

Origins of Christian Worship

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Early Jewish Worship

The early church was comprised mainly of Jews who had accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah and Lord. Therefore, to best understand the origins of Christian worship, it is necessary to look at the history of Jewish worship, for it was this past manner of worship that helped to shape the worship of the early church. After leaving Egypt, God gave the people of Israel the Law and then commanded that a tabernacle be constructed. The tribe of Levi was set aside to serve as priests for God and His people. The OT books of Exodus and Leviticus provide specific instructions about the manner in which worship and sacrifice was to occur, about what was to be sacrificed, and the reason for the offerings. While the people of Israel were clearly commanded to worship God (Deuteronomy 6:13 says, “You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.” Exodus 33:10 says, “When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent.”), little is given regarding the specifics of worship during that time.

Worship in the Temple

After its construction by Solomon, the temple in Jerusalem became the prominent focus of Jewish worship. It appears that the emphasis of worship in the temple was primarily on sacrificial offerings and praise to God through music. The music was comprised of numerous and various instruments of music, as well as well-trained vocal choirs (whose singing was perhaps somewhat similar to the melodious four-part harmony common in many churches today). Numerous passages of Scripture refer to the music, both vocal and instrumental, used in worship to God during that time:

- 2 Samuel 6:5 says that, as the ark of the covenant was being brought to Jerusalem, “David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals.”
- 1 Chronicles 16:4-6 says of David, “He appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the Lord, even to celebrate and to thank and praise the Lord God of Israel: Asaph the chief, and second to him Zechariah, then Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-edom and Jeiel, with musical instruments, harps, lyres; also Asaph played loud-sounding cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests blew trumpets continually before the ark of the covenant of God.”
- 1 Chronicles 25:1 says, “Moreover, David and the commanders of the army set apart for the service some of the sons of Asaph and of Heman and of Jeduthun, who were to prophesy with lyres, harps and cymbals...”
- 2 Chronicles 5:12-14 speaks of “...all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and their sons and kinsmen, clothed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps and lyres, standing east of the altar, and with them one hundred and twenty priests blowing trumpets in unison when the trumpeters and the singers were to make themselves heard with one voice to praise and to glorify the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice accompanied by trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and when they praised the Lord saying, “He indeed is good for His lovingkindness is everlasting,” then the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.”
- 2 Chronicles 29:25-30 speaks of the worship to God instigated by Hezekiah: “He then stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with harps and with lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king’s seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for the command was from the Lord through His prophets. The Levites stood with the musical instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. Then Hezekiah gave the order to offer the burnt offering on the altar. When the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord also began with the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David, king of Israel. While the whole assembly worshiped, the singers also sang and the trumpets sounded; all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. Now at the completion of the burnt offerings, the king and all who were present with him bowed down and worshiped. Moreover, King Hezekiah and the officials ordered the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with joy, and bowed down and worshiped.”
- There are numerous references to singing and the playing of instruments in worship to God throughout the Psalms: 33:1-3; 68:4, 25, 32; 81:1-3; 87:7; 92:1-3; 95:1-2; 98:1-8; 104:33; 105:2; 135:1-3; 137:1-6; 144:9; 149:1-6; 150:1-6.

Worship in the Second Temple

Following the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian exile, the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem in 539 BC. The OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the work in repairing the damage that was done and of their worship at that time:

- Ezra 2:41 records the return of 128 Levitical singers, “the sons of Asaph”. Ezra 3:10-11 states, “Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of King David of Israel. They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”
- Nehemiah 12:27-43 describes in detail the inauguration of the wall of Jerusalem with a grand processional of two groups of priests and Levites who marched in opposite directions on the wide wall, blowing the trumpets, singing and playing the cymbals, and plucking their *nevels* and *kinnors*. Nehemiah 12:44-46 says, “On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon. For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God.”

An article at Liturgica.com states:

Rabbinic literature recalls worship at the Second Temple, especially after its reconstruction by King Herod. The instrumental music at the Second Temple seems to have been richer than that of the First Temple. The orchestra consisted of two to six *nevels* (probably *kitharas*), nine or more *kinnors* (lyres; the maximum number was limitless), two to twelve chains (pipes, perhaps shawms of the *aulos* type), and one cymbal. The priests blew the shofar and at least two trumpets. They also sounded the *magrefah* (the rake used for clearing the ashes of the altar) by throwing it forcefully on the ground in order to signal the beginning of the Temple Worship.

