

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## Lesson 6

### Early Church Worship

A friend of mine recently sent around a YouTube parody of a modern church service that is built around entertainment and emotional manipulation more so than worship. My friend equated the parody to a mega-church service he had attended once where he said,

I was emotionally and physically repulsed by the sense of manipulation. It was a show with decent content. They mainly just watched the band ‘worship.’ Preaching was OK, but not great. Little real worship or participation.

I watched the three-minute clip carefully. It claims to be even more “cool” than services people call “contemporary” and services people call “relevant.” While the worship leader is putting on *his* makeup, the narrator says the best word for these services is “contempovant.” Then the service starts.

It has a rocking band with an instrumental intro that emphasizes the players in the band. Then the singer kicks in singing a song appropriately titled, “Opening song.” Following the song, a “young hip guy” with “hip glasses” and a “hip t-shirt” gives announcements with “open arms” (showing his strategically placed tattoo that informs people “he has a past.”)



(The choice of tattoo is interesting and basically meaningless. It is the Hebrew *vay<sup>e</sup>he* which basically means, “and it was.”)

After the announcements, the “worship leader” sings, “This is the Song that Everyone Knows.” The “audience” applauds and then the singer sings, “My New Song that Nobody Knows” followed by the offering. There is a video clip to “engage” the congregation preceding the sermon by “the man who knows everything.” The preacher uses pictures of puppies and impoverished third world children, combined with rhetorical devices of expression and voice to prepare people for the “Song that Makes Everyone Cry.”

I found the clip fascinating. Some of the things make sense to me and, done in the right way, seem appropriate. After all, singing a song everybody knows is a good thing. Sometimes it is appropriate to sing a new song and teach it to people.

Some of the things made me cringe. Especially the idea that this “contemporant service” was really nothing more than an entertaining show built around gimmicks. The gimmicks are wired to bring an emotional response, with more “worship” built around the leaders than around the Lord.

I couldn’t help but wonder, how did we get here?

What would it be like to go to a first-century church service? While we don’t have a time machine that enables us to post a first-century service on YouTube, we can still get a good idea about how the services might have gone by reading our New Testament, early church writings, and even some secular works. That is the goal of this class.

## **Location**

We start our examination asking, if we got out of a time capsule during the first 100 years of the Christian faith, where would we find the church? Where would we *go* to church?”

Any study of the early church necessarily begins with the New Testament. These writings span approximately 50 years of authorship (from c.50 to c.100AD). The church during that time period develops in size, structure, and likely worship. Even within the limited time set forward in the New Testament book of Acts, we see continuing developments of the church. So our questioning begins with the New Testament.

By and large, New Testament churches met in homes. When we read of Paul (called by his Hebrew name "Saul") “ravaging the church” in Acts 8:3, he did it by “entering house after house.” Later, Paul would have a different interaction with the house churches. Long after his conversion, Paul was sending specific greetings to people in the church at Rome. In the process he sends greetings to

Prisca (a shortened form of Priscilla) and Aquila with the added request to “Greet also the church in their house” (Rom. 16:5).<sup>1</sup> This is not the only church meeting in the home of these two friends of Paul. When Priscilla and Aquila were living in Ephesus, they also had a church meeting in their home there (1 Cor. 16:19). In Troas the church met in homes (Acts 20:7-11), as also in Colossae (Phile. 1:1ff) and Laodicea (Col. 4:15).<sup>2</sup>

How would the church pick the home in which to meet? History, archaeology, and common sense all dictate that the homes were frequently those of the more well to do. First, this is so because the Christian slaves would not own a home in which there could be meetings. Further, the wealthier would have the larger homes that would more readily accommodate a number of believers.

In the New Testament, we read of Jesus and the Apostles meeting in the upper room in Jerusalem for the first communion (Luke 22:12). We know that the Apostles stayed together at some house in Jerusalem, most likely the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (not the Apostle John). Many people stayed there and gathered there (Acts 12:12) and many scholars surmise this was the same house where the Apostles conducted much of the church’s business referenced in Acts (1:15; 6:6; 15:4-6) as well as early worship. Understanding this room gives us insight not only into the early Jerusalem church, but also into the other house churches in that area.

The term “upper room” is *huperoon* in Greek (ὑπερώον) and *coenaculum* in Latin. It was a room that was on the second floor in the nicer homes. It was a large room that was typically accessible by an outdoor staircase connected to the house’s courtyard. We do not know for certain where the Jerusalem upper room was, but St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.313-386) in 347 asserted that the upper room of the apostles was what was then known as the “Upper Church of the Apostles.”<sup>3</sup> If he was right, then we can assume the room was about 30 by 50 feet.

If we consider the Christian community in Ephesus, we are looking at a city that had a population of around 200,000. The ruins of Ephesus are well preserved, and

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<sup>1</sup> In the succeeding verses, Paul breaks out his greetings in such a way that it seems he is working through different house churches of which he is aware. So he will greet, “Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them” (Rom. 16:14) followed by “Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them” (Rom. 16:15).

<sup>2</sup> The earliest church “building” we can identify at present was converted from a home and dates to c. 232AD in Dura-Europos, Syria.

