

People of the Early Church

One of my stated goals for this class is to study not only the leaders of the church, the people who preached the sermons and wrote the books, but also to try to think from time to time about the people of the church. These are the people who sat in the pews (and before there were pews, stood in the churches) and listened to the sermons and went out to live for the Lord in their everyday lives. The last lesson, lesson seven, was on the early church fathers. Now lesson eight is on the people of the early church. Those people were men and women and children, slaves and free people who met together to worship the Lord and who went out to spread His word and serve Him in the world.

We will have two parts to this lesson as we look at the people of the early church. The first part will deal with the worship of the early church. The second part will deal with the life of Christians in the family and in the community. One of the ancient prayers that was used by these early Christians is called the *Sursum Corda*, which means “Lift up your hearts.” It was first given in a form similar to the one we will pray it in, in *The Apostolic Tradition*, a Syrian writing from Hippolytus. We think it came from Syria in the early third century. This prayer has been used in many, many liturgies in the history of the Christian church and is still used often today. We will pray this prayer.

Leader: “The Lord be with you.”

People: “And also with you.”

Leader: “Lift up your hearts.”

People: “We lift them up to the Lord.”

Leader: “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”

People: “It is right to give Him thanks and praise.”

All: “Amen.”

As we think about the corporate worship of the early church we have a number of important documents. You may have read about these in Gonzales’ textbook. These are documents that help us to construct to some extent what it was like to be present in a church service in the second century in Rome or somewhere else. The Teaching of the 12 Apostles, or the Didache, came from a Christian community, we think, in the land of Syria. That document has been dated differently, but the latest indication is that we are dealing with a very, very early document when we study the Teaching of the 12 Apostles or the Didache, perhaps as early as the first century. *The Apostolic Tradition*, written by Hippolytus, gives us the form of worship that was practiced in the church of Rome in the early third century. In addition to these two very important documents we have the writings of the church fathers. The most important is the First Apology of Justin Martyr. That writing describes Christian worship in Rome at about the middle of the second century. And we also have writings from people outside the church, like Pliny, governor of Bithynia. In his letters to the emperor Trajan, Pliny describes Christian worship as it took place in his province in Asia at the end of the first century. As we look at all those documents and try to put them together we realize that there are some common themes but there are also some differences. Christian worship apparently developed somewhat differently in different places. Therefore we are not able to come up with one service that would be standard in all parts of the Christian world.

The Christian people certainly remembered the writings of the apostles and read them constantly, as we will see. These writings of course included Hebrews 10:25, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Christians met together faithfully in worship on the Lord’s Day. That was considered an essential time for God’s people, the Christian people, to meet together. In fact, one of the early writings

from the church fathers tells us that if Christians were not present in the service on the Lord's Day, if they stayed away from that service, they would tear and rend the Lord's Body. We know from the writings of some of these people whom I have just mentioned that in many places that was worship not only on the Lord's Day but on other days of the week as well. Hippolytus said this, "Let every faithful man and woman, when they have risen from sleep in the morning before they touch any work at all, wash their hands and pray to God and so go to their work." In this way he was encouraging the Christians to have a time of private devotions. All the way back in the early centuries of the church Christians were putting aside a time of prayer before getting up and going forth to work. Hippolytus added this as well, "But if instruction in the Word of God is given each one should choose to go to that place, reckoning in his heart that it is God whom he hears in the instructor." Some places, sometimes there would be daily meetings. Christians would go forth from their homes after their time of personal prayer to hear a Bible exposition. As they listened to the preacher preaching the Word of God they were to know that they were hearing what God was saying to them. Hippolytus went on to say, "If there is a day when there is no instruction, let each one when he is at home take up a holy book and read it sufficiently." If there was no service that day in their community they were to take one of the holy books, one of the books that became the Old and New Testament canon or some other holy book and read it. So Christians were encouraged to times of private prayer, and if possible daily gatherings for instruction in the Word of God.

