

Leiturgia: The Development of Early Christian Worship

Jews at the time of Jesus Christ had a history of worship that was at least 1500 years old. Their history was filled with interaction with God who called them as His people and gave specific instructions as to offerings, sacrifices and cycles of worship. The Bible is clear that God revealed to Israel how to worship, and it was patterned after things in heaven. (Exodus 12 & 13, 25-31; Isaiah 6 and Daniel 7) These specific forms or liturgies of worship were first seen in the Tabernacle of the early Israelites, and were consummated in the temple worship in Jerusalem. The worship of God in the temple in Jerusalem was the first and most prominent focus of Jewish worship, which included the form and frequency of prayer and sacrifice.

For Judaism there had always been a constant cycle of prayers, blessings and meals: daily, weekly, monthly and annually. These constituted the second focus for the Jews. In its most regular form it included practices in the daily hours of prayers and the annual High Feast Days. The High Feast Days included the sacrificial offerings of the Temple and contained Jewish messianic expectation. These meals included the ‘breaking of bread’ and the ‘blessing of the cup’, and contained parallels with both the Temple sacrifice and the messianic feast.

Besides the structure or order of worship that came from Judaism into Christianity, one can also find the cycles of liturgy- the daily, weekly and yearly cycles of liturgy - coming from the Old Testament as well. Acts 2:46 says that “day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart”. On a daily basis the Apostles continued their Jewish worship practices in the Temple and on a daily basis broke the bread of communion. This regularity of time is further confirmed in Acts 3:1 where Peter and John were going to the temple because it was the hour of prayer. Not only did they continue in the Jewish worship practice, but also kept the liturgical cycle of daily prayer at set hours (this tradition is preserved in the tradition of *liturgical hours*) as well as the major feast days.

Christian worship, then, was a Christ-centered pattern that continued and preserved the traditional structure of synagogue worship and the meaning of the Temple worship that the Lord had established in Israel. This basic structure included the Old and New Testament practices of liturgy, baptism and Paschal feast that became the Eucharist, and of certain feast days.

If one realizes that Jewish worship was liturgical and provided the worship structure for the early Church, and then one reads the New Testament closely, an entirely new side to the question becomes clear. The earliest and clearest reference to liturgy comes in Acts, the book which chronicles the inception and growth of the early Church. The church in Antioch was the first Gentile church outside of Jerusalem, established approximately 38 A.D. when Barnabas was sent

to teach there (Acts 11:25 ff). Acts 13 describes the selection of Barnabas and Paul for the first missionary journey. This would have taken place around 46 A.D., in what by then was a well established and structured community of believers.

Luke records that the calling of Paul and Barnabas was the work of the Holy Spirit, and that it took place during the 'liturgy'. The text reads, "as they were worshipping (leitourgounton) before the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. Luke, a physician and well educated, must have understood that worship meant the community gathered together in formal and ritual worship.

So, in 46 A.D., this early church was worshipping in a liturgical manner using a Christian form carried over from the Synagogue. And this was within sixteen years of the resurrection of Jesus. The continuity of worship between the old and new Covenants is very evident.



Interior view of Church in Antioch, looking towards the entrance. © Dick Osseman.

The New Testament church was a minority movement within a hostile religious environment. The earliest followers of Jesus could not conduct public Christian worship of the type we are accustomed to in the Western world. For this reason, the New Testament does not provide detailed instruction for the order of worship. However, from its pages we are able to glimpse some details of what worship looked like in the early church.

The Christian assembly usually met in private homes for worship and instruction (Acts 2:46; 16:40; 18:7; Phil. 1:2). It appears that, in commemoration of the resurrection, the congregation assembled on the "Lord's Day," the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2). Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul describes two types of Christian gathering. One is the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 10:16-17; 11:20-29) or ceremonial community meal, over which Jesus had presided on the night of his arrest and which he asked his followers to continue. Paul goes on to describe a second type of gathering, the prophetic assembly, which includes both singing and thanksgiving in unknown languages, with interpretation, and prophecy (I Cor. 14:1-33).

Elsewhere the New Testament suggests that Christian worship incorporated singing of hymns and psalms (Eph. 5:19), prayer (I Cor. 11:4-5), vocal thanksgiving (Eph. 5:20; Heb 13:15), and instruction (I Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16). The Gospel of Luke and Revelation preserve hymns that may have been used in the worship of the early church (Luke 1:48-55; 2:14 & 29-32; Rev. 4:8 & 11; 15:3-5). The New Testament does not specify who is to lead the worship or administer the Lord's Supper, although prophets clearly had a role in corporate worship (I Cor. 14:23-33). Paul's words indicate that unbelievers occasionally attended the prophetic assembly (I Cor. 14:22-25), although it would not have been appropriate for them to take part in the Eucharist. In fact, although "The world had a right to hear the Gospel: but those who have not yet 'put on Christ' by baptism and thus as 'sons' received his Holy Spirit by confirmation *cannot* join in offering that prevailing prayer. All who had not entered the order of the laity were therefore without exception turned out (dismissed) of the assembly after the sermon. (Dix p.41)

Jesus himself instituted the Lord's Supper as part of his last Passover celebration with his disciples (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-22.) His words on the occasion (This is my body..., "this is my blood...", "do this in remembrance of me") suggest a close identification between the elements of bread and wine and the continuing presence of Jesus with the church. Though it is clear that the risen Christ was recognized by his followers "in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:13-35), the New Testament does not define this relationship as precisely as later theologians might have wished. As the ceremony passed into the practice of the church, it appears that the aspect of the blessing and thanksgiving became predominant in a celebration of the oneness of Christ with his followers (I Cor. 10:16-17). Indeed, the Greek word for giving thanks (*eucharisteo*) associated with Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper has given us one of the ceremony's historic names, *Eucharist*.

