

Worship in the Early Church

by S. Bracefield

- *How did the church of the early centuries (before Constantine) conduct its meetings on the Lord's Day?*
- *Can we learn anything from this to help us in our worship services today?*

Introduction

A Time of Change

In the age of the Early Church (~30 – 312 AD) the way worship was conducted underwent significant development.

This development was greatly influenced by the church's adapting to the following changes:

- the church's spread to embrace many and diverse cultures
- the church's response to heresies that arose
- the rise of episcopacy

There are difficulties in piecing together how and when changes occurred, and how universal they were. The New Testament doesn't give a complete description of worship and later material is sketchy and may contain inaccuracies. Nevertheless it is possible to get a general idea of patterns and developments¹.

1. Worship in the days of the Apostles (*NT: Acts and Epistles*²)

Jewish beginnings

As mentioned above the first Christians were Jews and lived in Palestine. They understood Jesus to be the Messiah hoped for by the Jewish people so did not initially at least see themselves to be a movement separate from Judaism. They continued to worship in the temple and synagogue along with their fellow countrymen, living as good Jews, keeping the law. Christians in Palestine did not cease worshipping in the synagogue and temple until they were barred from synagogues following the destruction of the temple in 70AD. Even many of those forced out of Palestine by persecution prior to this time were able to join a local

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship and Liturgy*, in Dictionary of the Later NT, Martin and Davids, Eds., (Downers Grove; IVP, 1997), 1225. He cautions against harmonising: ignoring the likelihood of regional variation, and assuming a linear development to reconstruct where there is no data.

² Names in brackets after each major heading are the most important primary sources drawn on by authors referenced in this essay

synagogue as synagogues existed in most major towns and cities in the Roman Empire.

It is helpful here to give a description of synagogue worship because besides being an integral part of early Christian worship, when Christianity eventually broke from Judaism and in the Gentile churches founded by Paul the pattern of synagogue worship was largely carried over into Christian worship services.

Jewish Synagogue Service³

- Open with prayer⁴ (Shema)
- 2 benedictions
- reading of 10 Commandments (by a reader) “Amen” response of congregation
- 18 prayers and benedictions (by a reader) “Amen” response of congregation
- lesson from law and lesson from prophets (read in Hebrew)
- homily in vernacular
- benediction and “Amen”

Other important details:

- any Jew of age could read the lesson, offer prayer or address the congregation
- the leadership consisted of president, elders (equal in rank), reader, interpreter, clerks, sexton (for humbler mechanical services) and deacons for collection of alms
- synagogues corresponded between each other
- services were held on Sabbath, Monday and Thursday. Hours of prayer were 9, 12 and 3
- men and women were divided by a low wall or screen
- during prayer people stood with faces to Jerusalem

It is easy to see how the early Christians remained in Judaism so long. The synagogue centred around the Jewish Scriptures and the worship of Yahweh. Also because any man of age was able to pray, read and speak it was the ideal place to speak about Jesus and show how the Scriptures pointed to him. Separation from Judaism eventually happened because their unbelieving countrymen forced them out.

Differences between Christian Jews and Jews

Christians worshipped Jesus as God alongside the Father.

Christians had received the Spirit in a way the Jews hadn't which brought *illumination*: they had a different understanding of the way of salvation and rejoiced that the promises had been fulfilled and the Messiah had come, and *joy*: their worship was characterised by “exultant praise⁵”.

Early Christian Practises Distinct from Judaism

Alongside their Judaism the early Christians also had some of their own practises. They had their own sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper

³ Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church Vol.1*, 212,213

⁴ prayers and songs were chiefly from the psalter: the first liturgy and hymnbook

⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship and Liturgy*, in Dictionary of the Later NT, Martin and Davids, Eds., (Downers Grove; IVP,1997), 1228

(which had been instituted by Christ), and their own meetings as described by Acts 2:42-47.

- they met daily in the temple and in houses (although it seems unlikely that this was sustained)
- continuing steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine,
- fellowship,
- in the breaking of bread⁶,
- prayers⁷

Meetings were characterised by simplicity and gladness (v47).

Early Gentile Christianity

While Paul first spoke at the local synagogue when he came to a new area, antagonism led to the churches he founded being completely separated from Judaism. Most of the new converts were also Gentiles rather than Jews. Paul set a pattern for the churches he established based on the pattern of Jewish synagogue worship but divested of its Jewishness as set out in the table below⁸.