But they were especially to come together for worship on the Lord's Day. The first references to Sunday or the Lord's Day are often "The First Day." That expression is used to describe the day of Christian worship. For instance, Justin Martyr wrote this, "We hold our common assembly on the day of the sun." People have often said that was a pagan day. Well, every day was a pagan day. The day of the sun, like any other day in the Roman Empire, was a pagan day. But it had an intriguing name that Christians began to use. Justin Martyr said, "We hold our assembly on the day of the sun because it is the first day [it was the first day of the week] on which God would put to flight darkness and chaos as He did in the creation when He made the world. And on the same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead." So as early as we can tell in the history of the church Christians were meeting on the first day of the week, the day of the sun that God made. Even though the pagans did not know the true God, the Christians did, and it was His day as much as any other day. And it was also of course the day when Jesus rose again from the dead. Therefore on that day rather than the Jewish Sabbath, the seventh day, on the Christian first day of the week Christians met for worship. We are told in several of these writings that they met very, very early, before daylight or "at cock crow," which would be early. The time of the gathering of Christians was early. That early meeting time may have been so that Christians would have privacy, particularly during times of threatened persecution. It was better to meet early and not stir up the notice and wrath or agitation of neighbors who may have been opposed to them. Also it is probable that Christians met very early in the morning so that those members who were slaves and did not have the freedom of the day to do what they wanted during the working hours would be able to come as well, early in the morning before daylight.

And we are told by Justin Martyr that they met in one place. "Christians come together in one place." I think that means that a group of Christians in a community would have one central place where they would meet. Of course, at first those were not church buildings because there were no buildings built for the purpose of serving as a church until much, much later. In fact, the great church buildings we are familiar with, the wonderful cathedrals, come only after the time of Constantine when Christianity was a legal religion and then later in the century the state religion of the Roman Empire. But early on Christians met in homes. Probably they did not often meet in places like the Catacombs, although it was possible that gatherings took place there at times when there was danger. But usually they would meet in homes. We think that in some of those homes, as in the Jewish synagogues, the leader or pastor and his

family would live in part of the house and the church would meet in a room or two of that private home. The earliest church buildings we know anything about are really remodeled houses with walls taken out to make rooms bigger in order to accommodate a larger gathering. The first church building *per se* that we have known anything about is the one at Dura-Europos, a town on the Euphrates east of the Roman Empire. This is a building we think dates to about the year 230 AD, although archaeologists have discovered another early church building in the land of Jordan that could be even earlier than the church building at Dura-Europos. The one at Dura-Europos is obviously a private home remodeled to be made into a larger meeting place. It has a central arch in its primary meeting room, an interesting architectural feature. It has a very low stone baptismary. We will talk later about how that may have been used. And it had paintings on the wall. This very early church had certain decorations and embellishments. There was a painting of the Good Shepherd, a painting of the King who conquers death, the Lord who conquers death for us, and a painting of the three Marys who came to the empty tomb. Later we will study what happened after Constantine and the development of church architecture as it becomes a very important aspect of Christian history.

Christians would gather early in the morning on the Lord's Day in a place, probably a house somewhere in their town or community. And then they would read together the Scripture and hear the Word preached. Scripture reading included both the Old and New Testaments. Justin Martyr said, "The memoirs of the apostles or the writing of the prophets." "Memoirs of the apostles" is almost certainly a reference to the Gospels and "the prophets" would be all of the Old Testament as the Old Testament was often called the Book of the Prophets. Justin tells us that at Rome that Scripture reading went on as long as time permitted. I think we should understand that to mean a long time, not just a verse or two and probably not even just a chapter or two, but perhaps some whole books of the Bible or large portions of some of the books of the Bible. You see how this would be important when Christians for the most part did not have access to the Word of God at home, although Hippolytus seems to indicate that there were available holy books, good books that Christians could perhaps share and pass around. But no one would have a whole Bible at home, and so they would come together on the Lord's Day to hear the Bible read in extensive portions. Then there would be a sermon that the pastor would give, an exposition based on either the reading of the day or some other passage of Scripture.

There would also be a time of prayer. The prayer time seems also to have been extensive. Some of the prayers were what we might call free prayers when the minister or the leader, the elder, someone in charge of the service, would pray extemporaneously. Those could be long prayers. There also seem to have been shorter prayers in which the people had a part, like the *Sursum Corda* that we prayed at the beginning of the lesson. In these prayers there would be prayer by the pastor and then responses from the people. Thus the prayer time seems to have included both free prayer and recited or set prayers. The posture in praying was almost certainly standing. That is why I have my students stand when we pray the *Sursum Corda*. That was a sign to the early Christians of joy and boldness in the presence of God. That certainly would also have been an appropriate way to pray. But as the early Christians prayed they stood with great joy and boldness in order to pray to the Lord. Certain pictures indicate that the whole congregation extended their hands in prayer.