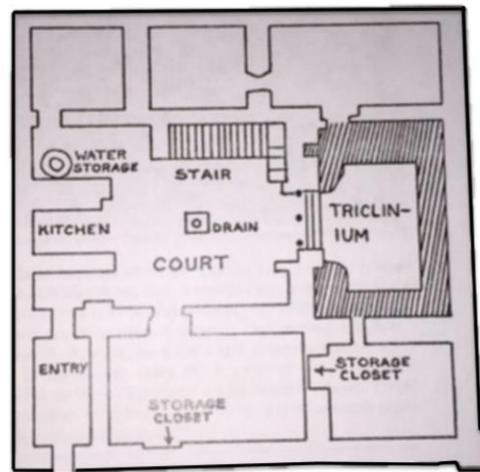
<sup>3</sup> *Catechetical Lectures*, 16.4

one can visit several reconstructed terrace houses and get a feel of how nice some of the richer homes were. A house church would not have been strange in Ephesus since the Roman homes there would typically be viewed as sacred places with the household gods being venerated and worshipped through simple religious services.<sup>4</sup>

The reconstructed terrace houses were some of the nicest houses in Ephesus, but we can see from them that the upper stories were generally bedrooms while the downstairs would have a better meeting room in the center called the “peristyle.”<sup>5</sup> The peristyle was an open courtyard with walkways around it and rooms branching off the walkways. The peristyles were typically 275-550 square feet. People standing generally need 8-10 square feet for comfort, although you can squeeze people in more tightly. But these rooms would hold 30 to 50 people without much trouble. In addition to the peristyle, many houses had an atrium off the peristyle that was a large receiving room. This room would also have served well for house church services.



A peristyle of a terrace house in Ephesus.



10 meters STREET

House with a triclinium at Dura-Europos

Frequently Roman homes would feature a “triclinium” or “dining room.” This room would often have a floor raised a few inches above the normal level so that

<sup>4</sup> Erdemgil, S., et al., *The Terrace Houses in Ephesus* (Hitit 1987), at 12.

<sup>5</sup> The church at Troas did meet in the upper room or story (Acts 20:8). That might also have been a reference to the first floor being a shop, a common set up in that time period.

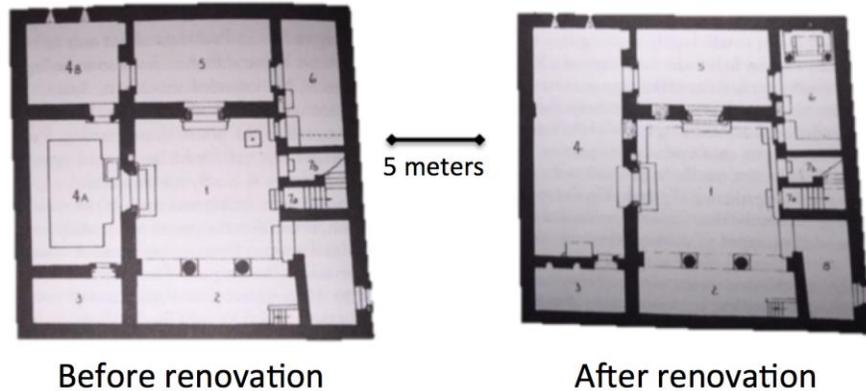
cushions, carpets and mattresses could be set out for reclining while eating. Generally there were such lounging arrangements around the three walls with a serving table in the middle. This arrangement gave the room its name. (“Tri-“ means 3 and a “*clinici*” referenced a bed). Remove the cushions and mattresses, and the room also functioned as a living room.<sup>6</sup> These rooms made for handy places for smaller groups to meet around meals with a ready conversion to a more open space for other worship.

In short, the types of houses varied around the Roman Empire and we would be foolishly naïve to conclude that one certain room in one certain house type was the exclusive meeting place for the early church. We can best say that the various homes for church meetings were well fit for the occasion, and were the main location of assemblies.

The earliest official “church building” we have is a converted house in Dura-Europos, Syria. The conversion of the structure from house into church building is securely dated to before 250AD. The main feature of the conversion was moving a wall from the Triclinium and making a large room out of two rooms.

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The House Church at Dura-Europos  
(renovated c.240AD)



### The Worship Service

Initially, the church saw itself as a branch of Judaism. When Tertullus was presenting the Jewish establishment’s case against Paul, he called Paul a

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<sup>6</sup> Beebe, H. Keith, “Domestic Architecture and the New Testament,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Sept.-Dec. 1975, at 100-101.

“ringleader of the *sect* of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). The word “sect” (Greek *airesis* – αἵρεσις) is the same word usually translated “party” in reference to the sect or party of the Sadducees or Pharisees (Acts 5:17; 15:5).<sup>7</sup>

As such, the church immediately drew from worship that was conducted by religious Jews of the day. In Acts 2:42-47 we read that in its infancy, the Jerusalem church was attending Temple as well as breaking bread in individual homes. It seems the Temple was a place the church was going for prayer (Acts 3:1) and praise (Luke 24:53). Jesus certainly taught his disciples that the Temple was a place of prayer (Mt. 21:13).

