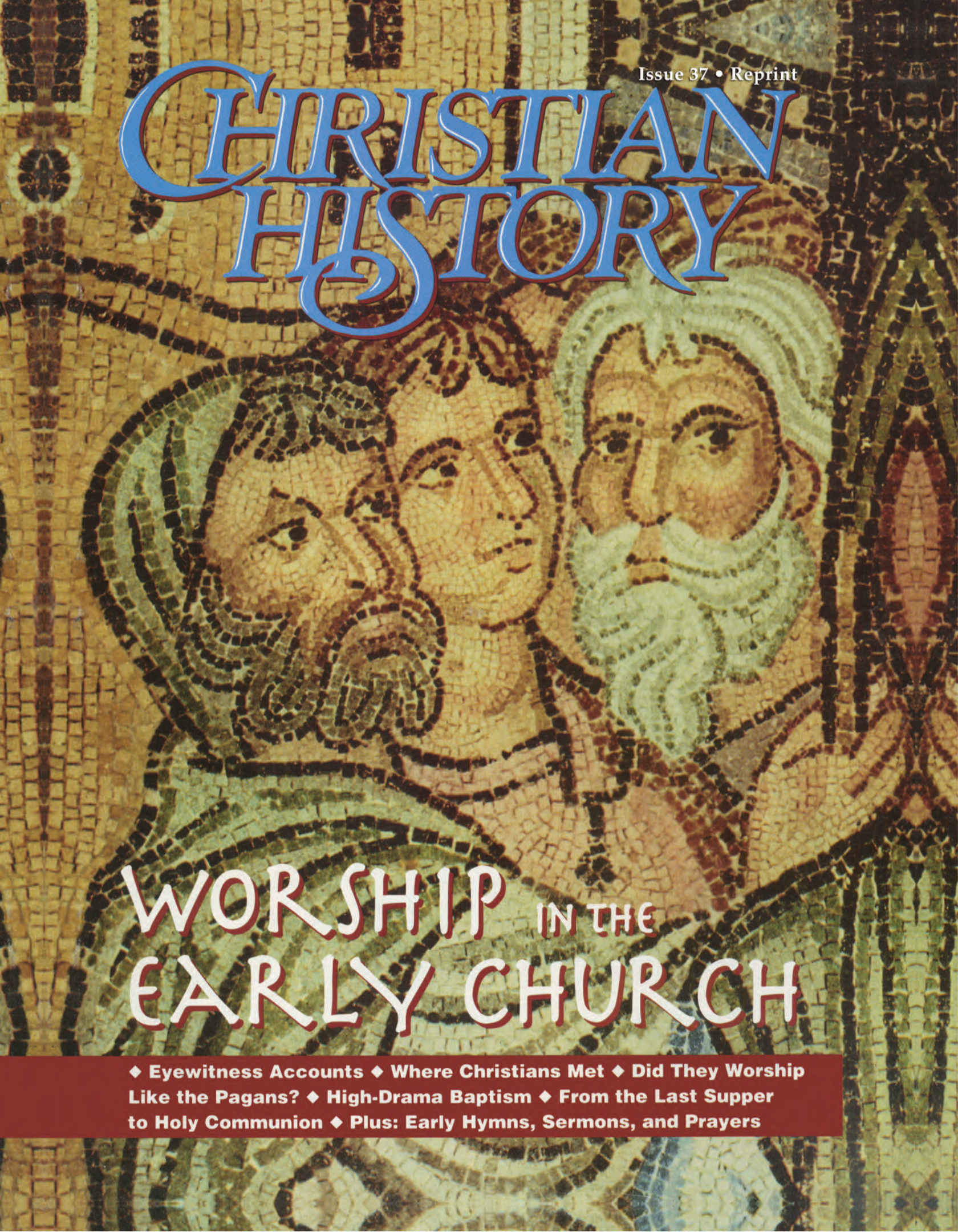
Issue 37 • Reprint

CHRISTIAN HISTORY



WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH

◆ Eyewitness Accounts ◆ Where Christians Met ◆ Did They Worship Like the Pagans? ◆ High-Drama Baptism ◆ From the Last Supper to Holy Communion ◆ Plus: Early Hymns, Sermons, and Prayers

DID YOU KNOW?

Little-known or remarkable facts about worship in the early church

JOHN O. GOOCH

MORE THAN WATER: By the early 200s, baptism often included renouncing Satan and all his works, making a statement of faith, being baptized (naked) in water, being clothed in a white robe, receiving anointing with oil, and immediately celebrating the Lord's Supper.

The first part of an early Christian worship assembly was open to all, including strangers, who might be converted by the preaching. The second part of the service involved the Lord's Supper, which only the baptized were allowed to partake, so the unbaptized departed then.

Many Romans believed Christians were a funeral society because Christian families observed the anniversary of a relative's death on the third, ninth, and thirtieth (or fortieth) day after the death. They gathered at the tomb, sang psalms, read Scripture, prayed, gave alms to the poor, and ate a meal. Later, this practice developed into feasts to honor martyrs. Perhaps the first such feast was for Polycarp (a bishop burned to death for his faith); it began shortly after his death in about 156.

Christians prepared for Easter, the festival of the Resurrection, by fasting. At first, the fasting lasted one day; later it was extended to 40 hours, to symbolize the 40 days Jesus spent fasting and praying in the wilderness.

Sunday, the "little Easter," was also a festival of joy. To prepare for it, many Christians fasted on Wednesday and Friday.

Repentance was an involved process in the early church. Sin was seen not as a personal matter but as something that destroyed the unity of the church. Penitents fasted and prayed for the forgiveness of their sins, appeared before the church to make public confession, and were barred from the Lord's Supper until they gave evidence of a change of heart and were absolved. (The only exception was for people facing persecution. They were readmitted to the Lord's Supper so they could receive strength.)

The New York Graphic Society

In the first century, the Lord's Supper included not only the bread and the cup but an entire meal. As part of the meal, neighbors who had quarreled made peace again.

Early Christians continued to observe the Jewish Passover. But they did not celebrate the Passover in memory of deliverance from Egypt. Instead, they fasted to commemorate the sufferings of Jesus, the true Passover Lamb.

Christians fiercely disagreed over when to celebrate Easter. Believers in Asia (modern Turkey) celebrated Easter, the "Christian Passover," *on Passover* (the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan). Victor, the bishop of Rome from 189 to 198, insisted all churches had to celebrate Easter *on a Sunday* (the first Sunday following the 14th of Nisan). Victor threatened to excommunicate those Christians who observed Easter differently, but the Asian custom continued. The Council of Nicaea in 325 finally decreed that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon in spring, the practice today.

Wikimedia/Kitkatcrazy

Emperor Hadrian's Temple still stands proudly on this street in Ephesus (in modern Turkey). In contrast to the pagans, early Christians worshiped not in special buildings but in private homes. In the home, an elevated seat was provided for reading the Scripture and giving the sermon. A table was set for the Lord's Supper. In the third century, Christians began to modify houses to create the earliest known church buildings.

In Africa, newly baptized believers were given a drink of milk and honey, symbols of their being children of Christ and citizens in heaven, a land of milk and honey.

The first Christian feast (other than Easter and Pentecost) was a feast in memory of the baptism of Jesus. It was first celebrated on January 6 or sometimes January 10; this became the feast of the Epiphany, which means "manifestation" in Greek. Christmas was not widely celebrated until the late 300s.

When worship was ended, Christians took home the consecrated bread so that those who couldn't attend worship could partake of the Lord's Supper. In North Africa, Christians took home the bread so they could celebrate the sacrament *every day* with their families. Thus, "Give us today our daily bread" carried a deeper meaning. □

Dr. John O. Gooch is editor of youth resources for the United Methodist Publishing House in Nashville, Tennessee, and author of Holiness in Tertullian *(University Microfilms, 1983).*

O God Almighty, who made heaven and earth and sea and all that is therein, help me, wash away my sins, save me in this world and in the world to come.

—Early Christian prayer

Lowrie, Walter. *Monuments of the Early Church*. New York: Macmillan, 1901.

A Bold Stance In Prayer, from a third-century fresco in Rome's Catacomb of Priscilla. On Sunday, Christians prayed standing because on this day, Christ had raised up humanity.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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From about the year 150, perhaps the most complete early description
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Christ as sun. *Wikipedia.*

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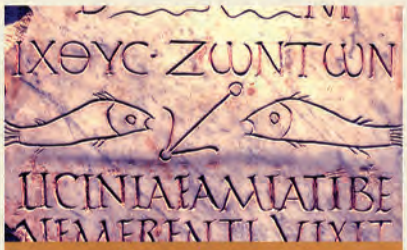
Christian symbols from the catacombs ▶



Funerary stele of Licinia Amias, an early Christian inscription. *Wikipedia.*

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©1993 CHRISTIAN HISTORY. **COVER:** Detail from a mosaic, "Entry into Jerusalem," at the Church of the Monastery, Daphni, Greece. **CHRISTIAN HISTORY** (ISSN 0891-9666) is published quarterly (February, May, August, November) by Christianity Today, Inc., 465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188. Canada Post International Publications Mail Sales Agreement No. 546526. GST R126028836. **SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE:** Please write to CHRISTIAN HISTORY, P. O. Box 11618, Des Moines, IA 50340; include current address label with all correspondence. For faster service, call toll-free: 1-800-873-6986. **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:** Please write to Kevin A. Miller, editor, CHRISTIAN HISTORY, 465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188. CHRISTIAN HISTORY does not accept unsolicited manuscripts; please send a query letter first. **PERMISSIONS:** Requests to reprint material should be directed to Mary Ann Jeffreys. Phone: 1-708-260-6200. **REPRINT 2017**

From the Editor

The Heartbeat of the Church

Worship—no act is more central to the Christian life. It gives rhythm and structure to the Christian's life; it is the heartbeat of congregational life. Worship is the first act of a new church, and in hard times, it's the last "program" to be cut—and when cut, the congregation passes away.

Of course, Christian worship didn't begin last year. We've been worshiping Christ for a couple of thousand years. Some of what we have done is impressive.

When I was a pastor, in fact, I got the tradition bug, especially when it came to worship. I revered anything old: old hymns, old symbols, and especially old prayers. And I left caution in the narthex when I found a worship practice that came from the early church.

These days, I no longer give the early church canonical status. Old isn't necessarily beautiful. Some early Christians, for instance, did some odd things, like baptize for the dead or get drunk at the love feast.