Many of these churches were well established and exerting great influence by the time Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogue. Christianity became a global movement based on Paul's model and Christianity within Judaism died out.

	Judaism	Christianity
Worship (holy) day	7 th day (creation)	1 st day (resurrection)
Sacraments	Circumcision, Passover	Baptism, Lord's Supper
Festivals	Several including Passover & Pentecost	Passover & Pentecost (but modified to celebrate their fulfilment: Jesus' death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit)
Atonement / consecration	Bloody sacrifices	Thankful remembrance and appropriation of eternal sacrifice of Christ / personal offering of prayer, intercession and entire self-consecration
Place / focus of worship	Temple in Jerusalem	Temple made without hands. Never ceasing worship of omnipresent God in Spirit and truth

Content of early Christian Worship (not in order⁹)

- meeting together on the first day¹⁰ of each week¹¹

⁶ referring to the shared meal or love feast, the Lord's Supper which followed it, or both

⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship and Liturgy*, in Dictionary of the Later NT, Martin and Davids, Eds., (Downers Grove; IVP, 1997), 1228 Some people see this reference to prayers to suggest a continued adherence to the Jewish temple liturgy

⁸ Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church Vol 1*, 213 (I put the information in table form)

⁹ J.G. Davies *The Early Christian Church: A history of the first five centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 63 (first 6), Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church Vol 1*, p 214,5 (last 3)

¹⁰ as it was the day of the resurrection- which was the central theme of their messages to their countrymen as it showed Jesus to be the Messiah.

¹¹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 83 He suggests they met both morning and evening and that the love feast and Lord's supper was celebrated in the evening

- love feast followed by the Lord's Supper.
- a homily was delivered (Acts 20:7)
- letters from leading Christians were read (Col 4:16) (and due to ties with the synagogue (Christianity having emerged from Judaism) it is likely that there were also lections from the OT.)
- collection for charity (1 Cor 16:2)
- kiss of peace (as a symbol of solidarity) (1 Cor 16:20)
- prayer: petition, intercession, thanksgiving (offered in childlike confidence to a reconciled Father in the name of Jesus, for all classes and conditions, freely from the heart as moved by the Spirit, according to needs and circumstances)
- song: psalms but also new songs rejoicing in the birth and death of Jesus etc
- confession of faith based on Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ

Martin considers Acts 20 suggests a two-part arrangement of public speaking and a meal occasion with some more discourse to follow¹². Whether or not there were non-sacramental meetings is unclear. Davies supposes this is likely citing *1 Corinthians 14* as a possible example.¹³

Baptism

Baptism was related to Jewish purification ceremonies but was made a sacrament by Jesus. He commanded disciples to be baptised as the sign and seal of initiation into his church (similar to circumcision being the rite of entry into the Old Covenant community). Baptism signified regeneration but was not confused with conversion. Simon Magus was baptised but later shown to be unconverted.

Baptism in *Acts* took place directly upon profession of faith (Acts 2:41, 8:36-39, 9:18, 10:47,48 etc). There was no prior catechising period.

Baptism was to be with water but the mode is not specified in the NT. It was to be in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. It was administered to a person only once. While most baptisms recorded in the NT were adults, household baptisms and the carry over into the NT of promises of a special relationship of God to children of believers suggest children were also proper subjects.

Davies comments that there was a practice (which may not have been universal) of following baptism with the laying on of hands signifying identification with the community by action of its representative.¹⁴

Lord's Supper

Initially the Lord's Supper followed the same pattern as the Last Supper in being at the end of a meal (love feast). The Bible describes it as a time of gladness and singleness of heart (Acts 2:46).

¹² Ralph P. Martin, *Worship and Liturgy*, in Dictionary of the Later NT, Martin and Davids, Eds., (Downers Grove; IVP,1997), 1231

¹³ J.G. Davies *The Early Christian Church: A history of the first five centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 60

¹⁴ J.G. Davies *The Early Christian Church: A history of the first five centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 59

The Lord's Supper understood to be the thankful remembrance and appropriation of the atoning death of Christ and the living union of believers with him and each other¹⁵.

