

Part I - Early Church Practices 1
WORSHIP PLACE..... 1
OCCASIONS FOR WORSHIP 1
ORDER OF WORSHIP..... 2
THE LORD'S SUPPER - 3
BAPTISM - 3
INFANT BAPTISM - 4
DISCIPLINE IN THE EARLY CHURCH..... 6

Part I - Early Church Practices

The question to address this week is, "How, when, and where did the early church worship and what importance does the answer hold for us today in how we conduct our own church?"

WORSHIP PLACE

Until the close of the 2nd century, worship was held in private houses (in dining rooms), or deserts, grave sites of martyrs, or in the Catacombs. The reason for seeking out such unusual places is more a consequence of the times than of preference. They were driven to these out of the way places by poverty, oppression, illegality, a love of silence/solitude when seeking out God, and possibly by an aversion to pagan art which was prominent in any other public building. Justin Martyr once said to a Roman Prefect, "the Christians assemble wherever it is convenient, because their God is not, like the gods of the heathen, enclosed in space, but is invisibly present everywhere."

After 250, churches were built to accommodate the rapid growth of the membership. Over 40 existed in Rome alone by the year 300. It was Constantine who began the great church construction program using the Basilica as the style. The one he built in Tyre looked something like this:

It included a large portico, an atrium surrounded by granite columns with a fountain in the center to wash the hands and feet before entering the church. There were inner porticoes, a nave or central space with galleries above the aisles and covered by a cedar roof. There was a most holy altar, thrones for the bishops or elders, and benches or seats for the others. The church was surrounded by halls and enclosed by a wall. The 'clergy' sat at the East end of the church (in the choir), and the people sat in the nave without a barrier between them. The barrier came as early as the 4th century though, creating an impassable dividing line between the priesthood and the laity.

OCCASIONS FOR WORSHIP

THE LORD'S DAY - Sunday, the first day of the week was celebrated in memory of the resurrection since the apostolic age - it was universally so in the 2nd century without dissent. It could not be a fixed Sabbath in the civil sense (without work/business) until Constantine gave it the backing of law. "Regular public worship absolutely requires a stated day of worship." It was never considered a continuation of the Jewish Sabbath, but instead it was always contrasted with

it. Tertullian viewed the Lord's Day as a rest from sin. He thought it wrong to fast or kneel in prayer for the day: "Sunday we give to joy." But he also thought it essential to abstain from work and worry to avoid giving Satan a foot in the door. Wednesday and Friday were half day fasts (till 3 p.m.) serving as days of penance or watch-days.¹

PASSOVER - Easter and Pentecost were the beginning and end of a continuous celebration of Christ's resurrection and power. There was an "Easter vigil" of fasting which was sometimes carried through from the previous week, and then came a time of watchfulness kept with special devotion till the break of day. The celebration was concluded with the feast of resurrection. The forty-day period of lent wasn't fixed until the close of the 5th century after which it was taught that lent referred to the 40 day fast of Christ. Because of calendar differences and ignorance it appeared at times to the world that one part of the church was in mourning over Christ's death while another part was celebrating it.² Considering the charge of cannibalism, this was a mildly amusing accusation.

EPIPHANY was generally condemned as an oriental innovation based on a Gnostic practice. It had a later origin than the Anti-Nicene period and celebrated collectively the Incarnation, Baptism of Christ, visit of the Magi, first miracle of Cana, and feeding of 5,000.³

ORDER OF WORSHIP

The earliest description of worship that we have comes from Pliny c.109. He tells us that the Christians assembled on an appointed day (Sunday) at sunrise, sang responsively a song to Christ as to God, and then pledged themselves by an oath not to do any evil work, to commit no robbery, theft, adultery, nor to break their word, nor sacrifice property entrusted to them. Afterwards, at evening, they gathered again to eat "ordinary and innocent" food (the agape love feast - morning worship was accompanied by the Eucharist).

About 140 AD Justin Martyr describes it this way: On Sunday everyone meets, a section is read from the Memoirs of the Apostles (the Gospels) and the writings of the Prophets (O.T.) for as long as time permits! (wouldn't any Pastor love that one!) When the reader has finished, the president (presiding elder) in a discourse gives an exhortation to imitate these things. After this everyone rose in common prayer. At the close of prayer the Eucharist is served (bread and wine with water). The president offers prayer and thanks for them and the congregation responds 'Amen.' Then the consecrated elements were distributed to each one, partaken, and carried by deacons to the houses of the absent. A free will offering is taken from the wealthy and the willing and given to the president, who gives them to the orphans and widows, poor and needy, prisoners and strangers, and takes care of all who are in want. Song is also a part of the celebration service, taken from the Psalter. Just for interest's sake, here is a second century poem that has found its way into our present day Psalter:

Bridle of untamed colts, wing of unwandering birds, Sure helm of babes, Shepherd of royal lambs!
Assemble thy simple children, to Praise holily, To hymn guilelessly with innocent mouths,
Christ, the guide of children. O King of saints, All-subduing Word of the Most High Father,

¹ Schaff, Philip *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vol.(Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1949), II pp. 198-204

² Ibid. p. 212

³ Ibid. p. 221

Prince of Wisdom, Support of sorrows, That rejoicest in the ages,

Jesus, Savior of the human race, Shepherd, Husbandman, Helm, Bridle, Heavenly Wing,
Of the all holy flock, Fisher of men who are saved,
Catching the chaste fishes with sweet life From the hateful wave of a sea of vices.
Guide us, Shepherd of rational sheep; Guide harmless children,

O holy King, O footsteps of Christ, O heavenly way, Perennial Word,
Endless Age, Eternal Light, Fount of Mercy, Performer of virtue.
Noble is the life of those who praise God, O Christ Jesus,
Heavenly milk of the sweet breasts of the graces Of the Bride, Pressed out of thy wisdom.

Babes, nourished with tender mouths, Filled with the dewy spirit Of the spiritual breast,
Let us sing together simple praises True Hymns to Christ the King,
Holy reward for the doctrine of life, Let us sing together, Sing in simplicity to the mighty Child.
O choir of peace, The Christ begotten, O chaste people Let us praise together the God of Peace.

literal translation of a poem by Clement of Alexandria c. 175⁴

From the middle of the 2nd century the public worship service was broken into two parts: one for the faithful and one for the catechumens. The latter had scripture reading, preaching, prayer, and song and was open to the unbaptized or those under penance. The faithful then would take communion after all the unbelievers and unbaptized had been escorted out by the deacons, the doors were closed or guarded. This began the Christian mystery worship which led ultimately to the "Secret Discipline;" many have said the source of transubstantiation is also found here. Yet there remains a need to keep the sacraments holy, and to ascribe the proper interpretation to them.⁵

THE LORD'S SUPPER -

This sacrament was considered symbolic spiritually, and yet it was universally regarded not only as a sacrament but also as a sacrifice superseding all the provisional and typical sacrifices of the O.T. However, the Ante-Nicene Fathers conceived it not as an unbloody repetition of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but simply as a commemoration and renewed appropriation of that atonement, and above all, a thank-offering of the whole church.⁶

BAPTISM –

The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, chapter 7 provides for baptism after catechetical instruction. It reads of the ceremony, "Baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in running water. But if you have none, then baptize in other water, and if you can't do it in cold water, then in warm. If you have neither [running nor standing], pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 222-224

⁵ Ibid. p. 232

⁶ Ibid. p. 245

Justin Martyr tells us that "Those who are convinced of the truth of our doctrine, and have promised to live according to it, are exhorted to prayer, fasting, and repentance for past sins, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are led by us to a place where is water, and in this way they are regenerated, as we also have been regenerated; that is, they receive the water both in the name of God, the Father and Ruler of all, and of our Redeemer Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost." Thanksgiving, benediction and brotherly kiss concluded the ceremony.⁷

The first six chapters of the *Didache*, or *Book of Apostolic Teachings*, contains an early catechism based on the Sermon on the Mount. Duration was sometimes two to three years to ensure that the sinfulness was past to a great extent and the baptism would therefore be more efficacious. Confirmation was originally closely connected with baptism and involved laying on hands and anointing with fragrant balsam oil.

INFANT BAPTISM –

This was an option given to parents even as far back as the Apostolic Age, the precedent having been a consecration by circumcision. There wasn't a single voice against the lawfulness of infant baptism which was supported by Christ's entreaty "suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not."⁸ Irenaeus, pupil of the Apostle John, said that "Christ passed through all the stages of life, to sanction them all, and came to redeem, through himself, all who through him are born again unto God, sucklings, children, boys, youths and adults." It implies a sacramental regeneration as opposed to a moral or spiritual regeneration which require a conscious act of the will to attain conversion, an exercise of faith and repentance, of which an infant is incapable. Confirmation has evolved into such an affirmation of faith and repentance by the catechumen (rather than by the catechist), as if the child now grown mature were ratifying the baptismal oath made on the child's behalf by the parents. The thing signified by the baptism is applied to the individual by his knowing affirmation of it.⁹

We are looking at what the church was like in the first two centuries, not because it is binding on us, but because it will help us grasp what the early church understood the Biblical directives to mean. Overlapping the time of the Apostles, the early Christians had a unique opportunity to hear Apostolic objections to their practices (or approvals of them). Anti-Nicene Christianity was refreshingly open in its discussions of doctrine and order. "There was an underlying health in the church which was able to survive disputes carried on in a manner which shocks our modern (anemic?) sensibilities."¹⁰ We can find the roots of many of our present church practices active even then. For example:

1. the disciplining of the Body.
2. the distinction between clergy and laity.
3. the creation of a separate priesthood (called sacerdotalism).
4. the increase of subordinate offices (e.g. sub-deacons, readers, acolyths or bishop's aides, exorcists, precentors or cantors, janitors or sextons, catechists, and interpreters).