Then again, the early church did some brilliant things, like regularly including Communion, the Scriptures, and the sermon in worship. And the early Christians accomplished the incredible feat of maintaining these key traditions in the face of persecution, heresy, and the increasing dispersion of the church through Europe, Africa, and Asia.

So I can't shake my deep respect for those second-, third-, and fourth-generation Christians. They are, after all, closest to the apostles and our Lord, closest to the source from which all later streams flow.

The rich cadence of a prayer from *The Didache* or an austere description of a worship service in the age of Marcus Aurelius can transport me back to the misty beginnings, when the Spirit of God brooded over the waters, when all things were made new.

Apparently, you, our readers, feel the same fascination with the early church's worship. A year ago, we asked which themes most interested you. "Worship in the early church" topped the charts.

In preparing this issue, we were left with questions. For example, how did women participate in worship? The evidence about their role *in worship* is scant. In fact, in general, we have little evidence describing early Christian worship. So we decided to reprint important original documents from which scholars have to draw so much.

This issue takes us from the New Testament to the reign of Roman emperor Constantine (312–337), although at times our cup runneth a little further. Our goal is to give you a feel for Christian worship in its earliest forms.

Mark Galli, Associate Editor

Let Us Pray: A Roman wall painting shows Christians in worship.

Painted Walls from Lullinstone Roman Villa showing a frieze of praying figures, 4th century AD, British Museum, by Carole Raddato from FRANKFURT, Germany CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37878056

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HOW WE CHRISTIANS WORSHIP

From about the year 150, perhaps the most complete early description

JUSTIN MARTYR • Translation and Commentary by **EVERETT FERGUSON**

Lowrie, Walter. *Monuments of the Early Church; a handbook of Christian archaelogy*. New York: Macmillan, 1901.

On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers.

When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the "Amen." A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons.

Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need.

We all make our assembly in common on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which

God changed the darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior arose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturn's day, and on the day after (which is the day of the Sun) he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught these things, which we have offered for your consideration.

First Apology, 67

There is no better place to begin studying early Christian worship than with this account of Justin Martyr. Justin knew Christianity in Asia as well as Rome, perhaps in Palestine also. And in one of his writings, his *Apology*, he left us this description of a typical worship service of the second century. Justin may not tell all, but where he can be checked by other second-century sources, those sources accord with his account. Justin was not a leader of the assembly, so he wrote his account as an active layperson.

"On a day called Sunday, there is a gathering together."

"Sunday" was the pagan name for the day of the week, used because Justin was addressing a pagan audience. "First day of the week" was the Jewish name; the "Lord's day" was the peculiarly Christian designation. In the earliest Christian references to this day, the final assembling of the saints at the Lord's coming is in mind.

Here Justin connects Sunday with Creation and Redemption: ". . . the first day, on which God changed the darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior arose from the dead on the same day." Thus, the Christian day of assembly was connected by Justin with the beginning of the physical creation and with the beginning of the new creation at the Resurrection.

"The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read."

The Scripture reading was from either the writings that became the New Testament, or the Old Testament, or both. The "memoirs of the apostles" would be particularly the gospels. The "prophets" was a standing designation among Christians for the entirety of the Old Testament. But the prophetic books in the narrower sense had special meaning for the early Christians, since they pointed to Christ's coming, and they may well have been the part most frequently read.

Oldest Gospel fragment: Dating from the early 100s, it contains a part of John 18, an "apostle memoir" likely read in early worship.

Rylands fragment of John—Wikipedia

Justin does not say whether the reading was part of a continuous cycle of readings (a lectionary) or was chosen specifically for the day. The phrase "as long as time permits" implies that the reading was not of a fixed length, but it does not have to mean a random selection.

There is a third possibility: the reading may have been continuous from Sunday to Sunday, with each reading taking up where the reading last left off—but not of a predetermined length. The readings appear to be rather lengthy. In that day, these readings provided the principal opportunity for the average person to become familiar with the Scriptures.

"The president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things."

The sermon was given by the "president." The word need mean no more than "presiding brother," but it can also mean "ruler," and there seems no reason to doubt that this individual was the functionary we know elsewhere under the title *bishop*. In Justin's time, he was a congregational overseer or pastor, not a diocesan bishop. He presided at the liturgy and administered the finances of the church as well as preached. He was a different person than the reader.

The sermon was expository in nature, based on the Scripture reading of the day, and made a practical application. As an apologist (someone who defends Christianity to pagan readers), Justin stresses the moral content of the preaching: "The president . . . urges the imitation of these good things." That accords with much of the preaching in the early church.

"We all rise together and send up prayers."

Justin tells us the congregation stood for prayer. Other sources tell us about the significance of this posture: A person kneeled or prostrated himself to express humility, contrition, repentance, confession of sin. Standing, on the other hand, was a sign of joy and boldness, showing the freedom of God's

Lowrie, Walter. *Monuments of the Early Church*. New York: Macmillan, 1901.

Outstretched Arms, symbolizing Christ on the cross, was a typical prayer stance of early Christians. Some also prayed facing the East, toward the Holy Land, in expectation of the Lord's return.

children to come boldly into his presence.

On the first day of the week, standing had a special reference also to the Resurrection. This was the characteristic Christian attitude in prayer, as other texts and archaeological findings confirm. For early Christians, standing meant one had special privileges to come to God as Father, through Christ. To stand in the presence of God meant to be accepted by him and to have the right to speak freely.

The prayer referred to at this point in the assembly was the corporate or common prayer. It was evidently a free prayer. Justin may give some idea of the typical content earlier in his *Apology:*

"We praise the Maker of the universe as much as we are able by the word of prayer and thanksgiving for all the things with which we are supplied. . . . Being thankful in word, we send up to him honors and hymns for our coming into existence, for all the means of health, for the various qualities of the different classes of things, and for the changes of the seasons, while making petitions for our coming into existence again in incorruption by reason of faith in him."

This summary statement accords with the general pattern that is found elsewhere: it begins with an address to God as Father and Creator, praises him for his mighty acts, moves from thanksgiving to petition, and closes with a doxology—all being done with reference to Christ.

"Bread is presented and wine and water."

The bread and wine may have been ordinary, but they had no ordinary significance to Christians. The two highlights of the eucharistic celebration for Justin were the consecration and the Communion.

According to Judaism, something was dedicated to a proper purpose "by the Word of God and prayer." The president's thanksgiving, Justin notes earlier, made the bread and mixed wine no longer "common bread and common drink."

We need not debate the exact import of Justin's words connecting the bread and wine with the body and blood of Jesus. It is sufficient to note that, according to Justin, by the Word of God (Jesus) and by prayer (of thanksgiving) the bread and wine were now set apart, consecrated, given a new significance.

When Justin mentions "wine and water," I believe he's loosely referring to the practice of mixing wine and water. The common table beverage of the ancient world was wine diluted with water. Justin thus counters wild pagan stories about the Christian meal by saying that Christians ate ordinary bread and drank the common table beverage (not something more intoxicating).

"The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings."

Earlier Justin specifically called the food *Eucharist*. The word means "thanksgiving" and points to the most important feature of second-century Communion: it was a thank offering. Although the New Testament usually calls it "the breaking of bread," second-century Christian writers adopted the name *Eucharist*.

Throughout his writings, Justin makes much of thanksgiving. This was the Christian sacrifice. Unlike the bloody offerings of paganism, Christians offered to God the pure spiritual sacrifice of prayer and thanksgivings. A quote from the Gnostic writer Ptolemy probably expresses Justin's thoughts on this: "The Savior commanded us to offer oblations, but not those of irrational animals or incense, but of spiritual praises, gloryings, and thanksgiving, and of fellowship and doing good to our neighbors."

The president made this prayer "according to his ability." The idea seems to be that human thanksgiving is inadequate to the greatness of God's goodness, but all, insofar as they are able, try to express their gratitude.

In Justin's day the prayer was extemporaneous. But we can't rule out the presence of some formulae recurring frequently. For example, elsewhere in Justin's writings we read that the president "sends up praise and glory to the Father of all through the name of his Son and of the Holy Spirit and makes thanksgiving at length for the gifts we were counted worthy to receive from him" and "We thank God for having created the world with all things in it on behalf of man, and for having delivered us from the evil in which we were and completely overthrowing the principalities and powers by the one who suffered according to his will."

The main theme, therefore, was praise and thanksgiving to God for his gifts, and these included both Creation and Redemption, but especially Redemption.

"The people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' "

The word *amen* is Hebrew and is explained earlier by Justin as meaning "may it be so." The congregational *amen* at the conclusion of prayer or in response to a doxology was taken over from the synagogue in the earliest days of the church. By the *amen*, the congregation confirmed what had been said, and so made the prayer pronounced by one person the joint prayer of the whole people.

Justin seems to have been much impressed with this element of congregational participation. He describes its rendition with a word that has a double meaning: to make acclamation, or to sing. I have tried to bring out both meanings in the translation "sing out their assent." We should think of a chant-like, unison acclamation. It was shouted out, not mumbled.

"A distribution and participation of the elements . . . is made to each person."

The elements consecrated by prayer were then distributed by the deacons for the communion of the members. Each person received both the bread and mixed wine.

One was either in communion, or one was not. Sharing the bread and wine expressed the fellowship of the believing community. The deacons even carried the consecrated elements to those who were sick and unable to be present physically, preserving a sense of corporate fellowship among those confined to their homes or beds.

Justin mentions earlier (in describing a baptismal Eucharist) that following the common prayers, and before bread and wine were brought forward, "we salute one another with a kiss." The "holy kiss" or "kiss of love" was particularly appropriate in a baptismal context, but it may have been employed at other observances of the Eucharist. It was an expression of brotherly love; it welcomed the newly baptized into the family of God. Justin had emphasized that "it is not lawful for any other one to partake" of the Eucharist than one in the full fellowship of the church.

Did They Sing Hymns?

Why doesn't Justin say they did?

Although Justin does not mention hymns in his account, other sources provide ample reason to assume their presence at this time.

In the ancient world, the normal way to praise a deity was through melodic words or chant. Hymns, therefore, may have been present under Justin's descriptions of Scripture reading or prayer.

In favor of including hymns with Justin's mention of Scripture reading would be the later practice of interspersing psalms among the different Scripture readings—and the fact that most of early Christian singing was of the psalms or psalm-like compositions.

In favor of subsuming hymns under prayer would be the consideration that they had in common the elements of praise and address to God. The prayers of the synagogue (and the synagogue service was a model for early Christian worship) were recited in a chant, and Christians may have followed this practice. So the distinction we make between prayer (prose) and hymn (poetry or song) would not have been evident in Justin's time.