Some scholars believe that the earliest Christian community actually formed a synagogue in Jerusalem for their worship and praise beyond that in the Temple.<sup>8</sup> Certainly ten men were all that were required to start a synagogue under Mishnah law, and there were twelve apostles, so this would have been quite feasible.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, it is a fair assumption that early Christian worship used elements of the synagogue worship, although we can readily see some stark differences. (For example, prayer would have been in Jesus’ name and the praise to God was part of the worship of Jesus, the risen Savior (Lk 24:52; Acts 13:2).)

We have ancient Jewish sources that detail for us the procedure behind such a Sabbath synagogue service in Greek areas outside of Palestine. We would find the synagogue likely around a river or some type of water, typically on the outside of town. This provided easy access to the water needed for purification by the priests or others as deemed necessary under the law.<sup>10</sup>

As we walked into the synagogue we would first find a very special seating arrangement. We catch glimpses of this in the New Testament as we read Jesus talking of hypocritical scribes and Pharisees who sought “the best seats in the synagogues” (Mt 23:6; Mk 12:38-39; Lk 11:43, 20:46). Schurer wrote, “The

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<sup>7</sup> In response, Paul draws a sharp contrast noting that his accusers call his beliefs a “sect” or “party,” Paul knows it to be The Way!

<sup>8</sup> Martin, Ralph, *Worship in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans 1975), at 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> *Megillah*, at 4.3. The requirement for ten men present for reading of the law, for public prayer, or other such rituals was based, in part, on the Jewish teaching that when ten men or more gathered together for these purposes, God’s divine presence was there as well. *Aboth* 3:6 provides, “If ten men sit together and occupy themselves in the Law, the Divine Presence [*Shekinah*] rests among them.” Jesus taught his disciples that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Mt. 18:20).

<sup>10</sup> Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (Hendrickson Publishers 1998 reprint of 1890 publication), Div. II, Vol II at 69.

congregation sat in an appointed order, the most distinguished members in the front seats, the younger behind; men and women probably apart.”<sup>11</sup>

Once we took our seats, we would have time to look around. We would see a closet (*tyboh* תיבה) that held scrolls of the law and the other “books” of the Old Testament. Each scroll would be wrapped in linen and have its own case.<sup>12</sup> At the front would be a raised platform (*bema* במה) which would hold a “pulpit” or “reading desk.” This *bema* would be for reading the scriptures as well as for preaching.<sup>13</sup> We would also likely pick out the “ruler of the synagogue.” Mark and Luke used the term *archisunagogos* (ἀρχισυνάγωγος) (Mk 5:22, 35, 38; Lk 8:49; 13:14; Acts 13:15; 18:8, 17). His responsibility was to make sure the needs of the service were taken care of and were supervised. He was not the one who actually read the scriptures, prayed, or preached. The members themselves typically did those tasks, but he would choose those fit to perform those functions and secure their help before each service. Schurer called him the “conductor of their assembly.”<sup>14</sup>

There was someone we might call a “minister” in the synagogue.<sup>15</sup> This man was responsible for bringing out the scriptures and replacing them after their use (Luke 4:20). This was also the man who had to execute any required scourging and would provide the instruction for children to learn to read.<sup>16</sup>

A final thing we might notice were containers for the alms or tithes. There was a box that was for money. This is where the hypocrites Jesus spoke of would sound a trumpet (an expression for exaggerated displays of “showiness” in giving) as they made their donation (Mt 6:1-2). There was also a plate or dish that was for the giving of natural products. This would include the “mint and rue and every herb” that Jesus spoke of some tithing, even though they neglected the important matters of mercy, justice, faithfulness and the love of God (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42).

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* at 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* at 74.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* at 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* at 65.

<sup>15</sup> In the Greek, Luke uses the word *huperetes* (ὑπηρέτης) and the ESV translates this man as “attendant” in Luke 4:20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* at 67.

A central purpose behind the synagogue services was “instruction in the law.”<sup>17</sup> We read constantly in the New Testament about Jesus “teaching in their synagogues” (Mt 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Mk 1:21; 6:2; Lk 4:15; 13:10; Jn 18:20). We would see this as the service itself began to unfold.

The service would have a reciting of the *Shema*. The *Shema* is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. In the main, it contained the core confession,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Dt. 6:4).

In fact, the word “*shema*” is the first Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4 translated “Hear.” There would be prayers recited with the *Shema*, although the *Shema* was considered a confession of faith more than a prayer.<sup>18</sup> Certain formula prayers were offered rather than extemporaneous prayers. The whole congregation did not say the prayer, but rather the one assigned to pray. This prayer leader would typically stand in front of the chest of scrolls while pronouncing the prayers. The congregation would answer the prayers with “amen.” Schurer wrote that the prayers were typically offered while standing and facing Jerusalem. This is also consistent with what we read in the New Testament.<sup>19</sup>

Following prayers, the scripture readings would occur. Two parts of the Old Testament were read, one section from the Law (*Torah*)<sup>20</sup> and a portion from the prophets. The Law section was rather large so that the entire Law would get covered every three years. The prophet section (*Haftarat*) was simply a paragraph and was typically chosen by the reader. The reader of the scripture would stand while reading.<sup>21</sup> We also see this in the New Testament (Lk 4:16 speaks of Jesus going to synagogue on the Sabbath stating “he stood up to read” choosing to read

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<sup>17</sup> Schurer, Div. II, Vol II at 54. The Jewish Philosopher and historian Philo (born around 20 B.C.) wrote of the synagogue services as focused on teaching the law. In his *Hypothetica* (7:12ff), Philo wrote of the Sabbath assemblies as “sitting together in a respectful and orderly manner [to] hear the laws read so that none should be ignorant of them.” Philo, (Loeb 2001) Vol IX at 433.