⁷ Ibid. pp. 247-251

⁸ Ibid. p. 256

⁹ Ibid. p. 259

¹⁰ Jackson, Jeremy C. *No Other Foundation* (Cornerstone, Westchester, Ill., 1981), p. 41.

5. the creation of the episcopate (bishopry).
6. Roman primacy (Roman-centered authority).
7. the unity of a catholic church, rather than independent congregations.

This centralization of the Body at this point in history should be considered a legitimate response to heretics and other forms of divisiveness. Papism and episcopacy were advocated by Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, to protect the church's heritage from those who sought to use the church as a path to earthly glory and dominion. Once church power and authority had been consolidated, there was little to prevent the marriage of church and state. Tertullian felt it was both unnatural and unhealthy to have a Christian emperor or to give both civil and ecclesiastical power to a single person. But as time went on and the Roman Empire began to crumble from within, the need for stability overshadowed all other considerations.¹¹ While time may ultimately have proved Tertullian correct, the unity of church and state at this moment in time contributed to the church's final success. In the same way that David was able to exercise compassionate kingship because Joab, his general, exercised raw military might, the church of 4th century Rome was able to preserve the teachings of the Apostolic Age because Rome's secular strength safeguarded the church even as the world around it disintegrated.

Consolidating church organization meant restricted individual liberty in the interest of order, and it also meant there was a real temptation to abuse church power.¹² This is the very issue which led to the Reformation in the second millennium of the church. The list of early church practices on the preceding pages are as natural as the aberrations which resulted from them. They were not inherently bad, but they lent themselves to misuse. The separation of clergy and laity was a natural progression from the Jewish heritage of the early church and from the pagan traditions of priesthood, altar and sacrifice. The extraordinary pentecostal illumination the Holy Spirit afforded the Apostles passed away with them. And the old reminiscences began to reassert themselves in the lives of God's people, just as the reminiscences of the "good ol' days" under the heel of slavery had reasserted themselves in the desert below Mount Sinai.¹³

To combat this backsliding, a special class of Christians developed. While Ignatius hinted at creating a separate priesthood, it was Clement of Rome writing to the church at Corinth who planted the seeds for its evolvment. Tertullian clearly indicated in his writings that there was an early distinction between the laity and eldership when he constantly referred to the elders in charge as "sacerdotes." The complete hierarchy of the church was in place by the early 3rd century, virtually as we know it today under Roman Catholicism. The exaltation of the eldership led to their separation as an independent caste.¹⁴ Yet the concept of a universal priesthood continued to emerge from time to time, e.g. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the early 2nd century, taught the Biblically grounded truth of a universal priesthood as did the Montanists. However, this latter group went even further, allowing women to teach publicly in the church. If you haven't addressed the question yet, I recommend Paul Jewett's text on the "Ordination of Women" which nicely lays out the arguments on both sides, and then curiously concludes that the Bible needs rewriting! That recommendation became the basis for the National Council of Church's advocacy of a non-sexist version of the Bible a number of years ago.

¹¹ Ibid. Schaff, p. 121

¹² Ibid. p. 122

¹³ Ibid. p. 123

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 126-127

Tertullian, who first recognized the emerging clergy-laity distinction, also opposed it asking, "Are not we laymen also priests? ... Where there is no college of ministers, you administer the sacrament, you baptize, you are a priest for yourself alone. And where there are three of you, there is a church, though you be only laymen... For each one lives by his own faith, and there is no respect of persons with God."¹⁵ Lay teachers were also acceptable in the early church as when Origen was permitted to expound the Bible prior to ordination. The 4th General Council of Carthage in 398 AD. prohibited laymen from teaching in the presence of clergymen without their consent, implying that it was permissible with that consent. Such laymen included many of the church's finest teachers: Hermas (author of some Apocrypha), Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Arnobius, and Lactantius.¹⁶

Roman primacy evolved because Rome was already a hub of the civilized world. Paul and Peter died there. The epistle to the Romans is one of the most important in the New Testament. The persecution by Nero and his successors brought the Roman Christians great honor. And extensive wisdom coupled with a desire for universal norms of belief made them a logical choice to lead the catholic church. The unity of such catholicism is presupposed in the Christian faith: "There is one body and one Spirit --- just as you were called to one hope when you were called --- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Eph.4:4-6. There was no visible vs. invisible distinction at this time because nobody in his right mind would suffer the type of persecution that was ongoing until 313 AD. for the sake of membership in a social club. But as Christianity became more and more "popular" the only way to maintain unity was to organize and systematize. Tertullian likened the church to Noah's Ark: you're either on board or you're lost.¹⁷ This idea removed the understanding of the parable of the wheat and the tares with which we began the course. We'll see the consequences of such universal exclusiveness in the Post-Nicene era.