—*Everett Ferguson*

Wikimedia/Dnalor 01 [CC BY-SA 3.0]

THE CATACOMBS: Christians did not live in these famous cemeteries to avoid persecution. But they did gather here to honor martyrs and to worship. The crypt shown, from the Catacomb of Callistus, holds some early popes (bishops of Rome). In A.D. 258, one pope, Sixtus II, was arrested while leading a worship service in the catacombs, and beheaded.

The exchange of the kiss was the sign of being in that fellowship.

"Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills."

Although other sources describe offerings of produce, Justin describes a contribution of money. He emphasizes the voluntary nature of the gifts. The money deposited with the president was not an assessment. The congregational contribution, therefore, was unlike the "dues" of the clubs and private associations that were so common in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. It was a freewill gift.

The persons who benefited from the almsgiving—orphans, widows, sick, prisoners, and strangers—are often mentioned in Christian texts.

Balanced fundamentals

These activities of Sunday assembly in Justin's day have remained through the ages:

- the Word of God (both read and preached)
- corporate prayer (including the psalms)
- Communion of the bread and wine
- offering of one's possessions.

Justin describes a liturgy, then, in which there are two balanced pairs of activity. In the service of the Word, God speaks to human beings. In prayer, human beings speak to God. The Word of God to us calls forth the response of our words to him.

In the second pair, the Eucharist represents God's gift to us—spiritual life through Christ. The offering or contribution represents the gifts of his people to God. God gives, and we give in return.

The modern liturgical movement has said much about "primitive wholeness." That describes Justin's account. It is commonly said that in the medieval church the Mass was emphasized at the expense of other activities of worship, and that in the Reformation, preaching was highlighted at the expense of the rest of worship.

The worship described by Justin calls us back to fundamentals. □

Justin Martyr was a philosopher and defender of Christianity who was martyred in Rome in about 165. He was the author of First Apology, Second Apology, *and* Dialogue with Trypho the Jew.

Dr. Everett Ferguson is professor of Bible at Abilene Christian University and editor of Encyclopedia of Early Christianity *(Garland, 1990).*

FreeImages.com/Tim Rogers

WORSHIPING LIKE PAGANS?

How much did Christians borrow from Greek and Roman religions?

E. GLENN HINSON

"The Devil, whose business it is to pervert the truth, mimics the exact circumstances of the Divine Sacraments in the Mysteries of Mithras. He himself baptizes some, that is to say, his believers and followers; he promises forgiveness of sins from the Sacred Fount and thereby initiates them into the religion of Mithras; . . . he brings in the symbol of the Resurrection, and wins the crown with the sword."
—TERTULLIAN (early third century)

This is just one bit of tantalizing evidence that has led some scholars to suggest early Christians borrowed worship practices from the religions of Greece and Rome, particularly the mystery religions (see "Inside Pagan Worship" on page 18).

CHRISTIAN HISTORY asked Dr. E. Glenn Hinson, professor of church history at The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia, to explore how much early Christians worshiped like their pagan neighbors.

Some scholars have claimed the apostle Paul was essentially a devotee of Greek mystery religions, that we cannot understand the New Testament without understanding the language of the mystery religions. Hardly anyone would now agree.

Still, most scholars recognize that over several centuries Christianity did not escape the effects of Greek and Roman culture. The question is, to what extent did the

culture's religions shape the lives and customs of Christians?

To answer that question, we must divide early Christian attitudes by historical periods.

Hesitant adaptations

The church experienced little Greek and Roman influence in its earliest years. In the age of the apostles, up to about A.D. 70, the predominance of Jewish Christians in the churches assured the influence of Judaism. Because Judaism was diverse, we find variety in worship across the vast reaches of the Roman Empire. The New Testament gives evidence of at least four styles of Christian worship: temple worship (Acts 2:46), synagogue worship (Acts 16:13, 16), a fellowship meal concluded by the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11), and a charismatic type of service with emphasis on prophecy (1 Cor. 14). None of these approaches to worship significantly reflects Greco-Roman customs.

From the late first century on, though, Gentiles came to outnumber Jews in the Christian assembly. They imported in subtle ways some of the ideas, attitudes, and customs of Greek and Roman culture. And to make Christianity attractive to Gentile hearers, Christian missionaries adopted their language and even their ideas.

When Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165) wrote his *Apology*, for instance, he spoke of baptism as "illumination," a word packed with meaning for Greek and Roman intellectuals. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–c. 107) characterized the Lord's Supper as "the medicine of immortality." Other apologists (defenders of Christianity) called the Supper "the unbloody sacrifice."

These early evangelists, though, chose their words cautiously. Justin took great pains to qualify what he said about baptism, the Eucharist, and even the word *Sunday*. Like other Christians, he still preferred "Lord's Day" and went out of his way to note that Christians worshiped "on the day which is *called* Sunday" (by non-Christians).

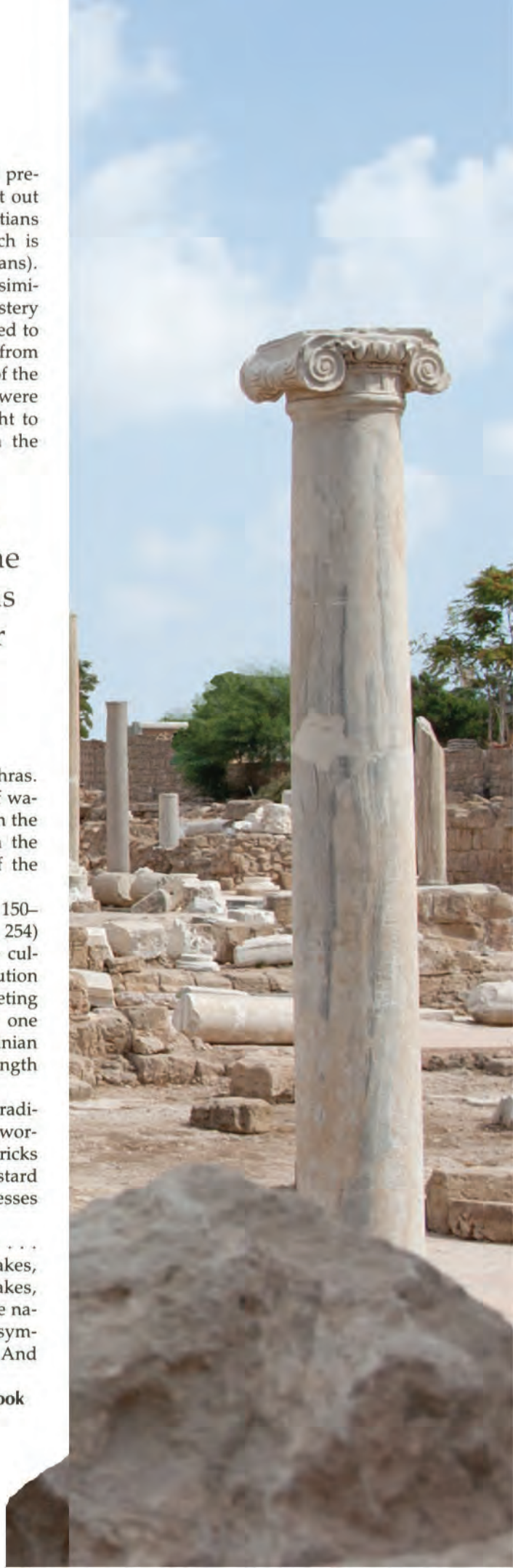
The apologists realized the similarities of Christianity to mystery religions, so they felt compelled to differentiate true custom from false. To Justin, the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup were things "evil spirits have taught to be done, out of memory, in the mysteries of initiations of Mithras. For in these likewise, a cup of water, and bread, are set out with the addition of certain words, in the sacrifice or act of worship of the person about to be initiated."

> The pomp and circumstance of the imperial court was adapted to honor the Emperor of emperors.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) and Origen (c. 185–c. 254) drew more daringly from the culture, but they exercised caution when they spoke about competing cults. Although probably at one time an initiate into the Eleusinian mysteries, Clement wrote at length on their vileness:

"The mysteries are simply tradition and idle invention; it is worshiping one of the devil's tricks when people honor with bastard religiosity these unholy holinesses and impious initiations.

"Think of the mystic chests. . . . What is in them but sesame cakes, triangular cakes, round cakes, cakes shaped with hollows like navels, balls of salt, and a snake, symbols of Dionysus Bassareus? And



Ruins of an ancient basilica on Cyprus—Pixabay

Above Left: Dionysus, The God Of Wine. Celebrations for Dionysus took place mostly in homes and included a common meal with wine.

Inside Pagan Worship

In the Roman mind, heaven was populated by dozens of deities

A Priest, flanked by two assistants (one a woman, the other an African) holds up a vase to be venerated by pagan worshipers.

Wikipedia

Ancient Roman religion was much less like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all of which teach that there is only one God—than it was like Hinduism or Shintoism, featuring a pantheon of many gods with different roles and duties.

There were gods of the household, the *lases* or *lares*, to which a portion of the family food would be offered. There were gods of forests and fields, *silvani*, and there were city deities, *penates*. At the highest level were national gods, whose names and attributes remain somewhat familiar to us today: Mars, Janus, Jupiter, Venus, Vulcan, and others.

These many gods offered cohesiveness at various levels of society, from the immediate family in the case of household gods, to the whole empire in the case of Jupiter and Mars. The latter embodied the "martial" spirit that characterized Rome—the word derives from the god's name.

The cult of the emperor was a strategy to strengthen unity throughout the state. This unity came through shared veneration of dead—and sometimes of living—emperors. To refuse participation in acts of veneration was viewed as unpatriotic and brought many noncompliant Christians into confrontation with Roman authorities.

However, multitudes of individuals found the traditional and imperial deities unsatisfactory. Such deities did not meet deep human needs: healing, protection from demons, forgiveness of sin, hunger for personal meaning, desire for immortality, and the need for identification with a superior being. Mystery religions promised to fill these wistful longings. And so cults of Isis, Mithrais, Cybele, Dionysius, and more entered the empire.

Participation in a mystery cult usually involved initiation ceremonies, secret knowledge, symbolic gestures (such as changing clothes), cleansing rites (sometimes with blood), re-enactment of myths associated with the diety, and ritual meals. All this was supposed to bring worshippers closer to their chosen god. But the fact that mystery religions could not deliver on their promises is suggested by the frequent migration of participants from one cult to another.