<sup>18</sup> Schurer at 77-78.

<sup>19</sup> Mt 6:5, “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues.” Standing in prayer was not only in the synagogue. Jesus also spoke of others standing while praying. See, Mk 11:25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone...”; Lk 18:11, “The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus...”

<sup>20</sup> These were scrolls of what we consider the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

<sup>21</sup> Schurer at 79-81.

from Isaiah 61:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...”).

After the reading, an “edifying lecture or sermon”<sup>22</sup> was given in explanation of the scripture read. The role of teaching, like that of the readings and the praying were open to qualified members of each congregation. The ruler of each synagogue typically gave the assignments.<sup>23</sup>

The service was closed with a benediction or blessing which was announced upon the congregation with hands raised to shoulder height. The congregation responded with “Amen!” and the service was finished.<sup>24</sup>

While the New Testament never sets out a “How To” manual for churches, it gives us a good indication of what happened in the early church services.<sup>25</sup> The apostolic church did not seem to have a liturgy in the sense of a set order of worship, but that does not mean that there are no observable practices that give substance to the services. The full extent of the links of the Christian services to synagogue practices is not fully agreed upon by scholars, but the links are nonetheless significant.

The elements of early church worship are now considered in light of a synagogue service.

### **Singing**

The synagogue service was built around four events: praise, prayer, Scripture reading, and instruction.<sup>26</sup> While some scholars debate whether there was singing in the first century synagogue services, there is no doubt there was singing in special public and private Jewish assemblies.<sup>27</sup> It is well documented that the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* at 82

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* at 65, 82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* at 82.

<sup>25</sup> The closest we find in Scripture to a “How To” instruction is found in 1 Corinthians 14 where Paul sets out his rules for speaking in tongues, noting how much more valuable it is to proclaim intelligibly an inspired revelation (to “prophesy”). Paul then adds that as the church came together, some would have “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation,” but that *all* should be done orderly and for building up the body (1 Cor. 14:26).

<sup>26</sup> Osborne, at 245.

<sup>27</sup> See discussion and references in Smith, J.A., “The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church and Singing,” *Music & Letters*, Jan. 1984), 1-16. It is worth noting that the reading of Scripture itself,

Levites sang in the temple services to full instrumental accompaniment.<sup>28</sup> Similarly references are replete that there was singing at public assemblies and private assemblies as times of sorrow (Esther 4:3; 3 Maccabees 1:18) or of joy (3 Maccabees 6:32, 25; 7:16).<sup>29</sup>

In private assemblies we read of Jewish singing for the Passover where there was singing of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) as part of the celebratory meal (Mt. 26:30).<sup>30</sup> There was singing at weddings,<sup>31</sup> funerals,<sup>32</sup> and even home lessons of religious instruction.<sup>33</sup>

Two different Jewish religious sects contemporary to the early New Testament church were the Essenes and the Therapeutae. Both communities held a meal as part of corporate worship and included singing in the gatherings. Philo wrote of the gathering of the Therapeutae as including the leaders teaching upon Scripture, followed by singing of hymns (sometimes solos, other times with corporate responsive singing). Then the meal was consumed and afterwards:

They rise up all together and standing in the middle of the refectory form themselves first into two choirs, one of men and one of women, the leader and presenter chosen for each being the most honored among them and also the most musical. Then they sing hymns to

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in both ancient Hebrew and Greek was a bit of a musical process. Scripture reading was both melodic and rhythmic. The first hard evidence of singing in a typical synagogue service comes in the middle of the second century, but even there, it is not explained as a new innovation, lending credence to those who set forward singing as a part of synagogue services before that time. See, Mishnah, *Rosh Hashanah* 4.7 (including blowing of the trumpet in the synagogues *after* the fall of the temple in 70AD); *Taanit* 3.9 (where it speaks of singing the *Hallel*). Paul Westermeyer fairly deduces that “singing was simply assumed in all worship,” citing Edward Foley’s affirmation that “to recite Scripture without chant was considered a minor sacrilege.” *Te Deum – The Church and Music* (Fortress Press 1998), at 42 citing Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music* (Liturgical Press 1996), at 46.

<sup>28</sup> Mishnah (trans. and ed. H. Danby, Oxford 1933), *Bikurim* 3.4; *Peshahim* 5.7; *Suka* 5.4; *Tamid* 7.4; *Midot* 2.5; Babylonian Talmud, *Sota* 30b. See summary by McKinnon, James W., “The Exclusion of Musical Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*,” (1979-1980), 77ff.