DISCIPLINE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Discipline was formalized at the Council of Ancyra, 314 AD. Penitents fell into four classes:

WEEPERS - who prostrated themselves at the church doors in mourning garments begging to return to good standing from both clergy and laity.

HEARERS - who were allowed to hear the Scripture lessons and the sermon, but not join the body.

KNEELERS - who attended public prayers, but only on their knees while the rest stood.

STANDERS - who could take part in the entire worship service standing, but they were excluded from the communion.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 128-129

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 130

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 171

Formal restoration of these penitents came by the laying on of hands and the pronouncement of a benediction by the priest. This, combined with a belief that sins which followed baptism needed special handling, may be the source of priestly intercession later on. "Though originating in deep moral earnestness, too much formality and legal constraint always deadens the spirit, instead of supporting and regulating it."¹⁸

The question of discipline became very heated at times and even led to several splits or "schisms" in the early church, such as the schism of Hippolytus at Rome. The schism of Felicissimus at Carthage was the result of his opposition to the election of Cyprian to be Bishop right after his baptism by a voice vote of the congregation. While rightly instigated, this opposition was headed by Novatus, an unprincipled demagogue of an elder, and his reputation became the reputation of the group he led. The Novatian Schism which produced an anti-pope in 251 AD. was the consequence of self-righteousness. The Novatians considered themselves the only 'pure' communion and they were completely unforgiving of the fallen. The present Nazarene doctrine of holiness finds its roots here. Finally, the Meletian Schism of 305 AD. was born from a zeal for strictness that led to counter-ordinations of elders and priests, counter-excommunications, and membership raids. The adherents later joined the Arians.

Discipline was not the result of someone's desire to lord it over someone else. It was the necessary means of maintaining the purity of faith that had been handed down generation after generation. There were many heresies growing up in the body as new converts brought their old ways with them. A list of these heresies and those who established them is substantial: Judaism, Heathenism, Ebionism, Gnosticism, Simonianism (Simon Magus), Nicolaitians Cerinthus, Basilides Valentinus, Marcion, Ophites, Saturninus Carpocrates, Tatian Justin's Gnostics, Hermogenes, Manicheans, and Montanism

We won't deal with all of these, perhaps only two or three in the next section. I want to end this part with a non-heresy that has reemerged in this century: Millenarianism, the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for 1000 years before the general resurrection and judgment. We dealt with this tangentially in the Fall of Jerusalem but now we can be more direct in describing its origins. The intent here is not to condemn or promote the interpretation itself, but to point out some aspects of it that are often distorted. The original name of this Doctrine of the End Times was Chiliasm. It was not a doctrine of the church that could be found in any creed or form of devotion, but it was a widely held opinion of such distinguished teachers such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius. It was opposed by Caius, Origen, Dionysius the Great, Eusebius, and later both Justin and Augustine. Barnabas was the first and only teacher of premillennialism in the early church, teaching that the church would not go through the Tribulation. His martyrdom must have been quite a shock.

Philip Schaff, the great church historian of the last century tells us, "The Jewish Chiliasm rested on a carnal misapprehension of the Messianic Kingdom, a literal interpretation of prophetic figures, and an overestimate of the importance of the Jewish people and the holy city as the center of that Kingdom. It was developed shortly before and after Christ in the apocalyptic literature, as in the Book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, 4th Esdras, the Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs, and the Sibylline Books. It was adopted by the heretical sect of the Ebionites, and

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 189

the Gnostic Cerinthus."¹⁹ Our congregation takes no stance to my knowledge, but Millenarianism is a minority view. If you hold this view, try to listen with an open mind and heart when the latent dangers which exist in the doctrine are clearly presented, and then avoid those pitfalls in your own walk with the Lord. Your salvation does not depend on a correct interpretation of the End Times, but your success as a servant and soldier of the Lord does rely on the strength of your faith under trial and persecution. Don't let your faith rest on a belief that God owes you an excuse not to participate in a tribulation. Next week we enter the realm of Theology and Church practice in the first three centuries.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 614