Christianity offered deeper satisfaction than any of its rivals. Like traditional Roman religion, Christianity unified people at various levels, but without the need to placate a diversity of deities. One God was equally valid for home and for field, for city and for nation, for slave, for husband and wife, for farmer, for soldier, for ruler.

Like the emperor cult, Christianity offered a God-man for veneration, but a God-man who actually linked heaven to earth and had power to help his followers, however remote they were from centers of power. And like the mystery cults, Christianity promised to satisfy the deepest longings of individuals—and actually did. —*The Editors*, 2017

Curious mystery religions

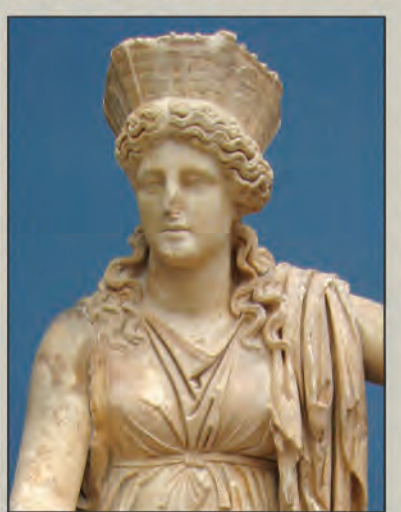
Here, from other sources, are ancient accounts of practices in the mystery religions (though not all rites were this dramatic).

Bathing in bull's blood—*This rite was usually offered to expiate sins and grant rebirth for a period of 20 years. It was used in the cults*

of Cybele, the Great Mother, and less frequently, Mithras. This somewhat sarcastic account is from the second century.

As you know, a trench is dug, and the high priest plunges deep underground to be sanctified. He wears a curious headband, fastens fillets [ribbons] for the occasion around his temples, fixes his hair with a crown of gold, holds up his robes of silk with a belt from Gabii.

Over his head they lay a plank platform criss-cross, fixed so that the wood is open, not solid; then they cut or bore through the floor



Goddess Cybele's festival included cries of grief, recalling her losing Attis, her mythical lover.

Cybele—ChrisO / Wikimedia [CC BY-SA 3.0]

and make holes in the wood with an awl at several points till it is plentifully perforated with small openings.

A large bull, with grim, shaggy features and garlands of flowers round his neck or entangling his horns, is escorted to the spot. They consecrate a spear and with it pierce his breast. A gaping wound disgorges a stream of blood, still hot, and pours a steaming flood on the lattice of the bridge below, flowing copiously. Then the shower drops through the numerous paths offered by the thousand cracks, raining a ghastly dew.

The priest in the pit below catches the drops, puts his head underneath each one till it is stained, till his clothes and all his body are soaked in corruption. Yes, and he lays his head back, puts his cheeks in the stream, sets his ears underneath, gets lips and nose in the way, bathes his very eyes in the drops, does not spare his mouth, wets his tongue till he drains deep the blood with every pore. When the blood is exhausted the priests drag away the carcass, now growing stiff, from the structure of planks.

Then the high priest emerges, a grim spectacle. He displays his dripping head, his congealed beard, his sopping ornaments, his clothes inebriated. He bears all the stains of this polluting rite, filthy with the gore of the atoning victim just offered—and everyone stands to one side, welcomes him, honors him, just because he has been buried in a beastly pit and washed with the wretched blood of a dead ox.

Sacred guidelines—*Some prescriptions of the mystery cult of Dionysus, also second century A.D.:*

All you who enter the precinct and shrines of Bromios, abstain for forty days after exposing a young child [to die], for fear of divine wrath: the same number of days for a woman's miscarriage. Do not approach the altars of our Lord in black clothes. Do not begin the sacred feast until the dishes have been blessed. Do not serve an egg at the sacred meal in the mysteries of Bacchus. Refrain from burning the heart on the holy altar. Abstain from mint . . . and the abominable root of beans.

Praying to the sun—*A prayer from an undetermined mystery religion:*

O Lord, hail, great in power, king great in sovereignty, greatest of gods, Helios [Sun], Lord of heaven and earth, god of gods, mighty is thy breath, mighty is thy power. □

Text from *Greek and Roman Religion: A Source Book* by John Ferguson (Noyes Press, 1980). Excerpted by permission.

pomegranates besides, and boughs of fig, and fennel, and ivy, yes, and biscuits and poppies. These are their holy things!

"And what of the symbols of Ge Themis, which no one is supposed to reveal—marjoram, a lamp, a sword, a woman's 'comb' [a religious euphemism for a woman's sex organ]. It's downright shamelessness!"

Neither Clement nor Origen, moreover, ever abandon Paul's original understanding of the term "mystery." They always tie it to God's saving plan in Christ, not to one of the stories of the gods.

The age of change

When Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, around 312, Christians found themselves in a radically different position in their culture. After 324, Constantine aggressively bolstered the churches and later tried to expunge paganism. His benefactions to the churches assured and inspired freer borrowing from the culture than the age of persecution ever allowed. Although Christians hesitated for a time, they soon zealously melded Christianity and Roman culture.

Buildings for worship gave evidence of the change almost immediately; Constantine and his mother, Helena, erected churches all over the Roman Empire. Christians moved circumspectly, though, opting to follow the model of the common public building, the basilica, rather than the Greek and Roman temples. In time, however, they used materials stripped from such buildings and even built on top of temple precincts.

These grand edifices brought significant changes in worship. The basic framework (inherited from Judaism and early Christianity) remained, but the liturgy became more dramatic. As the emperor became the number-one layperson in the church, a simple ceremony no longer sufficed. The pomp and circumstance of the imperial court

was adapted to honor the Emperor of emperors. Processionals, lights, special dress, and numerous other elements added to the grand setting. The living joined the vast company of saints, angels, and heavenly hosts in the glorious praise of God.

As the churches borrowed more freely from Roman culture, though, they also resorted frequently to their biblical roots to evaluate what they did. Christian paintings of the fourth century, for instance, frequently depict Jesus gathered with the Twelve to read from an Old Testament scroll. In this same period, droves of Christians trekked to the Holy Land.

Still, by the end of the fourth century, Christianity had achieved a dominant position in the empire, and Christians felt they could borrow cultural language and ideas more freely than before.

Editing time

Vast numbers of people came into the church after the conversion of Constantine. This influx could have virtually obliterated the churches' biblical foundation had they not found a way to instruct neophytes. The catechumenate—the process to teach new believers the essentials of the faith—served in part to reshape the thought and behavior of the masses.

Overwhelmed by numbers, however, the churches soon shortened the formation period from three years to the forty days of Lent. At that point, the Sunday liturgy and the Christian calendar had to bear a heavier load for instructing the newly converted.

Not surprisingly, the calendar underwent extensive elaboration. Like their forebears in ancient Israel, the early Christians observed special days and seasons, adapting such from Judaism and then Greek and Roman culture.

For instance, in order to commemorate the "Lord's Day," the day on which Jesus was raised from the dead, the first Christians, converts from Judaism, gathered on Saturday night after 6:00 P.M. By the early second century, however, Gentile converts met before daybreak on Sunday. Throughout the period up to Constantine, Christians observed the first day of the week as a day of worship.

Dancing For Dionysus. Women sometimes honored the god with orgiastic winter feasts in forests.

New York Public Library

With the conversion of Constantine, however, came new possibilities of adjusting the calendar to Christian ends. In 321 Emperor Constantine decreed that Sunday would be a day of rest, a legal holiday. Some scholars suggest he intended to honor the god *Sol Invictus Mithras* (Mithras, the Unconquered Sun). Indeed, he described the first day of the week as the day of the sun, but regard for the Christian Lord's Day motivated the ruling.

What Constantine did about Christmas further suggests he had Christianity in mind. Early Christians, of course, had no information that would help them calculate the date of Christ's birth. The earliest evidence for the observance of December 25 as the birthday of Christ appears in the Philocalian Calendar, composed at Rome in 336. For many years this date was observed only in the West; the eastern churches observed January 6, Epiphany. Curiously, pagan holidays lay behind both of these dates. December 25 was the *Natalis Soli Invicti*, the birthday of the Unconquered Sun. January 6 was the feast of Dionysus. It seems likely that Constantine, trying to unite the worship of the Sun with that of Christ, pushed, if he did not concoct, the observance of Christmas. At about the same time, the mosaic of Christ as the Unconquered Sun appeared, later found in the excavations under St. Peter's in Rome.

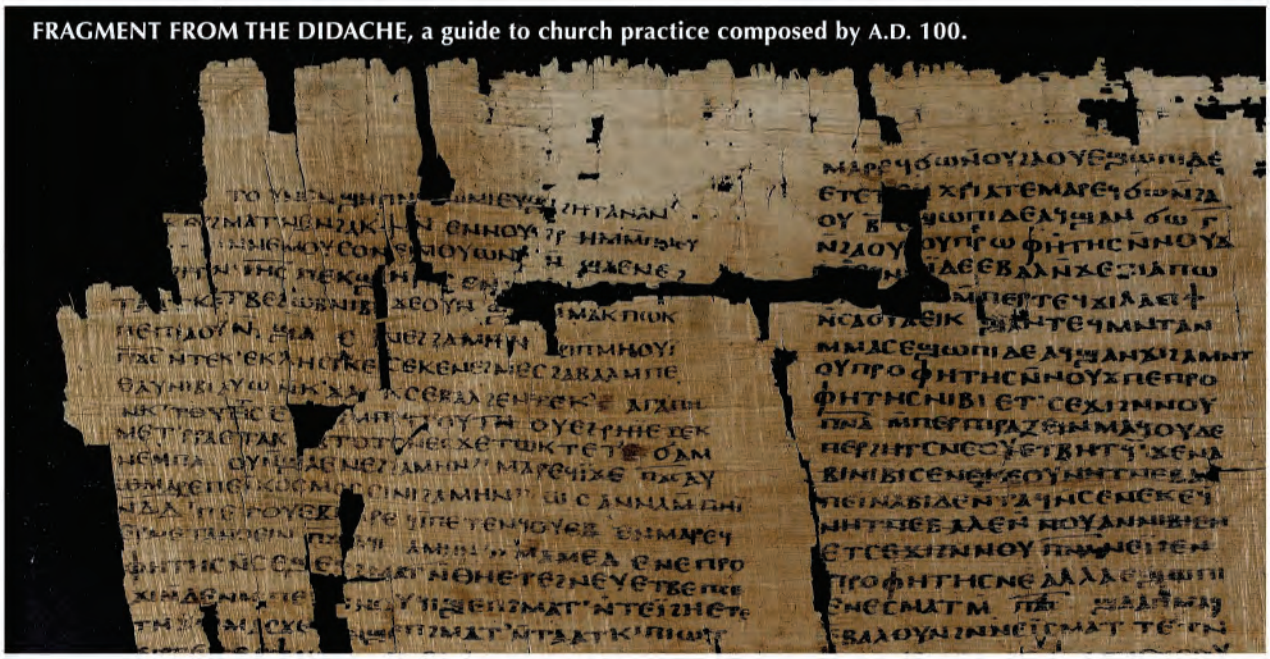
Cultural exchange

Scholars will never reach consensus on the extent of the exchange between Christian worship and the Greco-Roman culture.