Summarizing the Mishnah, Idelsohn describes the main musical worship, which — as in the First Temple — was part of the morning sacrifice. “After the priests on duty had recited a benediction, the Ten Commandments, the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9), the priestly benediction (Num. 6:22-26), and three other benedictions, they proceeded to the offerings,” after which, “one of them sounded the *Magrefah*... the signal for the priests to enter the Temple to prostrate themselves, whereas for the Levites that sound marked the beginning of the musical performance. Two priests took their stand at the altar immediately and started to blow the trumpets... After this performance, they approached Ben Arza, the cymbal player, and took their stand beside him, one at his right and the other at his left side. Whereupon, at a given sign with a flag by the superintendent, this Levite sounded his cymbal, and all the Levites began to sing a part of the daily psalm. Whenever they finished a part they stopped, and the priests repeated their blowing of the trumpets and the people present prostrated themselves.” [end quote]

Worship in the Synagogues

The destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile led to the development of a new aspect of Jewish worship. The lack of a temple in which to worship and sacrifice resulted in the creation of the synagogue (a word which, somewhat like our word “church”, is used to refer both to the congregation and to the building in which they met). The people of Israel would gather around their elders to listen to the word of God, to receive instruction, and to worship. This form was retained and matured after the return from the exile, and it became a normal part of Jewish religious life.

Even after the rebuilding of the temple (perhaps due to the inability of many to travel and attend worship in the temple), synagogue worship flourished. By Jesus’ time there was at least one in every town (perhaps as many as 480 just in Jerusalem, although some think this number is highly exaggerated). Acts 15:21 states, “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” (Scripture often records the teaching of Jesus therein: Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 12:9; 13:54; Mark 1:21, 39; 3:1; 6:2; Luke 4:15ff, 44; 6:6; 13:10; John 6:59; 18:20.)

Philip Schaff (*History of the Christian Church*) gives the following description of the synagogue:

1. The *building* was a plain, rectangular hall of no peculiar style of architecture, and in its inner arrangement somewhat resembling the Tabernacle and the Temple. It had benches, the higher ones (“the chief/uppermost seats” [as mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 23:6 and perhaps intended by James in 2:2-3 – BW]) for the elders and richer members, a reading-desk or pulpit, and a wooden ark or closet for the sacred rolls (called “Copheret” or Mercy Seat, also “Aaron”). The last corresponded to the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and the Temple. A sacred light was kept burning as a symbol of the divine law, in imitation of the light in the Temple, but there is no mention made of it in the Talmud. Other lamps were brought in by devout worshippers at the beginning of the Sabbath (Friday evening). Alms-boxes were provided near the door, as in the Temple, one for the poor in Jerusalem, another for local charities. Paul imitated the example by collecting alms for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

2. *Organization*.—Every synagogue had a president [as apparently were Nicodemus in John 3:1, Crispus in Acts 18:8, and Sosthenes in 18:17, and possibly Jairus in Luke 8:41; John 12:42-43 says that many rulers believed but would not confess Jesus – BW], a number of elders (Zekenim) equal in rank, a reader and interpreter, one or more envoys or clerks, called “messengers” (*Sheliach*), and a sexton or beadle (*Chazzan*) for the humbler mechanical services. There were also deacons (*Gabae zedaka*) for the collection of alms in money and produce. Ten or more wealthy men at leisure, called Batlanim, represented the congregation at every service. Each synagogue formed an independent republic, but kept up a regular correspondence with other synagogues. It was also a civil and religious court, and had power to excommunicate and to scourge offenders [as mentioned in Matthew 10:17; 23:34; Luke 12:11; 21:12; John 16:2; Acts 22:19; 26:11 – BW].

3. *Worship*.—It was simple, but rather long, and embraced three elements, devotional, didactic, and ritualistic. It included prayer, song, reading, and exposition of the Scripture, the rite of circumcision, and ceremonial washings. The bloody sacrifices were confined to the temple and ceased with its destruction; they were fulfilled in the eternal sacrifice on the cross. The prayers and songs were chiefly taken from the Psalter, which may be called the first liturgy and hymn book.