<sup>29</sup> Philo, *In Flaccum*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> See also, Mishnah, *Pesahim* 9.3; 10.4, 7.

<sup>31</sup> 3 Maccabees 4.6-8; Mishnah, *Sota* 9.11.

<sup>32</sup> Mk 5:38; Lk 8:52; Mishnah *Ketubot* 2:10.

<sup>33</sup> 4 Maccabees 18:15.

God composed of many measures and set to many melodies, sometimes chanting together, sometimes taking up the harmony antiphonally, hands and feet keeping time in accompaniment...<sup>34</sup>

The Dead Sea community at Qumran, considered by most to be an Essene community, referenced singing as a part of their gatherings. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls we have found many copies of the psalms and a collection of thanksgiving hymns. The document setting forth the Community Rule references the community singing “with knowledge” where all music is “for the glory of God” with lyre and harp.<sup>35</sup> It also sets forth singing “songs of thanksgiving.”<sup>36</sup>

There is no question that the early church was a singing church. Paul repeatedly instructed the churches to sing to each other “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Paul spoke of his own singing with his “spirit” and “mind” in the context of worship services in 1 Corinthians 14:15. An earlier lesson wrote up the investigation of Pliny the Younger as written to the Emperor Trajan around 112AD reporting the Christians gathering to sing in honor of Christ “as if to a God.”<sup>37</sup>

New Testament scholar Ralph Martin suggested that corporate praise opened the synagogue service, in accordance with the statement in the Talmud (first written around 200AD) that “Man should always first utter praises, and then pray.”<sup>38</sup> He believes this may explain Paul putting “a hymn” first in his list of events at corporate worship in 1 Corinthians 14:26.

We see evidences and sections of several hymns in the New Testament. Martin does a great job explaining the songs and is referenced for more detailed information.<sup>39</sup> The songs include 1 Tim 3:16 where Jesus is exalted and worshipped. We can better get a glimpse at the lyrical phrasing of the Greek if we set it out as follows.

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<sup>34</sup> Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, 11.83-84.

<sup>35</sup> *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, trans. G. Vermes, (Harmondsworth 1968), The Community Rule, 10.9.

<sup>36</sup> *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English, The Hymns*, 11.3-4.

<sup>37</sup> Pliny, *Letters* Book 10, at 96.7.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, Ralph, *Worship in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans 1975), at 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, at 48ff.

He [Jesus] was:

Manifested by (in) flesh

Vindicated by Spirit

Seen by angels

Proclaimed by nations

Believed by the world

Taken up in [by] glory.

A second song is found in Philippians 2:6-11, equating Jesus with God in a powerful collection of stanzas. Scholars differ on whether to divide the song into 3 stanzas or six, and a great deal has been written on this beautifully rich piece.

Here is the song set out in 6 stanzas of two lines each:

He [Jesus] was in the form of God  
But not grasping being God's equal

But emptied himself  
Taking the form of a servant

Born in the likeness of men  
and made in the outward form of a man

He humbled himself  
Becoming obedient to the point of death

Therefore God highly exalted him  
And gave him the name above all names

So that at Jesus' name, all knees will bow  
And all tongues admit that Jesus is Lord.

Other songs found in the New Testament for early church worship include Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:3.

## Prayer

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. He echoed the Old Testament's attribution to the temple as a house of prayer (Mt. 21:13; Is. 56:7). Also the synagogue was early called a "*proseuche*," literally a "place of prayer" (Acts 16:13, 16). First century Jews Philo and Josephus (37AD-c.100) frequently called it the same. God's people prayed.

Corporate prayer in Jewish practice is well known, and there is no scholarly debate about its important presence in corporate worship. The church was no different. Jesus taught his disciples that there was something special to be found in corporate worship and prayer.

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, the early church understood the church experienced the presence of Christ in its midst. Ignatius, studied in the Martyrs lesson, wrote to the Smyrneans that, "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal church."<sup>41</sup>

The book of Acts is replete with references to the early church praying in corporate gatherings. In Acts 2:42, the church in its infancy "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Upon the release of Peter and John, the church "lifted their voices together to God" and prayed, a prayer that is recorded by Luke (Acts 4:24-30).

When Peter was imprisoned, we read of the church praying.

So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church (Acts 12:5).

Once Peter was released, he sought out the church and found them praying in the house of Mary.

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<sup>40</sup> There was a corollary taught in rabbinical studies that where two sit together and discuss the Torah (Moses' Law), God's divine presence rested between them. Mishnah, *Pirke Aboth*, 3.2. With Jesus, though, we see his living presence, not simply the *Shikanah* glory.

<sup>41</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrneans*, 8.2.

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying (Acts 12:12).

The church at Antioch gathered together and with fasting prayed over Paul and Barnabas before sending them into the mission field (Acts 13:1-3).