Some historians say that borrowing from Roman culture radically transformed early Christianity. However, A. D. Nock, in *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background*, concluded that borrowing was done as "a matter of diplomatic and pedagogic technique." Nock was convinced these adaptations "owed nothing essential to pagan ritual." What surprised him, in fact, was that the pagan mysteries had "so little" impact on Christian ritual.

Modern studies affirm that early Christianity's adaptation to its culture was essential to its success. Adaptation was a risky business—the early Christians had no flawless guidelines, just as we have none today. But like the apostle Paul, they sought to be all things to all people, that Christianity might become the religion of as many as possible. □

Dr. E. Glenn Hinson is professor of church history at The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Virginia). He is author of The Evangelization of the Roman Empire: Identity and Adaptability *(Mercer, 1981).*



FRAGMENT FROM THE DIDACHE, a guide to church practice composed by A.D. 100.

Or. 9271 Fragment from the 'Didache' (papyrus), Coptic / British Library, London, UK / Bridgeman Images

EARLY GLIMPSES

Historical documents describing Christians at worship

Selected by
DAVID F. WRIGHT

A Roman official's report

Around A.D. 112, Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia (a province in northwest Turkey), wrote to the emperor Trajan in Rome. Pliny needed guidance on the persecution of Christians, and he reported what his investigations had disclosed.

[The Christians] maintained that the amount of their fault or error had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, their custom was to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food.

—*Letter X:96:7*

A manual for churches

The Didache *(Greek for teaching) is our earliest example of a "church order." It sets out how congregations should baptize, fast, pray, receive visiting prophets, and the like. The* Didache *probably reached its present form before the end of the first century A.D., but it certainly contains earlier material.*

Interpretations of the first account below differ widely. Does it describe the Lord's Supper — since it makes no mention of the Last Supper or the cross? Is it the agape, *the early Christians' love feast or church supper? Or the Lord's Supper combined with the agape?*

Concerning the Eucharist [or thanksgiving], give thanks thus, first concerning the cup:

We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of your servant David, which you made known to us through your servant Jesus. Glory be to you forever.

And concerning the broken bread:

We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through your servant Jesus. Glory be to you for ever. As this broken bread was scattered over the hills and was brought together and became one, so may your church be brought together from the ends of your earth into your kingdom, for yours is the glory and power through Jesus Christ forever.

No one is to eat or drink of your Eucharist but those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord. On this the Lord said, "Do not give what is holy to dogs."

After you have eaten your fill, give thanks thus:

We thank you, holy Father, for your holy name which you have

given to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you made known to us through your servant Jesus. Glory be to you forever.

You, Almighty Sovereign, have created everything for your name's sake, you have given food and drink to men and women for their enjoyment that they might give you thanks, but on us you have bestowed spiritual food and drink and eternal life through your servant. Above all else we thank you that you are mighty. Glory be to you forever.

Remember, Lord, your church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in your love, and bring it together from the four winds, sanctified for your kingdom, which you have prepared for it. Yours is the power and glory forever.

May grace come, and may this world pass away.

Hosanna to the God of David.

Whoever is holy, let him come; whoever is not, let him repent.

Maranatha [Our Lord, come!]. Amen.

But allow prophets to give thanks as much as they please.

—Didache 9–10

On the Lord's own day come together and break bread and give thanks, after first confessing your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure.

Let no one who has a dispute with a fellow Christian assemble with you until they are reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be defiled. For this is the sacrifice spoken of by the Lord: " 'In every place and at all times offer me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great King,' says the Lord, 'and my name is the wonder of the nations.' " *—Didache 14*

Charismatic visions

Tertullian was a powerful thinker and writer of the early third century in Carthage (near Tunis today). At some point, Tertullian embraced the Montanist movement, a prophetic movement that made special claims about the Holy Spirit. In this selection, from The Soul, *Tertullian gives a rare glimpse of charismatic experience in worship.*

Since we acknowledge spiritual *charismata*, or gifts, we too have merited the attainment of the prophetic gift, although coming after John [the Baptist]. We have now among us a sister whose lot it has been to be favored with sundry gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision during the sacred rites of the Lord's day in the church: she converses with angels, and sometimes even with the Lord; she both sees and hears mysterious signs; some hearts she understands; and to those in need she distributes remedies.

Whether in the reading of the Scriptures, or in the chanting of psalms, or in the preaching of sermons, or in the offering up of prayers, in all these religious services matter and opportunity are afforded her of seeing visions. . . . After the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services, she is in the regular habit of reporting to us whatever she may have seen in vision (for all her communications are examined with the most scrupulous care, in order that their truth may be probed).

"Among other things," says she, "there has been shown to me a soul in bodily shape, and a spirit has been in the habit of appearing to me; not, however, a void and empty illusion, but such as would offer itself to be grasped by the hand, soft and transparent and of an ethereal color, and in form resembling that of a human being in every respect." This was her vision, and for her witness there was God; and the apostle most assuredly foretold that there were to be spiritual gifts in the church.

We have now among us a sister [who] converses with angels, and sometimes even with the Lord; she both sees and hears mysterious signs.

A church service from Rome

Hippolytus, who died as a martyr around A.D. *236, was a prominent but controversial figure in the church at Rome. His* Apostolic Tradition, *written c. 215, is a church order, much more developed than the* Didache. *The* Apostolic Tradition's *directions for the Eucharist are interspersed with services of ordination and baptism.*

And when he has been made bishop, all shall offer the kiss of peace, greeting him because he has been made worthy. Then the deacons shall present the offering to him; and he, laying his hands on it with all the presbytery, shall give thanks, saying:
The Lord be with you.

And all shall say: And with your spirit.
Up with your hearts.

We have them with the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord.

It is fitting and right.

And then he shall continue thus: We render thanks to you, O God, through your beloved child Jesus Christ, whom in the last times you sent to us as savior and redeemer and angel of your will; who is your inseparable Word, through whom you made all things, and in whom you were well pleased.

You sent him from heaven into the Virgin's womb; and conceived in the womb, he was made flesh and was manifested as your Son, being born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin. Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people, he stretched out his hands when he should suffer, that he might release from suffering those who have believed in you.

And when he was betrayed to voluntary suffering that he might destroy death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread down hell, and shine upon the righteous, and fix a term, and manifest the resurrection, he took bread and gave thanks to you saying, "Take, eat; this is my body, which shall be broken for you." Likewise also the cup, saying, "This is my blood, which is shed for you; when you do this, you make my remembrance."

He was betrayed to suffering that he might break the bonds of the devil, and tread down hell, and shine upon the righteous.

Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you. And we ask that you would send your Holy Spirit upon the offering of your holy church; that gathering them into one, you would grant to all who partake of the holy things (to partake) for the fullness of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of faith in truth; and that we may praise and glorify you through your child Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and honor to you, with the Holy Spirit, in your holy church, both now and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Then the offering shall be presented by the deacons to the bishop; and he shall give thanks over the bread for the representation, which the Greeks call "antitype," of the body of Christ; and over the cup mixed with wine for the antitype, which the Greeks call "likeness," of the blood which was shed for all who have believed in him; and over milk and honey mixed together in fulfillment of the promise which was made to the fathers, in which he said, "A land flowing with milk and honey. . . ."

And when he breaks the bread, in distributing fragments to each, he shall say: The bread of heaven in Christ Jesus.

And he who receives shall answer: Amen.

And if there are not enough presbyters, the deacons also shall hold the cups, and stand by in good order and reverence: first, he who holds the water; second, the milk; third, the wine. And they who receive shall taste of each thrice, he who gives it

saying: In God the Father Almighty. And he who receives shall say: Amen.

And in the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

And in the Holy Spirit and the holy Church. And he shall say: Amen:

So shall it be done with each one.

When these things have been done, each one shall hasten to do good works and to please God and to conduct himself rightly, being zealous for the church, doing what he has learned and advancing in piety.

A weekday service

Hippolytus also gives instructions for a weekday morning service.

Let every faithful man and woman, when they have risen from sleep in the morning, before they touch any work at all, wash their hands and pray to God, and so go to their work. But if instruction in the Word of God is given, each one should choose to go to that place, reckoning in his heart that it is God whom he hears in the instructor.

For he who prays in the church will be able to pass by the wickedness of the day. He who is pious should think it a great evil if he does not go to the place where instruction is given and especially if he can read, or if a teacher comes.

Let none of you be late in the church, the place where teaching is given. Then it shall be given to the speaker to say what is useful to each one; you will hear things which you do not think of, and profit from things which the Holy Spirit will give you through the instructor. In this way your faith will be strengthened about the things you will have heard. You will also be told in that place what you ought to do at home. Therefore let each one be diligent in coming to the church, the place where the Holy Spirit flourishes. If there is a day when there is no instruction, let each one, when he is at home, take up a holy book and read in it sufficiently what seems to him to bring profit. —*4–6, 21–22, 41*

Some may be nervous in our morning sacrifices, lest by tasting wine their breath may smell of the blood of Christ.

Commands for Communion

Cyprian, a prominent bishop of Carthage (near modern Tunis), wrote this stern warning to a fellow bishop c. 255.

In offering the cup, the tradition of the Lord must be observed, and we must do nothing but what the Lord first did on our behalf: the cup which is offered in remembrance of him must be offered mixed with wine.

Since Christ says, "I am the true vine," the blood of Christ is assuredly not water but wine. Nor can his blood, by which we are redeemed and quickened, appear to be in the cup when in the cup there is no wine to signify the blood of Christ, as is declared by the sacrament and testimony of all the Scriptures. [Cyprian cites several Old Testament testimonies in which wine, grapes, or the vine foreshadow the cup.]