These things developed even more as we come into later, medieval worship. They became more complex and detailed. Later people began to turn toward the east, toward the city of Jerusalem, as a sign that they were expecting the Lord's return, and signs were added to other elements of prayer. If you worship in the Free Church of Scotland today they will ask you to stand to pray. They sit to sing and stand to pray in the Free Church of Scotland, going back to Reformation practices, but also back to the practice of the early church. Many of the accounts we have of early Christian worship do not mention singing. Yet, others do and it is almost certain that the early church did sing or chant psalms and, after

the year 200 AD or so, hymns. One of the earliest was the hymn “Shepherd of Tender Youth” written by Clement of Alexandria that I have referred to several times already. It could be that Justin Martyr and the others do not come right out and say “We also sing” because in describing prayer they are considering the singing or the chants of the congregation as part of prayer.

The Lord’s Supper was celebrated every Sunday. By the middle of the second century two things, which apparently were together at first, were separated: the fellowship meal and the Lord’s Supper. The fellowship or agape meal was a fellowship meal where Christians would meet together to eat. During this meal the Lord’s Supper would be celebrated as a part of that common meal. The fellowship meal, which continued as something on its own, was separated from the Lord’s Supper by the middle of the second century, pretty much the way we do it today with fellowship meals in churches and the Lord’s Supper in Sunday worship. We are not exactly sure why that separation came, but at least by the middle of the second century the Lord’s Supper was more of a token meal that was celebrated in the context of the liturgy on the Lord’s Day, and the fellowship meal was something else entirely. At the time of the Lord’s Supper only the baptized Christians were allowed to stay. The catechumens, those who were studying and preparing for baptism, were dismissed, as well as visitors. The Lord’s Supper, then, the second part of the service, proceeded with baptized members only; at least that was the practice in Rome that Justin Martyr tells us about.

That brings us to the practice of baptism. Let me talk a little bit about that. It is not too long in the history of the church before we see something rather strange happening. That is, baptism for (adult) converts to Christianity was often delayed. It did not take place right away. In fact, some people thought it should be delayed a long time. Tertullian is not always the safest guide in these matters because he was very idiosyncratic and could go off on his own tangents. But Tertullian said, “If there are any who understand the weightiness of baptism, they will be more afraid of attaining it than delaying it.” Here is a church father who said it is best to keep putting baptism off until you really understand the burden of baptism. In Augustine’s *Confessions* we read that when he was a little boy he was quite ill. Monica his mother was arranging to have him baptized. Augustine writes, “But suddenly I recovered. My cleansing was deferred on the assumption that if I continued to live I would be sure to soil myself and after that solemn washing the guilt would be greater and more dangerous.” The view was beginning to be developed that baptism washes away all sin and if it does, if you are going to die you need it but if you are not going to die it is better to postpone it because you will probably sin some more. You can only do it once. One baptism is all you get.

This strange and unbiblical view of postponing baptism in order to have it wash away as many sins as possible became the practice in many parts of the church. So, baptism was often delayed. There were long times of preparation for baptism, instruction, or study for as many as three years. It was almost like going to seminary to get ready for baptism. Catechumens were entitled to use the name “Christian”; they were Christians and could come to the first part of the service but not the Lord’s Supper. They were not yet “the faithful,” which was the name that was reserved for baptized Christians. This seems strange because in the New Testament baptism was often quite prompt. But as some people have pointed out, baptism in the New Testament (not always, but often) was baptism of Jews or God-fearers who already knew the Scripture and, you might say, were ready to be baptized. But there were exceptions to that, too. Now, at this time in church history converts came from paganism, mystery religions, all kinds of backgrounds and all kinds of false teaching. The church became very, very careful to indoctrinate these new Christians before they brought them to baptism. As time went on this became more and more elaborate. It ended with times of special preparation and fasting, all-night vigils. And finally, the actual baptism frequently took place on Easter Sunday, which was the first Christian celebration apart from the first day of the week. Decisions on exactly how to set the day for Easter Sunday becomes a real problem

and source of tension between the church in the West and the East. But Easter is quite early observed as a special day and in many places it was the day when the catechumens were brought in for baptism using the Trinitarian Baptismal Confession, which, as we have seen, developed into the Apostles' Creed.

Let us talk for a moment about the meaning and mode of baptism in the early church. The meaning of baptism, as far as we can tell from reading the church fathers, is almost always tied with the idea of remission of sins. Actually, the doctrine of original sin seems to flow more out of the practice of baptism than *vice versa*. It is not that the doctrine of original sin was very clearly understood and then baptism was practiced as a result of the doctrine. The practice of baptism was there, and then, since it had to mean something, people began to think about it in terms of washing away original and actual sin. That is why it was often delayed, to give the person the opportunity of having more sin washed away by baptism. The Didache says that there could only be one baptism. Apparently some thought that by being baptized again they could wash away later sins. But only one baptism was allowed. That is later expressed, of course, in the Nicene Creed: "One baptism for the remission of sins." This seems to tie the ideas together, "One baptism for the remission of sins." Well, what about later sins? That was a big problem. The church wrestled with that and eventually came up with the system of penance, as we will eventually see in the medieval church.