Regarding baptism, Jesus himself had been baptized by John the Baptist as a sign of his role as the Messiah or Son of God (Mark 1:9-11). As practiced by Jesus followers after his resurrection, baptism is an act through which a person repents or turns away from the existing cultural and religious establishment to identify with the new order God has initiated in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:38-39). Such repentance acknowledges Jesus as Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36). Paul gives baptism further theological significance as an act through which one dies to sin and shares in Christ's resurrection (Rom. 6:3-9). But its basic function as a ceremony is to initiate the new convert into the Christian faith. Jesus had commanded its use for this very purpose, as part of "making disciples" of people from all ethnic groups (Matt. 28:19-20). Since baptism was a rite of initiation, it was not practiced in the setting of the service of worship. Although the symbolism of baptism is best preserved when the new convert is completely immersed in water, the New Testament records several occasions of baptism where that method would have been impractical (such as the 3000 baptized on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, which has no river!), and perhaps water was simply poured over the convert's head. Scripture is not the only source of information about the style of early Christian worship.

The *Didache* or ‘Teaching’ is a manual of church order and Christian living from the late first or early second century. The Greek title is “Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles.” The document recommends praying the Lord’s Prayer three times daily. It describes how Christians come together on the Lord’s Day “to break bread and give thanks”, first confessing their sins and being reconciled with their neighbors for a pure sacrifice to the Lord. Only baptized Christians are to partake.

The order of worship in the *Didache* follows Jewish forms for “grace” before and after meals. The leader’s prayer does not refer to the body and blood of Jesus; instead, the emphasis is on the gathering of the church body. It is noteworthy that the prayer and thanksgiving are interlaced with doxologies; the event is a praise/celebration of the congregation of God’s people. The role of the prophets is significant; the *Didache* calls them the church’s “high priests”, and gives instructions on how to welcome prophets and discern true from false. The document does not specify what sort of church official is to preside at the Eucharist. As part of the instruction for becoming a member of an *Ecclesia*, the word church was not used until later, the *Didache* was probably the first Catechism in Christianity.

Justin Martyr composed his *First Apology* in Rome about 155 A.D. He described both a post-baptismal Eucharist and a Sunday Assembly. The first event follows the baptism or “washing” of one who has become convinced and confessed Christ. The new Christian is then led to the assembly of “brethren”. Only those who accept the Christian faith and have “received the washing” for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and who live by Christ’s principles, are allowed to partake of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist begins with common prayers for the assembly: for themselves, for the new convert and for others. Then the worshippers greet one another with a kiss. Bread wine and water are then brought to the president, who offers the Eucharistic prayer. The prayer begins by ascribing glory to the Father in the name of the Son and Spirit, and continues with thanksgiving that worshipers have been judged worthy to receive the bread and wine. At the end, the congregation says the Amen.

The other event Justin describes is the Sunday assembly “in one place”. He explains that the community gathers on Sunday, or the first day, both because it was the day of creation and because on it Jesus rose from the dead.

The service begins with the readings from the “memoirs of the apostles” (Gospels) or the writings of the prophets, as long as time allows. Then the president teaches from the Scriptures. The speaker was probably seated while the people stood, as was the custom in ancient times. Prayers and the celebration of the Eucharist follow as described above. At the end those who have prospered voluntarily bring their gifts to the president, who will distribute them to those in need.

The worship as described by Justin reveals a further development of Christian liturgy beyond the ceremony described in the Didache. There is a formal offertory for the elements of bread and wine, which are now associated with the body and blood of Christ. They do not here signify the gathering of the church, although the corporate solidarity of the community is evident in the setting for the Eucharist. The Sunday assembly combines the service of Word, or reading and teaching from Scripture, with the Eucharist or service of the Lord's Table; this was to become the historic sequence of Christian worship. There is a greater role and responsibility for the president and deacons, while the prophets of the Didache are not mentioned. The description of the post-baptismal Eucharist makes it clear that the unbaptized were not present for the Eucharist. If during the Sunday gathering they were present for the readings and the president's discourse, they were dismissed before prayers. It is interesting to note that early Christian writings use the term translated as president and not priest, pastor or minister, probably because then person who would officiate at pagan rites were called priests. It was also a time when the Christians, a term first appearing in the writings of Tacitus, when Nero blamed Christians for the great fire in Rome (64 A.D.), were trying to separate themselves from their Jewish background.

In this last context, the Christian Community was developing not only their own orthodoxy (right belief), but also orthopraxy (right practices). While holding to the importance of ritual cleansing and fasting, the Jews would fast on Monday and Thursday, so the Christians would fast on Wednesday and Friday. It was not until the middle ages that the Friday fast was modified to become simply an abstention from eating meat.

And so as the Christian faith spread throughout the Roman Empire the worship became more codified as did the need for a more rigid church structure and hierarchy. To maintain the community there was a need for further development of consistent and orthodox belief as well as a Canon of Scripture. The church was moving from a Hebraic culture into a Greco-Roman culture and was undergoing a philosophical transition. The emphasis was shifting from *being* the people of God to *explaining* issues of Christian theology. This begins to appear in the writings of the early *fathers* of the church and in the early doctrinal disputes, and is reflected in the development of the liturgy. There is a growing tendency to define the way in which the bread and wine are identified with the body and blood of Christ, although the New Testament sources do not.

Understanding early Christian worship is an important aspect of the renewal of Christian worship today. In our efforts to restore Christian worship based on early models, however, we must always evaluate what we do in the light of worship as described in Scripture.

Next: The models of worship and how they developed.