Hence it is evident that the blood of Christ is not offered if there is no wine in the cup, nor is the Lord's sacrifice celebrated with a proper consecration unless our offering and sacrifice correspond to his passion. . . .

Some may be nervous in our morning sacrifices, lest by tasting wine their breath may smell of the blood of Christ. This is how the brethren are beginning to hold back even from sharing Christ's passion in persecution, by learning in the offerings to be embarrassed at his blood and bloodshedding. . . . How can we shed our blood for Christ if we blush for shame to drink Christ's own blood?

—*Letter 63:2, 13, 15*

Instructions in the mysteries

Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, delivered a series of addresses to candidates for baptism, in the Church of

the Holy Sepulcher around A.D. *350. Attached to this series is a shorter set of addresses (by Cyril or his successor) titled* On the Mysteries. *These explain the Eucharist to the newly baptized. (The meaning of the Eucharist was deliberately concealed from the unbaptized.)*

You have seen the deacon give water for washing, to the priest, and to the presbyters standing around God's altar. . . . the washing of hands is a symbol that you ought to be pure from all sinful and unlawful actions. . . .

Then the deacon cries aloud: "Receive one another, and let us kiss one another." Do not suppose that this kiss ranks with those given publicly by common friends. It is not so; this kiss binds souls one to another, and solicits for them entire forgiveness. . . .

After this the priest cries aloud: "Lift up your hearts. . . ." The priest in effect bids all in that hour to abandon all worldly thoughts, or household cares, and to have their hearts in heaven with the merciful God. Then you answer: "We lift them up to the Lord. . . ."

Then the priest says: "Let us give thanks to the Lord." For assuredly we are bound to give thanks that he has called us, unworthy as we were, to so great grace. . . . Then you say: "It is fitting and right . . ."

After this we make mention of heaven and earth and sea, of sun and moon, of the stars and all creation, rational and irrational, visible and invisible, of angels, archangels, powers, dominions, principalities, authorities, and thrones, of the many-faced cherubim — in effect repeating David's call to "Magnify the Lord with me." We mention also the seraphim, whom Isaiah in the Holy Spirit saw encircling God's throne . . . who cried: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts." The reason why we rehearse this confession of God, delivered to us from the seraphim, is that we may join the hosts of the world above in their hymnody.

Then after sanctifying ourselves by these spiritual hymns, we call upon the merciful God to send forth his Holy Spirit upon the gifts lying before him, that he may make the bread the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ; for whatever the Holy Spirit has touched is surely sanctified and changed.

Then after the completion of the spiritual sacrifice, the bloodless service, over that sacrifice of propitiation, we call upon God for the common peace of the church, for the well-being of the world. . . . In a word, for all who stand in need of succor, we all pray and offer this sacrifice.

Then we commemorate also those who have fallen asleep before us, first, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs . . . believing that it will be a very great advantage to the souls for whom supplication is offered while that holy and most awesome sacrifice lies before us. . . .

Then, after these things, we say that prayer which the Saviour delivered to his disciples, with a pure conscience styling God "our Father," and saying: "Our Father who are in heaven. . . ." [There follows a clause-by-clause exposition of the Lord's Prayer.]

After this the priest says: "Holy things to holy people. . . ."

After this you hear the chanter inviting you with a sacred melody to communion in the holy mysteries, and saying: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Trust not the judgment of your bodily palate, but of faith unfaltering, for when we taste we are bidden to taste, not bread and wine, but the antitype of Christ's body and blood. . . . Then wait for the prayer, and give thanks to God who has accounted you worthy of such great mysteries.

—*Cathechesis 23:1–9, 11, 19–22* □

You hear the chanter inviting you with sacred melody to communion in the holy mysteries, and saying: "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

David F. Wright is dean of the faculty of divinity at the University of Edinburgh and a member of the editorial advisory board for Christian History.

WORSHIP IN THE

UP TO A.D. 50

c. 30 Distinctives of "Jesus People" in Jerusalem include daily temple worship, prayers, apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, baptism

c. 33 First "deacons" appointed in the church, later to become those who take Communion to the sick

c. 37 Christian worship spreads; a church established in Antioch

50–100

c. 55 Paul describes Lord's Supper and informal worship in *1 Corinthians* (ch. 11, 14)

c. 95 *Book of Revelation* written, a Christian prophecy given "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day"

c. 96 *1 Clement* (a letter from the church of Rome to the church of Corinth) echoes Communion prayers

c. 90–100 Jewish Christians virtually excluded from synagogue services

c. 100 (or earlier) *Didache*, earliest church service book, describes *agape* meal (and Communion?)

100–150

c. 100 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, in letters against the Docetists (those who say Christ only seemed human), stresses the "reality" of Christ's flesh and blood in the Eucharist

c. 100 Scandalous rumors begin that Christians in their worship practice cannibalism and incest

c. 112 Pliny, Roman governor in Bithynia, interrogates Christians about their meetings

c. 125 *2 Clement*, the earliest extant Christian sermon

150–200

150–180 Controversy over the proper day (Sunday or weekday?) to celebrate Easter (quartodeciman controversy)

c. 150–250 Development of "rule of faith," a loose summary of Christian belief, especially for use against gnostics

c. 155 Justin's *Apology* explains Christian worship to critics

c. 170 Melito, bishop of Sardis, writes sermon *On the Pascha*

c. 170 First evidence of Christians' venerating martyrs' remains and celebrating anniversaries of their deaths ("birthdays"); Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, martyred; memorials to Peter and Paul at Rome

Other Church & Empire Events

c. 30 Crucifixion of Jesus; Pentecost

35 Stephen martyred; Paul converted

c. 37 Temple of Divus Augustus for emperor worship consecrated

42 Apostle James beheaded

43 London founded by the Romans

46 Paul begins missionary journeys

48 Council of Jerusalem

49 Jews expelled from Rome (for disturbances with Christians?)

64 Nero persecutes Christians in Rome; Paul and Peter martyred

70 Temple at Jerusalem destroyed by Romans

79 Mt. Vesuvius erupts, destroying Pompeii

106 Rome conquers Dacia (Rumania); Empire reaches greatest size

110 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, martyred

118 Population of Rome exceeds 1 million

132–135 Second Jewish War led by Bar Kokhba

140–160 Heretic Marcion and gnostic teacher Valentinus active

Alexamenos Graffiti—*Wikipedia* • Apostles—*Christian History* archives • Constantine—Tony Lane • Cyprian, from Basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo—Wikimedia/Ruge [CC BY-SA 4.0] • Dura-Europus house church—Wikimedia/Heretiq [CC BY-SA 2.5] • Fish and Bread Mosaic, Tabcha— *Wikipedia*/Berthold Werner • Goths attack Rome—John Lord. *Beacon Lights of History*. (James Clarke, 1886) • Lyons arena—*Christian History* archives • Menorah—Wikimedia/Hanay [CC BY-SA 3.0] • Nero—*Wikipedia* • Peter and Paul—*Wikipedia*.

164 Fifteen-year plague breaks out

177 Severe persecution at Lyons

EARLY CHURCH

200–250

c. 172 Montanist movement (which emphasizes ecstatic prophecy, the end times, and strict discipline) begins

c. 180 Irenaeus of Lyons (writing against the gnostics in *Against All Heresies*) emphasizes goodness of gifts of creation, including bread and wine ▼

197 In Carthage, Tertullian's *Apology* explains conduct of Christian assemblies, and he writes the first exposition of Lord's Prayer

c. 200 Frescoes in Roman catacombs begin to depict agape/Eucharist (or heavenly banquet)

c. 200 Eastern church begins to celebrate Christ's nativity and baptism on January 6

c. 207 Tertullian describes Montanist-style visions received in worship

c. 215 Hippolytus of Rome writes *Apostolic Tradition*, a developed and influential set of guidelines for church practice

c. 232 Earliest surviving ▲ example of house converted for use in Christian worship, in Dura-Europos (in modern Iraq)

230–50 Origen's homilies form first collection of Christian preaching

c. 200–240 *Didascalia of the Apostles*, a "church order" from Syria that uses *Didache*

250–300

c. 255 Cyprian of Carthage insists that Communion cup contain wine (and water); he promotes priestly and sacrificial views of ministry and worship ▼

260 Emperor Gallienus restores church property confiscated in recent persecution

300–350

321 Roman Emperor ▲ Constantine makes the first day of week a holiday as "the day of the sun"

325 Council of Nicea, first general council of church, affirms deity of Christ, sets date for celebration of Easter, and gives norms on liturgy

336 First evidence (at Rome) of December 25 celebration of Christ's birth

c. 350? Addresses to newly baptized Christians in the Church of Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, by bishop(?) Cyril; Communion expounded in strongly "realist" language

---

c. 160–180 Ptolemy studies astronomy and geography; findings remain useful until 16th century

c. 212 Roman citizenship extended to every freeborn person

230 First Persian War

248 Goths attack Rome ▼

250–1 First empire-wide persecution of Christians, by emperor Decius

257 Emperor Valerian hounds clergy

258 Cyprian martyred

c. 260 About 6,000,000 Christians in the Empire

c. 270 Antony, monastic pioneer, takes up life of solitude in Egyptian desert

285 Roman empire divided East and West

303–4 Emperor Diocletian begins the Great Persecution

312 Constantine converts to Christianity; Donatist schism begins

313 "Edict" of Milan gives Christians full toleration

c. 318 Arian controversy begins

324 Constantine becomes sole ruler of Empire

330 Constantinople made capital of Roman Empire

The author, David F. Wright, is dean of the faculty of divinity at the University of Edinburgh and a member of the editorial advisory board for CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

WORDSMITHS OF WORSHIP

In their writings, these people preserved early church worship — and shaped Christian worship since

JAMES D. SMITH III

Andre Thevet, *Histoire des plus ilustres et scavans hommes de leurs siecles*, 1671.

JUSTIN MARTYR
(c. 100–165)
Defender of the worshiping community

Justin Martyr preserved the earliest full record of a Christian worship service, dating to the mid-second century.

Justin was born in the Roman city of Flavia Neapolis (ancient Shechem in Samaria). Raised by pagan parents, he sought to find life's meaning in the philosophies of his day. This brought a series of disappointments.

His first teacher was a Stoic who "knew nothing of God and did not even think knowledge of him to be necessary." There followed a Peripatetic (itinerant philosopher), who seemed most interested in his fees. Then came a Pythagorean, but his required course of music, astronomy, and geometry seemed far too slow. Finally, Platonism, though intellectually demanding, proved unfulfilling for Justin's hungry heart.