The opening prayer was called the *Shema* or *Keriath Shema*, and consisted of two introductory benedictions, the reading of the Ten Commandments (afterward abandoned) and several sections of the Pentateuch, namely, Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41. Then followed the eighteen prayers and benedictions (*Berachoth*). These benedictions are traced in the Mishna to the one hundred and twenty elders of the Great Synagogue. They were no doubt of gradual growth, some dating from the Maccabean struggles, some from the Roman ascendancy. The prayers were offered by a reader, and the congregation responded “Amen.” This custom passed into the Christian church [as noted in 1 Corinthians 14:16 – BW].

The didactic and homiletical part of worship was based on the Hebrew Scriptures. A lesson from the Law (called *parasha*), and one from the Prophets (*haphthara*) were read in the original, and followed by a paraphrase or commentary and homily (*midrash*) in the vernacular Aramaic or Greek. A benediction and the “Amen” of the people closed the service.

As there was no proper priesthood outside of Jerusalem, any Jew of age might get up to read the lessons, offer prayer, and address the congregation. Jesus and the apostles availed themselves of this democratic privilege to preach the gospel, as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. The strong didactic element which distinguished this service from all heathen forms of worship, had the effect of familiarizing the Jews of all grades, even down to the servant-girls, with their religion, and raising them far above the heathen. At the same time it attracted proselytes who longed for a purer and more spiritual worship. [end quote]

This unique worship format is illustrated for us in Luke 4:16-30. The passage tells us that Jesus observed the common Jewish custom of attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. At one point in the service, He stood up, signifying that He wished to read from Scripture and address the congregation.

Accordingly, He was asked to read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. After doing so, He again followed the custom of the synagogue by sitting down and then expounding on what He had read. Although His hearers did not appreciate all that He said on this occasion, v15 shows that He had been allowed to teach many times in the synagogues and had often been well-received. It was this open format that afforded Jesus and His disciples many opportunities to preach the gospel of salvation to the Jews.

The Demise of Instrumental Music

A significant difference is seen between the dramatic worship exhibited in the temple (both the first and the second) and the restrained and subdued gatherings in the synagogues. While the focus in the temple seemed to be mainly upon exuberant worship and praise through sacrifice and music (both vocal and instrumental), it seems that the main focus in the synagogues was not so much upon public worship, but rather upon instruction in the Law. The worship of the synagogues was apparently limited to recitation of prayer, chanting of the Psalms, and Bible reading and instruction.

Why the change? Why were the various instruments of music commonly seen before suddenly put aside? Why was the singing (which, while no one knows for sure exactly how it sounded, was perhaps more expressive in temple worship) suddenly confined to plain and simple chanting? Scholars have cited several contributing factors:

1. Exposure to the Babylonian culture may have had some influence on the development of music in Jewish worship (although, as already seen, worship in the second temple remained, at least for a while, similar to what it had been before). Borrowing from other cultures was not uncommon; examples of such are the borrowing of Assyrian script and the Babylonian calendar while they were in exile.
2. It may be that the return from exile was accompanied with the beginning of Rabbinic influence and dominance. In fact, it appears that, from about the 2nd century B.C. onward, the synagogues came to be greatly dominated by the Pharisees who emphasized their legalistic teaching therein. The rabbis apparently taught that a proper life of piety resulted from increased knowledge of Scripture. This may have contributed to the emphasis being more on instruction than on worship through music.
3. Perhaps the main reason that the use of instruments in worship ceased in the synagogues was that the Rabbis decided to forbid such. According to their views, such could possibly lead to work on the Sabbath. Musical instruments remained a part of the Sabbath service in the temple because the rabbis apparently could do nothing regarding their presence there. But they could and did prohibit them outside the temple for fear that playing an instrument on the Sabbath, a permissible act in and of itself, might lead inadvertently to the musician's tuning it, or mending it, or carrying it from one public place to another – all of these being forbidden acts of work. Since the main synagogue service took place on Sabbath mornings, no musical instrument could become an integral component thereof.
4. The rabbis gave another reason for banning instruments of music (as well as other types of singing): they apparently felt such joyous or celebratory music would be inappropriate in light of the sorrows that were being experienced by the Jews (i.e., the destruction of the temple and their exile). The rabbis apparently felt that such an attitude of mourning should be carried into the synagogue service as well. They quoted Hosea 9:1, "Do not rejoice, O Israel, with exultation (or "merriment") like the nations," and then declared: "An ear listening to songs will surely be cut off.... A song in the house means destruction is at its threshold" (Sotah 48a, as given by Liturgica.com).
5. The music of the synagogues was further influenced by the legalistic and puritanical ethic of the rabbis in regards to their concern over promiscuity. They taught, "A woman's voice is indecency" (Ber. 24a, as given by Liturgica.com); and, "Men singing and women answering is promiscuity; women singing and men answering is like fire set to chaff" (Sotah 48a, as given by Liturgica.com). These excessive fears of promiscuity led to the separation of men and women, and ultimately to only men singing in the synagogue in worship.