What about the mode of baptism? We can find evidence for sprinkling, evidence for pouring, and evidence for immersion. The Didache says that the water should be running water, not still water, and that it should be cold, not warm. I am not sure of the reason for those restrictions, but there must have been some meaning implied in all of that. And if only a little water was available, the Didache instructed them to just pour the water three times on the person's head. Does that mean if there was a lot of water they could immerse and if there was a little water they could pour? It seems to say that. Tertullian in North Africa said "A person is dipped in water and is sprinkled and then rises again." This seems to indicate both immersion and sprinkling. Hippolytus in Rome says, "A candidate stands knee-deep in water while a deacon pours the water over his head or presses his head down into the water." I think putting all that together you have to come up with the idea that it just really did not matter. As long as water was applied in some way the early church felt that it was effective baptism. You can imagine the drama of the scene when a person who had been saved from a mystery religion or paganism, after long years of preparation and nights of fasting and watching, finally made it to Easter Sunday. That person was baptized and given a white robe in Rome to symbolize the cleansing from sin, and then was ushered into the waiting church for his or her first participation in the Lord's Supper. Whatever the theology of it all, it certainly was a dramatic and impressive moment in the lives of Christians.

What about infant baptism? Well, I wish we could be more clear on this, but let me say what I think is there in terms of evidence from church history. I think it is quite clear that infant baptism was an uncontroversial practice very early on. How early on, we cannot really say. But the first mentions of infant baptism, such as by Hippolytus in the early third century, did not report it as something new. It was not an innovation; people had not just started doing this, rather it had been done for a long time.

The first clear opposition to infant baptism came from the person you might expect it come from, Tertullian. He opposed it in about the year 200 AD. But he did not oppose it as a novel practice. He did not say, "This is something that is just started and is therefore to be opposed." But he opposed it because he thought it was a good idea to delay baptism. He did not really oppose infant baptism as an invalid form of baptism. It is real baptism. But if it cleanses sin it is better to have it delayed because infancy is an age of innocence. Many of the church fathers say that, and that puzzles us because Tertullian did believe in some form of original sin. But perhaps he was thinking of infancy as a period of innocence in terms of actual sins.

Later people like Augustine would dispute that. Augustine thought the actual sins start right at birth, that it does not take long for a baby to sin. But Tertullian had a different idea. So infant baptism was real baptism, but it was also risky in light of serious post-baptismal sin. Not only did Augustine have a different idea about that but Cyprian, the famous North African church father between Tertullian and Augustine, said, "Baptize quickly." He did not even want to wait eight days as some people were suggesting because of the analogy with circumcision. "Baptize quickly, because of original sin, so the baby does not run the risk of dying in sin." In fact, Cyprian thought that as the baby was born and started crying, that was not crying because of the shock of coming into this world or of hunger or something else. The crying was because of the understanding of the child that he or she was a sinner, crying out for God's grace. That first cry of a baby is a cry for God's grace, according to Cyprian.

Well, the question about infant baptism in the patristic age, it seems to me, was not whether to do it. It was being done, and it was being done early. But the reason for doing it early became the big debate. Someone has said that the practice was in search of a theology. Now, that is not the only time that has happened in church history. Sometimes the church practice can help develop the theology. Prayer can lead to doctrine, as well as doctrine to prayer. Thus it was not necessarily wrong that the church was practicing infant baptism before it could clearly explain what it was doing in that practice. We will see this developed later on in different ways. With Augustine it will be linked very, very tightly to original sin. With the Reformers of the 16th century, like Zwingli, the idea of the covenant and circumcision as analogous to baptism will be emphasized. This was not unknown in the early church, but it was not emphasized until the rise of covenant theology in the 16th century. These become explanations for infant baptism. But early on it was practiced. How early? We do not know. Exactly why the church was doing it was a kind of mystery. It took a long time for the theology to catch up with the practice.