Acts is not the only place where we read of early church prayer. Consider Paul's prayer at the start of the letter to the Ephesians. This was a letter to be read aloud to the church, and in the first chapter, verses 3-14, we read a prayer of praise. It reads rhythmically in the Greek and seems to be of three stanzas. The first stanza is verses 3-6 and ends with "to the praise of his glorious grace." The second stanza is verses 7-12 and it also ends with "to the praise of his glorious grace." Similarly the third stanza (13-14) ends with "to the praise of his glorious grace." This prayer blesses God, recounting his marvelous deeds through Christ and for us. Scholars readily identify this as containing liturgical phrases and terms found in the worship of the early church.<sup>42</sup>

Again in the middle of Ephesians Paul sets forth a corporate prayer. Ephesians 3:14-18 sets out Paul's impetus for praying,

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Then Paul followed with a prayer calling for a corporate "Amen."

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3:20-21).

It is interesting to see how prayer from the Jewish Christian community extended into the broader church through "borrowed vocabulary." Aramaic was a common language of the Jews in Palestine, but not in the Greek-speaking world. Yet in the

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<sup>42</sup> Martin at 33-34.

prayer life of the early church, Aramaic loan words are found prominently throughout the Greek speaking churches. These loan words show the tight relationship between churches in the larger Mediterranean world with the apostolic church's start in Palestine.

Two important loan words are “*marana tha*.” In his closing prayer in 1 Corinthians, Paul uses these two Aramaic words and simply turns the Aramaic letters into their Greek equivalent, demonstrating the Corinthians' ready usage and understanding of the Aramaic words. The English Standard Version simply translates the passage, “Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor. 16:22). One needs to look at the footnote to see that Paul has written the Aramaic word “Marana tha” in Greek (μαράνα θά). These same words are found in *The Didache*'s instructions for the Lord's Supper (Did. 10:6) showing their ready acceptance and usage in the religious vocabulary of the Greek and Latin world.

A second loan word used in the prayers of the church is “*Abba*,” Aramaic for a child's reference to his or her father. Multiple times Paul uses this Aramaic word, putting the Aramaic letters into their Greek equivalent (Αββα), when addressing the Greek-speaking church (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

Perhaps the most common loan word, one that we still have today, is the Aramaic/Hebrew, ܐܡܝܢ. The word means, “Let it be so” or “truly.” The Greek letters corresponding to the Aramaic/Hebrew are ἀμήν. The corresponding English letters are “amen.” This word had long been used by the Hebrews to close proclamations (Dt. 27:15-26) as well as prayers (1 Chron. 16:36; Neh. 8:6). Jesus used it as an affirmation of truth (where the ESV translates it “truly” rather than “amen”), doubling it in the Gospel of John for Jesus' affirmations (“amen! Amen!”).

In Paul, we read “amen” affixed to many of his prayers (Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 15:33; 16:27; 1 Cor. 16:24, etc.). Paul also references “amen” as the word people are to say at a prayer's conclusion when he wrote to the Corinthians about the importance of praying in an understandable language (as opposed to an untranslated tongue).

Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? (1 Cor. 14:16).

We can also fairly deduce that this Hebrew word was used at the conclusion of prayers offered in Jesus' name. In other words, as prayed in the name of Jesus, the prayer was one to which the church said, “Let it be so!” Consider in this regard Paul's usage in 2 Corinthians 1:20.

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [in Jesus]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

### **Scripture Reading and Teaching**

We know that the early apostolic church found the Old Testament Scriptures important in their worship and teaching. This was clearly a practice in the synagogues of the Jews throughout the diaspora. The synagogue service would include a reading from the Law (*Torah*), followed by a reading from the prophets (*Haftarah*).

Jesus read Scripture and commented on it at synagogue. Repeatedly Matthew and Mark wrote of Jesus teaching in synagogues (Mt. 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Mk. 1:21, 39; 6:2). Luke gives similar statements, but also gives more detail about Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth. There, Jesus read from the prophets (Is. 61:1, 2) and after reading sat down to teach, claiming that the prophetic words were finding fulfillment that very day. It was in the synagogue at Capernaum where Jesus taught the disconcerting concept that “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn. 6:56).

After his conversion, Paul went into the synagogues to teach that Jesus was Messiah (Acts 9:20). We see Paul in the mission field going into synagogues where he would teach after the readings of *Torah* and *Haftarah*.

After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.” (Acts 13:15).

Decades later Paul would give Timothy instructions for reading and teaching from Scripture in church:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching (1 Tim. 4:13).

Around the middle of the second century (c.150AD), we have an account from Justin Martyr (c.100-165) on a Christian worship service that occurred in Rome. That account is interesting as it describes the church reading not only from the prophets, but also from the “memoirs of the apostles.” These were “read as long

as time permit. Then, when the reader had finished, the leader spoke, admonishing and exhorting the people to follow noble teaching and examples.”<sup>43</sup>

This was not a late development. The Epistle of 2 Peter references Paul’s writings in the same authoritative position as “other Scriptures.”

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

We will cover this more in depth in later discussions on the development of the New Testament canon.

### **The Lord’s Supper**

One big difference between the apostolic church and the synagogue gatherings centered on the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist. The apostolic church used the term “Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20), referencing the communion service set in place by Jesus at the Last Supper. The Lord’s Supper is also called the “Eucharist” from early church writings using the Greek word *eucharisteo*, meaning “to give thanks.” This is something Jesus did before giving the elements to his disciples and something the early church did as well. *Eucharisteo* is the word found in the institution of the Lord’s Supper where Matthew reported,

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks [*eucharisteo*] he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you” (Mt. 26:27).