Spiritual Gifts, Informality and Liturgy

The worship of the early church was marked by informality and spontaneity. It was an age of the Spirit: people empowered by the Spirit spoke in tongues and prophesied bringing the message of God to the people. Any who felt led were able to bring a word, psalm, tongue etc, similar to the synagogue model but regulated by two guiding principles: 1) edification and 2) God is not a God of confusion but of peace¹⁶.

This system was not without its problems. A major issue in Paul's letter to the Corinthians was dealing with people desiring the "showy" gifts for their own prestige rather than the up building of the church as a whole, and the resulting chaos.

There was still a tendency to use some fixed liturgical forms¹⁷. These include the Lord's Prayer, benedictions (1 Cor 16:23), doxologies (Rom 1:25), and hymns (Col 3:16). Many scholars see examples of liturgy in the text of the epistles¹⁸ but have varied views as to the extent.

Leaders & Meeting Places

From both the Bible and the writings of Clement (who died ~100 AD) there is no evidence that there was a leader above the elders, but rather a plurality of elders with visiting evangelists and apostles.¹⁹

Meetings were in homes public auditoriums, not in specially built buildings (Acts 2:46, 19:9, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:5, Philemon 2...)

Uniformity

As Christianity spread it embraced people of differing cultures and religious backgrounds each with their own specific needs and problems.

Among the Gentile churches Paul is a common link²⁰. Paul and his helpers founded many churches; establishing worship services and putting in place the system of government. Paul's letters were also circulated amongst them.

Paul however did not elevate uniformity²¹. He did not stamp a fixed brand of culture on all. To the Jews he was a Jew and to the Greeks, a Greek,

¹⁵ Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church Vol.1*, 219

¹⁶ J.G. Davies *The Early Christian Church: A history of the first five centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 63

¹⁷ J.G. Davies *The Early Christian Church: A history of the first five centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 64

¹⁸ eg Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:18-20, 1 Tim 3:16, Eph 5:14 Martin LH

¹⁹ Michael A. Smith, *Clement of Rome*, in Lion Handbook "The History of Christianity", Dr Tim Dowley, Ed. (Tring, Lion Publishing, 1997), 125

²⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship and Liturgy*, in Dictionary of the Later NT, Martin and Davids, Eds., (Downers Grove; IVP,1997), 1225

²¹ eg not uniformity but unity in diversity is seen in Paul's concept of a church (Eph 4, 1 Cor 12)

adapting his message to find a starting point that captured his audience. Paul made much of Christian liberty. He accepted Jewish Christians could live under the law but insisted it should not be imposed on Gentile converts. Instead they should use biblical principles to guide them in working out their salvation. Similarly regarding worship, Paul's writings don't contain detailed instructions, but gave the guiding principles mentioned above.

2. Worship in the 2nd Century (*Didache, Justin, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Theophilus*)

By this time the Jewish Christian model was gone, Christianity was multinational and most Christians were Gentiles.

Justin Martyr and the *Didache* give information about mid 2nd century worship services²²:

- Held on Sunday
- Started with reading of the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets for a period as long as time permits
- An exhortation or homily on the reading given by the president
- Congregation stands for prayer
- Kiss of peace²³
- Celebration of Lord's supper- elements dedicated by bishop with thanksgiving and prayers²⁴. People respond with Amen
- Collection for aid to widows etc.
- Meeting dismissed

Both informality and room for individual contribution have lessened; "worship gradually became more formal and stereotyped after Paul's death"²⁵.

There is no longer mention of prophetic gifts. Shelley comments: "The church was no longer a place where the spirit of prophesy could be heard... It was not that the church had ceased to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. The difference was that in the first days the Holy Spirit had enabled men to write the sacred books of the Christian faith; in the later days the Holy Spirit enabled men to understand, interpret, and to apply what had been written."²⁶

Liturgy was used to unify belief and combat heresy. Examples include songs written by Ignatius to combat Docetism²⁷ and the Apostles' Creed.

²² Ralph Martin, Cairns, Davies etc all quote from these documents

²³ Bruce L. Shelley *Church History in Plain Language* 2nd Edition (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 42 according to Shelley slanders were disseminated about early Christians being involved in gross immorality: "the kiss (of peace) became so susceptible to abuse that the churches almost completely abandoned it"

²⁴ The *Didache* contains lengthy prayers (liturgy) thought to be for the love feast and the Eucharist. A call to self scrutiny before partaking in the Lord's Supper was included in this liturgy.