The Prominence of Chanting

Thus ended (at least for quite some time) the format of melodious and harmonious singing in worship. In its place, chanting (which had sometimes been in use in the temple) came to be the only acceptable style of music in the synagogue. Ken Collins gives this definition of chant:

To some people, the word 'chant' refers to mindless repetitions of the same words and phrases. But 'chant' is actually a technical term for a specific musical form—a simple melody in which you sing a number of words or syllables on the same note. Or you might say that a 'song' is words set to music, but a 'chant' is music set to words. The most well-known chant is the musical setting of the Lord's Prayer, which is more elaborate than most chants. Chants were invented to encourage congregational singing, since they require less musical skill than songs. The advantage of chanting is that most any text can be chanted to any tune without modifying either the tune or the text, and that makes it an ideal way to put scripture to music.

There were generally three genres of chanting commonly found in the synagogues: chanting of the Psalms (known as psalmody), chanting of Scripture, and chanting of the prayers. The Psalms were often chanted in an antiphonal format, in which two groups would sing alternate verses to one another, or in which one or more soloists would alternate with the choir in singing verses and a refrain.

The one leading the chanting was known as the chazzan (now commonly called a cantor). As would be expected, the chazzan of a synagogue tended to develop his own unique style of chanting. But, as also might be expected, those who were quite proficient in this role came to be in great demand. Therefore, as they went from synagogue to synagogue, they took with them their own traditional melodic patterns. These became mixed with those of other locations, thereby helping to develop the many and varied styles and forms of chanting.

Early Christian Worship

It should not be surprising that the forms and format of early Christian worship were greatly influenced by those found in the Jewish synagogues. After all, the first Christians were Jews, just as Jesus had been a Jew. The apostles were Jews, and the initial missionary thrust of the church was to those who were Jews. It was obviously natural for the early Jewish Christians to continue to follow Jewish traditions. They continued to gather in the temple and the synagogues during the regular times of worship. It appears that many continued to observe the Sabbath, the annual Jewish feasts, and the hours of daily prayer. They saw no reason to leave their traditional places and forms of worship since they were still worshipping the same God.

Even when they gathered outside the synagogue, the Jewish Christians still conducted their assemblies in a manner quite similar to that of the synagogue. Just as in synagogue worship, the focus was upon the reading of Scripture, exposition and/or instruction, chanting of the Psalms, and prayers. Even the Scripture of the early church was the Jewish Old Testament. The writings of the old covenant continued to be profitable (as Paul later stated in Romans 15:4 and 2 Timothy 3:15-17) and, since they pointed towards Jesus and the promised Messiah, the early Jewish Christians continued to use these Scriptures in celebrating and sharing the gospel.

Numerous passages attest to this continuation and influence of Jewish worship and practice:

- Acts 2:46 says that the early Christians were “day by day continuing with one mind in the temple...”
- Acts 3:1 records that Peter and John were going to the temple because it was the hour of prayer.
- Acts 5:21, 42 shows the continued practice of Christians going to the temple on a regular basis.
- Paul continued to observe the traditions of Jewish worship: Acts 21:26; 22:17; 24:11-12; 24:18.
- Several passages seem to indicate a continued observance of the Sabbath by Paul and others: Acts 13:14, 42-44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4.
- Romans 14:5-6a and Colossians 2:16 may also be referring to Christians who continued to follow the Jewish practice of worship on the Sabbath.
- Several passages refer to the early Christians gathering in the synagogues for the purpose of worship and teaching others: Acts 9:2; 9:20; 13:5; 13:14ff; 13:42-44; 14:1; 17:1ff; 17:10; 17:17; 18:4ff; 18:26; 19:8; 22:19; 24:11-12; 26:11. James 2:2 uses the same Greek word *sunagoge* (Strong #4864), but KJV and NASB have “assembly”.
- Acts 2:42 says, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Some have suggested that this verse shows the similarity between the gatherings of the early Jewish Christians and that of the synagogues.
- The influence of Judaism upon the Christian church may even possibly be seen in comparing the functions of the Jewish synagogue officers and those of the early church. Just as every synagogue had elders and instructors, so also the early church came to have elders/bishops in every church (Acts 14:23) whose primary responsibility was to lead the congregation and care for its spiritual needs (Hebrews 13:17). Furthermore, just as the synagogues typically had men designated to gather and distribute alms to those in need, so also the early church came to have deacons who had similar responsibilities (Acts 6:1-7).
- Though not a Scriptural point, it is suggested that even the architecture of our church buildings today may be influenced by that of the Jewish synagogues; consider the use of raised platforms and pulpits at the front, as well as rows of benches or pews facing the front of the auditorium.