*Eucharisteo* is also used by *The Didache* in its instructions about how the early church was to take communion (Did. 9:1).

The Eucharist itself centered on the elements Jesus infused with special meaning at the Last Supper—bread and “the cup,” which would have contained “wine.” The bread Jesus used would have been “unleavened bread” as a part of the Passover. Whether Jesus and his disciples were actually celebrating the Passover meal, something some scholars debate, is irrelevant here. During the week of Passover, all leaven was removed from houses and cooking and only unleavened bread would have been used.

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<sup>43</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, at 67.

The Eucharist was not something you might or might not have, depending upon the Sunday you made church. It was done every Sunday according to *The Didache*, which instructed,

On every Lord's Day—his special day—come together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who has a quarrel with a companion join you until they have been reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be defiled (Did. 14:1-2).

*The Didache*, and other early church writings made clear that communion was “closed,” something only partaken of by the baptized believers of the church.

You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's name. For in reference to this the Lord said, “Do not give what is sacred to dogs” (Did. 9:5).

We also read in *The Didache* some beautiful prayers to be offered over the communal elements—first the cup and then the bread. The communion service ends with the Aramaic phrase in prayer, *Marana tha* – Come, Lord Jesus! This shows the bidirectional nature of the Eucharist. It looked back, as one prepared for the service considering their actions, it looked back at the sacrifice of Christ, but it also looked forward to the promised coming of the Lord!

Scholars have been at odds over trying to figure out what the early church did as far as having a meal in conjunction with the gathering where the Eucharist was held. The meal is generally termed an “*agape* feast” (*agape* is a Greek word for “love”) and is referenced in Jude 12 where we read of those abusing the *agape* feasts.

Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever (Jude 11-13).

There was a ready presence of feasting in the Greco-Roman world at the time of the church, so the pagans that came into the faith would have a basis for understanding a meal-time celebration. Judaism also had meals as a part of many

of its rituals and celebrations. We see this clearly in the institution of the Eucharist where the apostles first had a meal with the Lord before Jesus took the bread and cup and blessed them, infusing them with the significance of his own body and blood.

Where, when, or how the *agape* feast separated from the elements of the Lord's Supper is unknown. We see its separation by 200 in the writings of Tertullian (c.150-c.122).

Tertullian wrote a defense of the *agape* feast to the outside world. In his defense, we get a good idea of the feast as it occurred at that time.

Our dinner shows its idea in its name; it is called by the Greek name for love (*agape*).<sup>44</sup> Whatever the cost, it is gain to spend in piety's name, for with that refreshment we help the needy<sup>45</sup>... We do not take our places at table until we have first tasted prayer to God. Only so much is eaten as satisfies hunger; only so much drunk as meets the needs of the modest. They satisfy themselves only so far as men will who recall that even during the night they must worship God; they talk as those who know the Lord listens. After water for the hands come the lights; and then each, from what he knows of the Holy Scriptures, or from his own heart, is called before the rest to sing to God... Prayer in like manner ends the banquet. Then we break up.<sup>46</sup>

### **Worship Order**

We do not have an early church "Order of Worship" handout to inform us how the earliest churches ordered their services. The earliest full information comes from Justin Martyr, in the writing referenced above in the "Scripture Reading and Teaching" section.

Justin placed his explanation of a service in the context of blessing the "Creator of all through his Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit." He then sets forward the "service" seen in Rome in 150AD.

And on the day called Sunday there is an assembly of those who dwell in cities or the countryside, and the memoirs of the apostles or

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<sup>44</sup> Tertullian was writing in Latin.

<sup>45</sup> The feast was seen as a way to help feed the poor.

<sup>46</sup> Tertullian *Apology*, 39.16-18. Translated by Glover, T. R., (Loeb Classical Library 1931),

the writings of the prophets are read, for as long as there is time. Then, when the reader has stopped, the president, in an address, makes admonition and invitation of their good things. Then we all stand up together and send prayers. And, as we said before, when we have stopped praying, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president sends up prayers and thanksgivings in similar fashion to the best of his ability, and the people give their assent, saying “Amen.” And there is a distribution and a partaking of the eucharistized elements to each one, and it is sent to those who are not present by means of the deacons. But those who are well-off and are willing, give—each what he wishes according to his own choice—and what is gathered together is deposited with the president. And he assists orphans and widows and those who are in need because of illness or some other cause, and those who are in chains, and the foreigners who are staying with us. And he is the protector of all in general who are in need.

And it is on Sunday that we all make assembly in common, since it is the first day, on which God changed darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead on the same day.<sup>47</sup>

There are several notable matters in the description. The role of the “president” is notably significant as presider over the prayers, instructions, and holder of assets. The Greek for “president” is *proestos* (προεστὸς) and means the one presiding, or the “presiding minister.” This is the one who gives the Eucharist in Rome at the time. In *The Didache* it is the proper task of the “prophets” to give the thanks over the Eucharist. Ignatius of Antioch in our last lesson set the Eucharistic responsibility on the bishop.