Now, let me move quickly to other aspects of life in the early church for the early Christians. We will talk about sex and marriage, and then the Christian out in the world, in community. Many other things could be added, but we have to limit these lectures somehow. On Christian marriage: Christians read and believed Hebrews 13:4, "Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure." There are two ideas there, and I think the early Christians held firmly to these two ideas, that marriage should be honored by all. Some Christians, of course, chose not to marry based on the advice of Paul. I think one reason for avoiding marriage was the unsettled times, the possibility for martyrdom, and the crisis that Christian communities faced time and time again in early church history. So, as Peter Brown puts it, "Marriage and children demanded a peculiar and necessary brand of Christian courage." It may have taken as much courage if not more courage to get married and have a family than to go to the stake, because in those times that was a calling Christians honored, so many did get married. But it often ended, of course, in disaster as far as this world is concerned. Families were broken apart and fathers and mothers were killed for the sake of their faith. But the early Christians honored marriage. Clement of Alexandria said, "By all means, then, we must marry, both for the sake of our own country and for the succession of children and for the completion of the world, in so far as it pertains to us."

Within marriage, but within marriage only, the early Christians believed sex is proper, right, and good, and is to be practiced and honored. Christians lived in a world with two extremes. There was the anti-body, anti-sex world of the Gnostics. Because the body is bad and the material world is bad, sex just traps more souls in material bodies. Therefore at least one aspect of Gnostic thinking was to deny the body and to avoid sexual union that would produce children. On the other hand, it was a very licentious world. Thus you could get two conflicting worlds, one rejecting the material and the other reveling in sexual orgies and immorality of all kinds. Christians avoided both of those. Sex was good and proper, but, as Clement of Alexandria along with countless others said, "Sexual activity is to be limited to marriage and is to be undertaken as a purposeful, reverent endeavor." This is very interesting way that

he says that. Sex is to be within marriage, and it is a reverent and purposeful endeavor between Christians. Of course, it was not long before the church, before Christian people, began to see marriage as not quite so good or at least not the highest form. Asceticism and celibacy become elevated in the monastic movements—more in the East than in the West, but certainly in the West as well. The ideal was no longer marriage and a family but celibacy and sexual abstinence as the marks of the complete Christian. I think Hebrews 13:4 began to be read more this way: “Marriage should be honored by all [but celibacy even more!].” And eventually it became, “[Celibacy should be honored by all, and marriage tolerated.]” But that takes us far beyond the limits of our lesson today.

Let me close by saying a few words concerning Christian life in society. Christians read the words in the Bible that they were to be “in the world but not of the world.” Christians in the early church struggled to put this in practice. Diognetus explains it this way, “We belong to this world, we are citizens of this world, we do everything like other people do that we can within the limits of our faith, but at the same time we are aliens.” So Christians were both at home and not at home in the world. I will give just three examples of life in society. Early Christians had great respect for life. They were pro-life. They opposed abortion and they opposed infanticide, which was perhaps an even more frequent practice then. The practice was to expose infants, to simply let them be born and place them outside to die. A husband in Alexandria wrote to his pregnant wife in about the year 1 BC. He obviously loved his wife; it is a very warm letter, but it has this chilling note because she is expecting a baby and he is away some place. He says, “If it is a boy, keep it. If it is a girl, put it out.” This means, expose her. Put her out on a trash heap to die or to be picked up by someone. That was not uncommon. Girls were not as wanted as boys because of economic considerations, but both boys and girls were exposed.

Abortion, too, was practiced, but less commonly because of the danger of death to the mother in that case. But it was routine in Greco-Roman culture for the welfare of state and family to be placed above the welfare or rights of the unborn or even the born child. The child was not really a part of the family until the decision was made to keep it. Then it became part of the family. The Christians totally opposed all that. Not only did Christians not practice infanticide or abortion, but Christians picked up many of the children who were abandoned and raised them as Christian children in Christian homes.

Compassion for the needy was also a theme we see in the early church. The church took care of orphans, widows, and the poor. I did not mention when we were talking about the worship services that collections were made, people brought money and gifts to the church. And in those days with no buildings to keep up, no pastors to pay (since pastors were not full-time pastors like we often have today), and no staff to employ, all the money could go to charitable purposes. Thus the money that was collected went to the poor, the prisoners, the orphans, and others in need.

Christians also lived in light of a concern for decency. There were many activities, even public activities, that were marked by obscenity and vulgarity, public festivals and celebrations of different kinds. Christians would absent themselves from all of that in order to take a stand for purity and decency in culture. There is a book called *The First Urban Christians*, which describes all of this in some detail. It has two main points: radical purity and radical generosity. It seems to me to be a wonderful outline of and tribute to those early Christians who practiced radical separation from the world in purity, even as they lived in the midst of an impure world, and radical generosity in being willing to reach out and give to others. Now, I do not mean to say in this lesson that all Christians were perfect or anywhere close to it. Many of them fell away in the persecutions, and many of them fell into sin. We will talk about church discipline later on. But as I have described these early Christians today, I have described many of them who really lived for the Lord in their time.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).