Music in Early Christian Worship

While it has been suggested by a few that the early Christians may have reintroduced a form of melodious singing similar to that found previously in the temple, the vast majority of scholars state that the music of Christian worship was limited to the same plain chant as had been used in synagogue worship, and that it would be several centuries before the introduction of choral melody and/or four-part harmony (or reintroduction, if indeed temple singing was similar to modern day church singing).

The chant of Christian worship, apparently like that of synagogue worship, is generally described as alternated (perhaps identical to the antiphonal chanting of the synagogues) and monophonic: that is, comprised of a single melody without any harmonic support or accompaniment. It is suggested that at least some types of chanting would sound very different than the major/minor scales to which our ears are accustomed today. It is generally believed that the silence imposed upon women in the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34) did not extend to the public worship through chanting, although it is not clear as to when the early Jewish Christians recognized the equality of women in such matters (as Paul would later discuss in Galatians 3:28).

The reciting of chants by the early Christians, as well as the antiphonal manner in which they did so, is recognized by Eusebius, a 4th century historian, in his book, *The History of The Church* (18.1). Therein he quotes Philo, who was a Jewish historian writing in the first century. Philo describes the Christian “all-night vigils of the great festival, the spiritual discipline in which they are spent, the hymns that we always recite, and how while one man sings in regular rhythm the others listen silently and join in the refrains of the hymn.”

Two verses of Scripture, while commonly used in reference to singing, actually reflect the Jewish and early Christian practice of chanting in worship. Ephesians 5:19 says that Christians are to be “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.” Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” The word “singing” is from the Greek word *ado* (Strong #103), which, according to Thayer’s Lexicon, actually means, “to sing, chant; to the praise of any one”. Therefore, it is likely that both these verses are consistent with the practice of chanting commonly found in the synagogues. Notice also the phrase, “speaking to one another”, perhaps further indicating the practice of antiphonal chanting common in synagogue and early Christian worship.

Addition of the Lord’s Supper on First Day of the Week

The early Christians made one significant alteration or addition to their Jewish manner of worship. Jesus had instructed His disciples to remember Him through partaking of the Lord’s Supper (Matt 26:26-29; 1 Corinth 11:23-26; notice that Jesus used the Jewish forms of unleavened bread and wine and gave them new meaning). The Jewish tradition of animal sacrifices gave way to remembering the one perfect sacrifice of the Jesus Christ the Lamb on the cross (1 Peter 1:18-19).

But there was a problem: the Lord’s Supper memorial could not be added to the synagogue service, yet it was still to be celebrated as the Lord had commanded. The solution for the Jewish Christians was to partake of the Lord’s Supper at a separate time and place than their worship in the synagogues. While it appears that many of the first Christians continued their traditional Jewish worship on the Sabbath, they came to realize the appropriateness of partaking of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week, the day Christ rose from the grave. Thus it was apparently common for the Jewish Christians to gather early on the Sabbath for worship, and then again on Sunday (perhaps later that same evening since, for the Jews, the Sabbath ended at sundown and the first day of the week then began) for celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Numerous secular writings of that time show the custom of assembling on the first day of the week:

- 74 AD "We keep the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead" (Letter of Barnabas 15:6-8).
- 90 AD "But every Lord's day . . . gather yourselves together and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned" (Didache 14).
- 90 AD “Every Lord's day, hold your solemn assemblies, and rejoice: for he will be guilty of sin who fasts on the Lord's day, being the day of the resurrection” (Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 7, pg. 449).