Also notable is that the service is not based on an agape feast, but really features the elements of the Lord’s Supper. While the text reads “bread and wine and water,” this does not mean there were three elements to the Supper! Wine was diluted with water, so there were two elements: (1) bread, and (2) wine and water. “Table wine in the ancient world was always taken diluted with water.”<sup>48</sup> A second way to understand the inclusion of water was for washing the hands, a purification process that for some went along with the Eucharist. The term

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<sup>47</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apology*, ch. 67 as translated in Minns, Denis and Parvis, Paul, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr – Apologies*, (Oxford 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Ferguson, Everett, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, (Eerdmans 2003), at 106.

referencing “eucharistized elements” is literally “elements that have been blessed with thanksgiving over them.”

While this service explanation does not include singing, there is every reason to think it was included in the section that says, “Then we all stand up together and send prayers.” Earlier in the work, Justin wrote that the believers “send processions and hymns in gratitude to him for our creation, and for all the provisions for well-being.”<sup>49</sup> This is more easily understood if we recognize that the entire service would seem to our modern ear as “musical.” There was not a clear distinction between singing and speaking, because speech itself was “sung.”<sup>50</sup>

The music heritage of the church is worthy of its own study and will be considered later.

### **Worship Posture**

Some scholars believe that the early Christians stood for their worship, a practice still employed in many Eastern Orthodox congregations. However, we know that the practice was one of sitting in the Jewish synagogues. Both New Testament writings indicate such (e.g., Jesus “stood” to read the Scripture and then took his seat again – Luke 4:16-20). When reading Scripture, one stood. Also when praying in the synagogue, it seems one stood (at least the hypocrites loved to stand when praying in the synagogue – Mt. 6:5).<sup>51</sup>

Philo (c.25BC-c.50AD) was a Jewish writer contemporary with the New Testament church from Alexandria and a prolific author. His writings include some references to synagogue services and he places the Jews as seated during the bulk of the assembly.

And indeed they [the Jews] do always assemble and sit together most of them in silence except when it is the practice to add something to signify approval of what is read. But some priest who

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, at 13.2.

<sup>50</sup> *Te Deum*, at 60.

<sup>51</sup> Jews would pray in multiple positions: standing (Lk 18:11, 13), sitting (2 Samuel 7:18, kneeling (Lk 22:41), and even lying face down on the ground (Mt. 26:39). The normative behavior seems to have been standing with hands raised. Osborne, Grant, “Moving Forward on Our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*,” June 2010, 243-267, at 246

is present or one of the elders reads the holy laws to them and expounds them point by point till about the late afternoon when they depart having gained both expert knowledge of the holy laws and considerable advance in piety.<sup>52</sup>

In another passage, Philo explained the seating order among the Essenes on the Sabbath.

[On the Sabbath, they] abstain from all other work and proceed to sacred spots which they call synagogues. There, arranged in rows according to their ages, the younger below the older, they sit decorously as befits the occasion with attentive ears. Then one takes the books and reads aloud and another of special proficiency comes forward and expounds what is not understood.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

One thing we readily learn from church history is that the *place* of worship is not important. The *importance* of worship is found in truly ascribing worth to God, encountering him around his table, learning from his word, seeking him in prayer, and edifying and fellowshiping with the saints. This leads to the first of our Points for Home.

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.*” (Jn. 4:23).

The woman at the well wanted to engage Jesus on where to worship God. Jesus quickly moved the discussion to something that mattered. Not *where* to worship God, but *how* to worship God. God is worshipped in spirit and in truth! God is calling us to give him our praise, our prayers, our time and attention, our minds – all that we are and all that we have.

This is fitting and right. First off, God is GOD! He is worthy of all praise and worship. Moreover, GOD has come into our world in Jesus and given of himself

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<sup>52</sup> Philo, *Hypothetica*, at 7.13 ed. & trans. F.H. Colson & G.H. Whitaker.

<sup>53</sup> Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit*, 9.57-59.

in the most extreme demonstration of love for us. Who else, or what else, is then worthy of our time and attention.

2. *“What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.”* (1 Cor. 14:26).

Worship is an encounter with God, but it is also a time of change for his people. God has always been about bringing people into alignment with what is best for them (his will). We can think of it as a massive cleaning. We have mold, dirt, grime, garbage, and more in every fiber of who we are. God has declared that he will not leave us that way. God is at work cleaning up his people. He does that through his Spirit in a variety of ways, most notably in worship. Worship that includes learning, refocusing, training, and more, is worship that is transformational.

When we come together to worship, we should remember we are there for *others* just as others are there for us. Worship becomes a true corporate experience where my concerns need to be, “How do I help others grow before God?” more so than “What do I get out of this?”

3. *“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

We encounter Jesus in the Eucharist. We are not partaking of a cracker and grape juice (fermented or not). We are partaking of elements that have been infused by Jesus with the significance of his very body and blood. As we take of this, we are reflective of our sin, of his death, and of his promised return to feast with us in the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).

## HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-2:2. One chapter down, four to go!

**1John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

**1:5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

**1John 2:1** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.