²⁵ Ralph Martin, *How the First Christians Worshipped* in Lion Handbook "The History of Christianity", Dr Tim Dowley, Ed. (Tring, Lion Publishing, 1997), 124

²⁶ Bruce L. Shelley *Church History in Plain Language* 2nd Edition (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 64-66

²⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship and Liturgy*, in *Dictionary of the Later NT*, Martin and Davids, Eds., (Downers Grove; IVP, 1997), 1230,1

By the end of 1st century the love feast had disappeared and Lord's Supper was celebrated in the morning²⁸.

Leaders

A pattern was emerging of a powerful, holy clergy and a passive, less spiritual laity. From early in the 2nd century a new, three-office structure (bishop, elder and deacon) appears. Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in 110 but this phenomenon was not widespread until later in the century. He was concerned about schism so called on the churches to rally around the bishop and his officers. It is in this context that the Lord's Supper rose to be the church's focal point. Cairns comments "Emphasis on the monarchical bishop who, it was believed, derived his authority by apostolic succession, led many to think of him as a centre of unity, the depository of truth, and the dispenser of the means of grace of God through the sacraments. Converts from the mystery religions may also have aided in the development of the concept of the separation of the clergy and laity as emphasised in the holiness of the bishop's position."²⁹

Baptism

A period of instruction and fasting as a catechumen now preceded baptism. This was presumably a response to false teaching about the person of Christ that was prevalent at this time. Catechumens even had to sit in a separate part of the church from baptised members. Baptism was usually performed at Easter or Pentecost³⁰.

Regarding the actual administration of the sacrament the mode was usually immersion. Didache states that baptism should be in running water but if this was not possible other water was allowed. It should be cold rather than warm and if only a small amount it is to be poured three times upon the head in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. After the baptism the neophyte (candidate) was clothed in white robes. The *Odes of Solomon* belonging to the Eastern church has the neophyte crowned with a garland (symbolising the presence of Christ), putting on a special robe and signed with the sign of the cross (although there is doubt as to whether this is orthodox practise as according to Irenaeus, some Gnostic groups followed these rituals).

The theology of baptism also had shifted:

- *Irenaeus* considered baptism a means of conveying the Holy Spirit and called it "the seal" of eternal life
- *Ignatius* thought it provided weapons for spiritual combat
- *Justin* considered it mediated remission of sins
- *Theophilus* called it the means of rebirth.

²⁸ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 83 and Ralph Martin, *How the First Christians Worshipped* in Lion Handbook "The History of Christianity", Dr Tim Dowley, Ed. (Tring, Lion Publishing, 1997), 126 (who quotes Pliny & Trajan's correspondence (112) which mentions Christians meet before daybreak on Sundays)

²⁹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 119

³⁰ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 119

Lord's supper³¹

The Lord's Supper was now conducted by the bishop or his delegate. Deacons distributed it to those present, and then to those unable to be present in their homes.

The theological understanding of the Lord's Supper had also changed, perhaps due to the influence of Gnosticism:

- *Ignatius* taught that the Eucharist is the flesh of the Saviour Jesus Christ, the bond of union between Christians and Christ and between Christians, and the medicine of immortality
- *Justin* believed the elements had both an earthly and heavenly reality, and that on receiving the sacrament "our bodies... are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity. He used a special prayer to call on the Divine Word to come upon the bread and wine
- The belief that the Eucharist is a sacrifice became common at this time and new vocabulary was used to make it seem more "other worldly"
- *Irenaeus* held similar views

3. Worship in the 3rd and 4th Century prior to Constantine (*Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, Serapion*)

Structure of Worship

Origen describes a two-part worship service: the first part open to converts under instruction and probably enquirers and the second only to baptised communicants³².

Sacraments

"The church increasingly hedged the two sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism around with rites that a priest alone could perform"³³

Tertullian (born ~150) opposed infant baptism, but it seems his views were a minority. From the mid 3rd century there are writings indicating that baptised children were being admitted to the Lord's Supper. There is dispute over whether this was a new development or a longstanding practise³⁴. Clinical baptism: the baptism of the sick, also developed in this period³⁵.

