that any soldier who become a convert must either leave the army immediately or ready himself for martyrdom

Given all of this, many Christians would not take up arms. In 177, the apologist Athenagoras wrote to Marcus Aurelius (who persecuted Christians) indicating that while Christians would not join in fighting for the empire, nevertheless they were praying for him so that the empire could be at peace. And the pagan critic Celsus was alarmed that if the Christian attitude of resisting the taking up of arms, even in self defense, would spread, the empire would surely fall to barbarians. However, by the time of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) there was evidence of some Christians in military service and their numbers were growing rapidly.

While in the second and third centuries influential Christian writers came out against military service for Christians and ordinary Christians were ambivalent about military service, this came to an abrupt end with the victory of Constantine in 312. In 314, the Synod of Arles condemned Christians who deserted from the army. In 339 Eusebius, Constantine's court bishop, now stated that peace comes *through arms* and that Isaiah's hope of swords turned to plowshares would be made possible by the peace established by Constantine's military victories.

Athanasius of Alexandria, a strong defender the Council of Nicea, wrote that while in general Christians are not supposed to kill, killing enemies of the empire in battle is permissible and even praiseworthy. Ambrose of Milan (339-97) spoke of war as just if it was against the barbarians in the defense of allies and/or the weak within the empire. Even with this change in attitude on the part of many influential Christians writers and the enlistment of many Christians in the imperial army, the voices of caution and certain

practices of the Church in the fourth century indicated a strong ambivalence about Christians participating in warfare.

Certain fourth century manuals of Church order restricted those who used the “power of the sword” from baptism and communion. St. Basil (d. 397) suggested that those whose hands were stained by blood should abstain from the Eucharist for three years. In 386, Pope Siricius wrote to the bishops in Africa that anyone who had enlisted in the army after baptism could not be accepted into the clergy.

The ambivalence of the Christian attitude towards military service is still with us. Modern Catholic moral theology envisions Christians in good conscience electing to be either conscientious objectors or conscientious warriors. The Christian warrior asks: How can we survive if we do not take up arms? The Christian objector asks: Is it not also important to ask, survive as what? What do we become in the process of killing our fellow humans?

The era of Constantine was important in so many respects. We have seen abrupt changes in the social, liturgical and moral life of Christians. Some of these changes were plusses and some were minuses and most of them are with us today.