At last, about A.D. 130, after a conversation with an old man, his life was transformed: "A fire was suddenly kindled in my soul. I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable. That is how and why I became a philosopher. And I wish that everyone felt the same way that I do."

Justin continued to wear his philosopher's cloak, seeking to reconcile faith and reason. His teaching ministry took him first to Ephesus (c. 132), where he held a disputation with Trypho, a Jew. Later he moved to Rome, founded a Christian school, and wrote two bold *Apologies* addressed to Roman authorities. The first (c. 153), addressed to Emperor Antoninus Plus and sons, has gained the most attention and preserves detailed descriptions of early Christian worship.

What emerges is a writer who loved not only Christianity but also Christians. Justin saw believers baptized "so that we should not remain children of necessity and ignorance, but [become children] of free choice and knowledge." He took part in the communal prayers, the kiss of peace, the Eucharist, and distribution of resources to those in need. In worship he gathered with others to hear the memoirs of the apostles and writings of the prophets read, to hear the president's exhortation, and to stand in prayer.

In about 165, partly because of his defense of martyrs in his second *Apology*, Justin was pointedly denounced as a Christian. Refusing to recant and offer pagan sacrifice, Justin was scourged and beheaded. Having been born a pagan, he gave his life for this "true philosophy," Christianity, and would ever be known as Justin *Martyr*. □

Temple of Artemis, by simonjenkins' photos - Flickr [CC BY-SA 2.0]

THE PREACHER: The temple of Artemis at Sardis. Preacher Melito of Sardis would have known it.

Edwin Long: *Diana or Christ*—*Shepp's Library of History and Art*. Globe, 1905.

Perpetua (d. 203)

Martyr for Christ

Roman emperor Septimius Severus forbade conversions to Judaism and Christianity in 202. In North Africa, Vivia Perpetua, Felicitas, and several other catechumens [new converts to Christianity] were imprisoned and eventually sentenced to die in the arena at Carthage.

In the *Passion*, an account of the martyrdom of these women, the 22-year-old Perpetua, a well-educated wife and nursing mother, described her faith and her life in prison, concluding, "The dungeon became to me a palace."

Perpetua was a woman "privileged to converse with the Lord." She sought a vision to reveal whether her confinement would result in release or martyrdom, and she received the vivid message that it was the latter. Thereafter she gave up expectations for this life.

Her dungeon-bound days were marked by prayer meetings, a word of knowledge, several visions and Felicitas' giving birth to a baby girl after eight months of pregnancy (avoiding delay of the execution).

On the eve of martyrdom, the prisoners celebrated an "agape feast." Then, approaching the arena, Perpetua sang psalms, faced the beasts "in the Spirit" and in an ecstasy. She joined a companion whose bloody slaying was accompanied by the crowd's mocking baptismal chant, "Saved and washed, saved and washed."

Venerate the goddess Diana, a young woman is urged in this painting. Perpetua was about her age. She refused to "sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors" and was killed by a gladiator in the arena.

Most elements of early Christian worship are evident in this *Passion* of Perpetua and Felicitas. Moreover, such martyrs profoundly shaped the worship of the church for centuries to come (see page 31, "Praying to the 'Dead' "). Feasts were held in their honor; their relics were gathered for veneration; monuments were erected to them.

Despite speculation that Perpetua was a Montanist, the larger Christian family embraced her as a saint of surpassing grace. □

Melito of Sardis

(died c. 190)

Keeper of the Christian calendar

In the late second century, Bishop Polycrates of Ephesus wrote about "Melito the Eunuch" who "lived entirely in the Holy Spirit" and is among "the greatest luminaries who lie at rest in Asia and will rise again on the day of the Lord's coming." Melito traveled to Palestine to visit the Holy Places. Virtually nothing else is known of his life.

Melito's importance lies in the topic of his most popular work, *Homily on the Pasch*, and in his role in the controversy over the proper date on which to celebrate Easter.

In Melito's day, some Eastern churches (especially in Asia Minor) followed Jewish custom and celebrated Easter at the same time as Jewish Passover. This "Christian Passover" marked not only the Lord's resurrection but also his sufferings as the Passover Lamb.

Other churches (e.g., the Roman Christians under Victor) celebrated

Clement of Alexandria

(c. 150–c. 215)

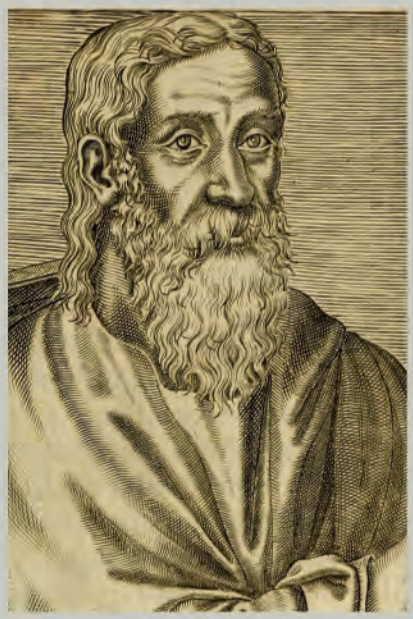
Teacher in song and symbol

Titus Flavius Clemens was born in the mid-second century, most likely to pagan parents in Athens. Well-educated and a convert to Christianity during his early adult years, Clement traveled widely in search of excellent teachers. This quest led him finally to Alexandria in Egypt, where he became a student of Pantaenus, first known master of the city's catechetical school (for Christian instruction).

In about 190, Clement succeeded his teacher and began to write, composing three major works: an *Exhortation to the Greeks*, the *Instructor* (who is Christ), and the *Miscellanies* of topical study. In each, the Christian faith engages classical culture.

In 202, persecution during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus compelled Clement to flee Alexandria. He settled in Cappadocia and by 215 had died.

At the peak of his Alexandrian ministry, however, Clement was the outstanding Christian teacher in a city of perhaps one million inhabitants. Moreover, as presbyter (not bishop), he helped shape the worship life of the Christian community.



Wikipedia

One of the earliest Christian hymns is that appended to Clement's *Instructor*, "Hymn of the Savior Christ." Its earliest rendering in English verse (in 1846) appears in many hymnals today as "Shepherd of Tender Youth." Three stanzas translated from the original Greek bring a vivid picture of the praise-life of the Alexandrian church:

Bridle-bit of untamed colts,
Wing of birds that do not go astray,
Sure Tiller of ships,
Shepherd of the King's lambs!

Gather your children
Who live in simplicity.
Let them sing in holiness.
Let them celebrate with sincerity,
With a mouth that knows no evil,
The Christ who guides his children!

O King of the saints,
O sovereign Word
Of the Most High Father,
Prince of wisdom,
Support of toiling men,
Eternal Joy of the human family,
O Jesus, Savior . . .

Clement also advocated the visual arts in worship. Many early Christians were reluctant to do paintings or drawings, fearing attention to their work might constitute idolatry. Clement faced the issue head on and concluded that Christians are not to depict pagan gods (we're not idolaters), nor sword or bow (we're peaceful), nor wine cups (we're temperate), nor reminders of sexual immorality. But Christians could "let our emblem be a dove, or a fish, or a ship running before the wind, or a musician's lyre, or a ship's anchor. And if there be a fisherman, he will remind us of an apostle, and little children being drawn up out of the water." □

Easter on the *Sunday* after Passover, marking the vital importance of the resurrection, which occurred on the first day of the week.

As bishop of Sardis, Melito defended the former position, termed *quartodeciman* (meaning "fourteenth"). He believed it dated from the apostle John's stay in Ephesus. Ultimately, however, the Easter Sunday position triumphed. The Council of Nicea (in 325) rejected quartodeciman practice.

This decision, along with decisions to commemorate Christmas, Epiphany, and Pentecost, as well as days for martyrs, shows the increasing importance of the Christian calendar, a means for Christians to mark sacred time.

Melito's *Homily on the Pasch* not only shows some of these developments, it is one of the most beautiful meditations ever written on the work of Christ. The word *Pasch* evoked for early Christians a number of themes: the Jewish Passover, the Passover meal, the lamb sacrificed and eaten at Passover, Holy Week, and Easter — sometimes all at once. In this sermon, the rhythmic prose declares this mystery:

The mystery of the Pasch
is new and old,
eternal and temporal,
corruptible and incorruptible,
mortal and immortal . . .

Born as Son,
led like a lamb,
sacrificed like a sheep,
buried as a man,
he rises from the dead as God,
being by nature both God and man.

He is all things:
when he judges, he is law,
when he teaches, word,
when he saves, grace,
when he begets, father,
when he is begotten, son,
when he suffers, lamb,
when he is buried, man,
when he arises, God.

Such is Jesus Christ!
To him be glory forever! Amen. □

Hippolytus of Rome

(c. 170–c. 236)

Preserver of sacred tradition

Hippolytus was the first "anti-pope" (schismatic bishop of Rome), yet he is venerated by the Roman Catholic church as a martyr and saint.

Little is known of his early life. Some have maintained that his familiarity with Greek philosophy and Eastern mystery cults suggests early ties with the East.

In the early third century, Hippolytus became a presbyter in the church of Rome under Bishop Zephyrinus. When Origen visited the city in 212, he gladly heard Hippolytus's vigorous preaching. Disputes over doctrine and church discipline turned Hippolytus against the bishop and his fellow presbyter Callistus.

When Callistus became bishop in 217, Hippolytus left the church and (probably) was elected bishop of Rome by his influential supporters. This schism persisted until 235, when Roman authorities found both pope (now Pontian) and anti-pope (Hippolytus) guilty of preaching the gospel. They were sent to the extermination mines of Sardinia. This led each of them to abdicate his episcopate and re-establish fellowship. Both became martyrs on "death island."

The new bishop of Rome, Fabian, had the bodies of both brought back to Rome, with funerals celebrated on the same day, August 13. A list with similarities to Hippolytus's writings, and Easter tables, were found on an ancient statue unearthed in Rome in 1551.

Hippolytus was the most significant theologian in Rome during the third century, producing books, commentaries, and topical treatises. The work that has drawn the most interest in this century, however, is his *Apostolic Tradition*. This systematic manual of church life and practice, written in about 215, opens a window to the Roman church. Liturgies for holy orders, baptism, the Eucharist, and various Christian observances are given.