³¹ J.G. Davies *The Early Christian Church: A history of the first five centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 104

³² Ralph Martin, *How the First Christians Worshipped* in Lion Handbook "The History of Christianity", Dr Tim Dowley, Ed. (Tring, Lion Publishing, 1997), 128

³³ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 119

³⁴ Richard Bacon www.fprcr.org/blue_banner_articles/meanye takes the view that paedocommunion emerged at this time

Tommy Lee www.crt.org/sacramentology/tl_paedo.html believes paedocommunion was practised from the beginning of the church. But regarding recorded evidence he notes "From the third century until the twelfth and thirteenth century there is overwhelming evidence that the Western Church regularly brought her infants and young children to participate in the Lord's Supper. This is evidenced by several primary

The Lord's Supper was seen even more as an offering (eg Hippolytus, Serapion) and the elements "to become the likeness of the holy body of the Lord"³⁶

Leadership and Spirituality

Shelley notes: "At the beginning of the 3rd century... something significant happened. The extraordinary moral fibre of the church had weakened... By the year 220 it was evident that the Christian churches, together with their bishops and clergy, were no longer what they had been."³⁷ Shelley believes there is a link between the rise of the bishops and clergy to a lack of the fruit of the Spirit in ordinary Christians: "even in the 3rd century many felt that the coming of episcopacy meant the departure of the Spirit"³⁸.

Place of worship

In describing the early 4th century Shelley says "Impressive church buildings appeared in the principle cities of the empire."³⁹

4. Lessons for today

Change relating to spread

The early church as it spread to embrace new cultures had a challenge to provide edifying worship. Today with the spread of the gospel, traditions again need to be challenged especially in the area of edification:

- many urban churches today contain people of different cultures and levels of competence in language
- People of our age have short attention spans, and are used to slick multimedia presentations (eg TV).
- Those converted from a Non-Christian background have little or no Bible knowledge
- Children are seldom catechised (as they were in the past), often ill disciplined

- In mission situations difficult languages must be mastered compared to the early church which had a universal language

sources and substantiated by numerous secondary sources. Before this time, we have no unambiguous evidence about the practice of paedocommunion."

³⁵ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 119

³⁶ Ralph Martin, *How the First Christians Worshipped* in Lion Handbook "The History of Christianity", Dr Tim Dowley, Ed. (Tring, Lion Publishing, 1997), 128

³⁷ Bruce L. Shelley *Church History in Plain Language* 2nd Edition (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 74

³⁸ Bruce L. Shelley *Church History in Plain Language* 2nd Edition (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 72

³⁹ Bruce L. Shelley *Church History in Plain Language* 2nd Edition (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 93

We also can learn from Paul and the early church that imposing uniformity can destroy Christian liberty. In both mission situations and multicultural churches we must take care to differentiate between the essentials of the gospel and biblical principles compared to other, non-essential cultural preferences.

The need for order also needs to be considered in churches influenced by movements such as Toronto and Pensacola

Change arising from reaction to heresy

The early church coped with this problem by the formation of creeds: ie teaching the people the truth. It is important today for the church to have a biblical answer to the heresies of our times so people are not misled and turned away. The creation of new creeds is not such a necessity as we have several formed in the past, and some past heresies have returned to plague the present. Also most people today are literate so are not dependent on a concise, memorisable summary.

The second way the early church dealt with heresy was to rally around the bishop...

Change arising from the rise of episcopacy

Increasing the power of the clergy as the holy and orthodox ones, in the end made the congregation put their trust not so much in the truth, as in a man. It led to a lack of spirituality among the people and a holier class of leaders who became venerated. The worship service almost became a performance, with a passive audience.

There is a warning for today, that it is necessary to have a true biblical view of leadership. While it is biblical to respect and submit to leaders they should not be worshipped or treated as "more holy".

The clergy/laity gap that arose shows the importance that members of the congregation are actively participating in worship. There must at least be the engaging of their minds and hearts. There also must be fellowship, love and concern between the leadership and the people so messages are edifying and the people's needs prayed for in congregational prayers etc.

Conclusion

The early church provides us with many virtues to imitate but also pitfalls to avoid. It was not perfect. It would be wrong to hold it up as a model to be imitated in every detail. Sinful man will never have a perfect church in this age.

Change was a feature in the early church and continues to bring fresh challenges today. For this reason there will never be a perfect model that we can copy. By contrast the principles God gave us through Paul are timeless and adaptable to any situation.