- 90 AD “But every Lord's day, do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord” [Matt. 5:23-24] (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Chap. 14:1, Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 7, page 381).
- 90 AD “On the day of the resurrection of the Lord, that is, the Lord's day, assemble yourselves together, without fail, giving thanks to God, and praising Him for those mercies God has bestowed upon you through Christ, and has delivered you from ignorance, error, and bondage, that your sacrifice may be unspotted, and acceptable to God, who has said concerning His universal Church: "In every place shall incense and a pure sacrifice be offered unto me; for I am a great King, saith the Lord Almighty, and my name is wonderful among the heathen” [Malachi 1:11, 14] (Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 7, pg. 471).

Furthermore, in the early church, the Lord’s Supper was often celebrated as part of, or at the end of, the agape (love) meal. This was perhaps a derivative of the Passover tradition and/or Jesus’ instituting the Lord’s Supper as part of a meal. Regardless, the love feast was a means for believers to show each other the love and unity they shared together in Christ. It appears that each individual or family brought what they were able to bring; it was a time when they tried to set aside their differences in wealth, education, and culture.

Unfortunately, this practice came to be abused by some in the church in Corinth. It appears that some of the Corinthians were being selfish during the meal, thereby undermining the love and unity that should have prevailed, and preventing the church from being able to partake of the Lord’s Supper with the proper attitude and mindset. Paul harshly criticized them in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, suggesting that they eat at home if they’re unable to exhibit the proper degree of brotherly love.

It was not long, however, before the Lord’s Supper came to be separated from the agape meal. Differing opinions exist as to the reason(s) for this. Perhaps it was due to problems such as those in Corinth. Some have suggested that it might be due to the lack of Jewish perspective among the incoming Gentile Christians. Whatever the reason, it appears that the church ceased their practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper in connection with the agape meal sometime around the beginning of the 2nd century.

Further Developments

A gradual separation developed between Judaism and Christianity. The Jewish Christians increased in their understanding of Christ and His fulfillment of the Law. They came to realize that they themselves were a royal priesthood of believers, and that the sacrifices of the temple were no longer necessary. Their worship shifted from a focus just on God to include Jesus the Christ. They began to recognize the writings of the apostles as being equal with OT Scripture, and thus, as they became available, they gradually incorporated the use of such writings into their worship assemblies. Their separation from Judaism was further impacted by the unbelieving Jews. The teaching of the Christians had been so effective and widespread (as noted in Acts 17:6) that they were no longer welcome in the synagogues of unbelieving Jews. The separation was increased still further by the persecution of Christians by the Jews (beginning in Acts 6). As a result of this exclusion, Christian worship began the gradual process of moving away from its original Jewish ties.

The church as a whole moved further from its Jewish ties as a result of Gentile evangelism. Acts 10 records the conversion of the first Gentile family, and many more would follow. Acts 11 records the response to such by the Jewish Christians. It apparently took them a little while to accept this dramatic change, and this change was not without some difficulty. Some of the Jewish Christians felt that Gentile converts needed to follow some of the same Jewish traditions they had followed. But the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, led by the Holy Spirit, determined that there was no such need. Only a minimal requirement was placed upon them – perhaps in order to facilitate better relations between the Jewish and Gentile Christians (Acts 15:1ff).

The Gentile Christians enjoyed their freedom in Christ; they felt no ties to the forms and format of Jewish tradition. Unlike many of their Jewish brethren, they did not keep the Sabbath, but instead they gathered on the first day of the week to worship. Likewise, contrary to the custom of Jewish Christians, the assemblies of the Gentile Christians were not patterned strictly after the synagogue format. They still incorporated Scripture, instruction, prayer, music (the Jewish forms of chanting began to be mixed with and influenced by Greek music forms), and the Lord’s Supper in their gatherings, but their manner of conducting the service seemed to be a bit more informal and independent than that of the synagogue style of worship. Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians 14 gives some insight into the appearance of such an assembly. Notice he does still urge them to maintain some semblance of order and decency, apparently to prevent confusion, and that especially in regards to outsiders.

The writings of Justin Martyr give us a glimpse of Christian worship as it came to be by the middle of the 2nd century:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration. (Justin Martyr. *The First Apology of Justin*, app. 150 A.D.)

Conclusion

It appears that the manner of worship seen in the early church was originally just a continuation of what the Jews had been doing for the previous 500 years (adding only the agape feast and Lord's Supper on the first day of the week). This was followed by further gradual changes and variations, but the basic fundamental aspects of historical worship (music, prayer, instruction, Lord's Supper) remained constant. Perhaps this is close to what Jesus had in mind when He stated that worship would not remain confined to specific places, but should always be done in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24).

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