Hippolytus gives several lengthy prayers but adds, "It is not necessary for anyone to recite the exact words that we have prescribed . . . but let each one pray according to his ability. If, indeed, he is able to pray competently with an elevated prayer, it is well. But even if he is only moderately able to pray and give praise, no one may forbid him; only let him pray sound in the faith." □

Tony Lane

Hippolytus? This statue, unearthed in 1551, was assumed to be of him. A list of writings on its base was similar to titles of Hippolytus's writings. But scholars now doubt this statue is actually of the "anti-pope" Hippolytus.

Dr. James D. Smith III is pastor of Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church and adjunct professor of church history at Bethel Seminary–West, both in San Diego, California. He is a member of the editorial advisory board of Christian History.

Praying to the "Dead"

Praying *to* the saints began with the practice of praying *for* them. Any Christian who died was remembered in prayer, and services took place on the third, seventh, ninth, thirtieth, and fortieth day after death. For martyrs, annual remembrances of their death were celebrated and called "birthdays," the day the person was born into heavenly life with Christ.

Soon churches drew up lists of martyrs, believing that prayer for martyrs was of "great benefit to those for whom it is offered" (Cyril of Jerusalem). Origen said praying for the dead attested to the living unity of Christians in heaven and on earth—the communion of saints.

Gradually, the church believed that martyrs, having made the ultimate sacrifice, already lived fully in God's presence. They didn't need the church's prayers as much as the church needed theirs: "Only God can pardon, though we see that the merits of the martyrs have great weight before his tribunal" (Cyprian of Carthage).

When persecutions waned (and thus the number of martyrs), the church began to give honor to the lifelong sacrifice of virgins and ascetics. For instance, an inscription on a church dedicated to Martin of Tours (died c. 397) reads, "Seek for your patron [Martin], as he steadily follows the steps of the Eternal King. . . . Ask for [his] assistance: it is not in vain that you knock at this door. His generous goodness extends over the whole world."

Despite fears of idolatry, the practice of praying to saints was affirmed by later church leaders such as Augustine and Aquinas.

—*Mark Galli*

WHERE DID CHRISTIANS WORSHIP?

Tracing the move from simple houses to splendid public buildings

CHRISTOPHER HAAS

The Roman prefect interrogated Justin Martyr and his associates: "What sort of life do you lead? What are your doctrines? You admit that you are a Christian?"

To each question, the Christian philosopher made a direct reply.

Then the prefect, Rusticus, demanded: "Where do you meet?"

"Wherever it is each one's preference or opportunity," said Justin. "In any case, do you suppose we can all meet in the same place?"

Rusticus pressed him, no doubt for information that might compromise others: "Tell me, where do you meet? In what place?"

Justin said, "I have been living above the baths of [text corrupt] for the entire period of my sojourn at Rome . . . and I have known no other meeting place but here. Anyone who desired could come to my residence, and I would give to him the words of truth."

At the close of this interrogation, Rusticus passed sentence on Justin and his companions, obtaining for Justin his appellation: Martyr.

The proceedings of Justin's trial, just prior to A.D. 168, reveal some things about the location of early Christian worship and teaching.

Atriums and dining rooms

In the Rome of Justin's day, Christian meetings were still being conducted in private residences, in much the same way as over a century earlier, during the ministry of Paul. This is remarkable in light of Justin's depiction of Christian worship, which included baptism, common prayers, preaching, and Communion. Though baptism played a prominent role in the Christian community, formal baptisteries were as yet undeveloped. Justin's only comment is that the candidates "are brought by us where there is water."

Justin's defense before Rusticus also suggests that although the Christians in Rome were becoming fairly numerous, they did not abandon meeting in homes, even if that meant the Christian community could no longer assemble in one place. Thus, the house-church pattern, first articulated in the New Testament, continued for the first generations of the church's expansion in the Roman world.

READING A SCROLL recalls synagogue gatherings of the first Christians.

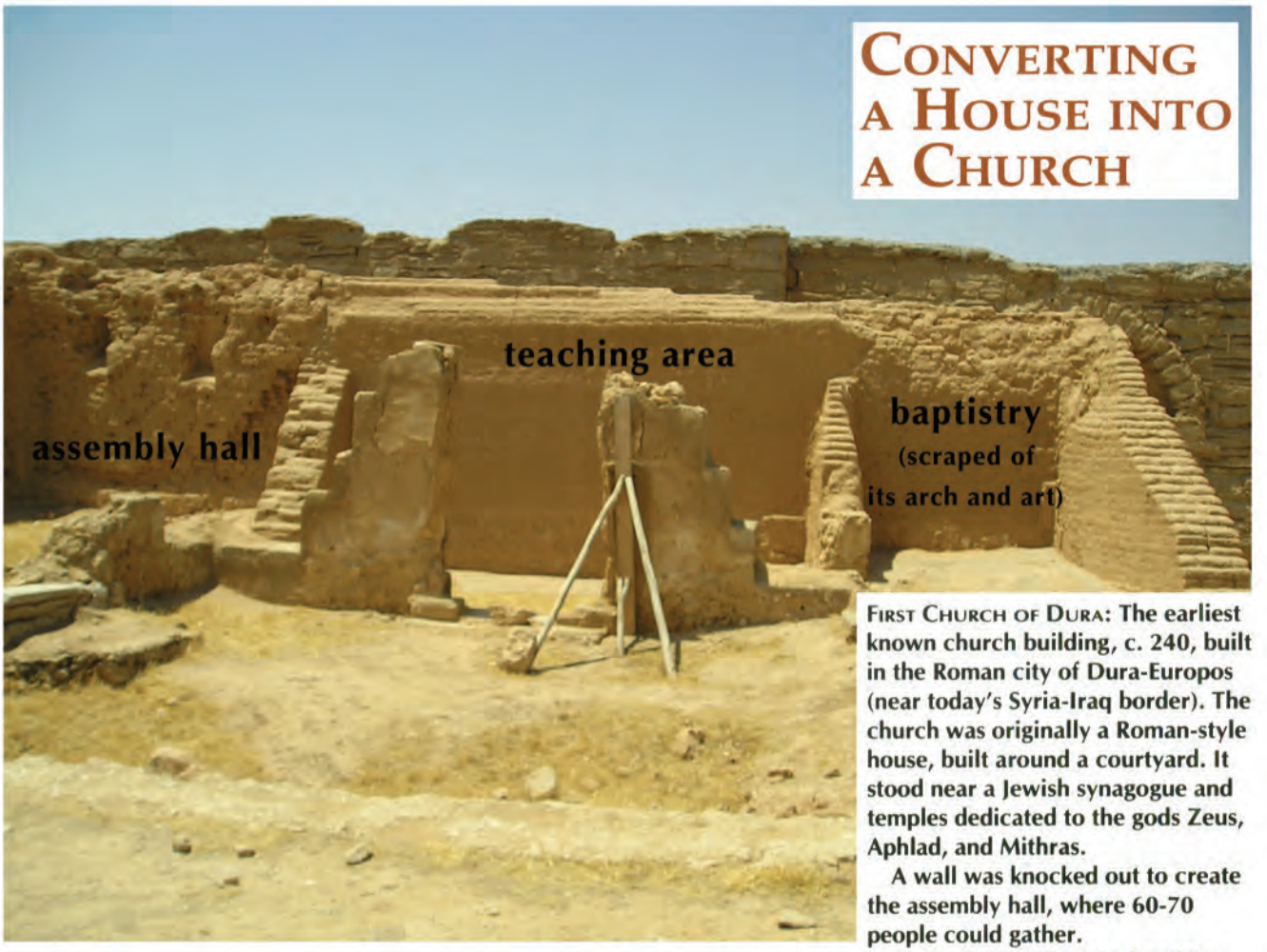
The Jewish Nation. (Religious Tract Society, 1848).

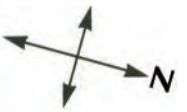
The Acts of the Apostles portrays the first Christian community in Jerusalem as gathering in the temple colonnades and "breaking bread in their homes." As the Christian message gained a wider hearing in eastern Mediterranean cities, early believers commonly met in the homes of the community's more prominent members: Gaius, Titius Justus, and Stephanas at Corinth, Phoebe at Cenchrea, Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila at Ephesus, Nympha at Laodicea.

Though houses came in various styles and sizes, an atrium in a Roman villa (or a spacious dining room of a Greek house) would accommodate the needs of the small Christian communities. The account of Eutychus' late-night plunge from his window seat suggests that, in Troas, the Christians met in the third-story dining room of a Greek house.

Local circumstances sometimes dictated other arrangements. While in Ephesus, Paul preached daily in the Roman prefect the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years, and apocryphal stories hint that a warehouse for grain functioned in the same way when Paul went to Rome. Nonetheless, house churches

Converting a House into a Church





Wikipedia/Marsyas

First Church of Dura: The earliest known church building, c. 240, built in the Roman city of Dura-Europos (near today's Syria-Iraq border). The church was originally a Roman-style house, built around a courtyard. It stood near a Jewish synagogue and temples dedicated to the gods Zeus, Aphlad, and Mithras.

A wall was knocked out to create the assembly hall, where 60-70 people could gather.

At the west end of the baptistery was a font, into which candidates for baptism would step, water being poured or sprinkled over them. The south wall of the baptistery was likely the focal point for celebrating Communion.

Modest Murals. The Dura-Europos baptistery contains murals of Adam and Eve and the Good Shepherd (under the arch), three women fleeing the empty tomb (two are seen here) as well as of David and Goliath, the woman at the well, and others not pictured. The murals' modesty in quality and number suggests the congregation was neither large nor wealthy.

seem to be the principal setting for Christian worship, at least through the time of Justin Martyr.

A frontier building

Less than a century after Justin, important developments had altered the setting for Christian meetings. The most striking example of these changes can be seen at the edge of the Roman world, in the garrison town of Dura-Europos, on the banks of the Euphrates.

Dura-Europos was a bustling frontier town, a crossroads between two great imperial powers, Rome and the revived Persian empire of the Sassanians. Possession of Dura had changed hands several times through the second and third centuries.

Priscilla And Aquila may have hosted worship in a shop such as this. The upper floor living quarters could hold a meeting for 10–20 people.

In the early 250s, the Sassanians captured Dura, but the inhabitants of the city soon rebelled against their Persian overlords. The Sassanians returned and besieged the city in 256. During the siege, the cosmopolitan inhabitants of Dura undoubtedly sought divine assistance in the temples of their various gods. Prayers went up in sanctuaries of Syrian baals, desert sun gods, and Persian savior deities, as well as in the temples of more familiar gods from the Greek pantheon — all to no avail. Dura-Europos was sacked, the inhabitants carried off, and the city left to the enveloping sands of the surrounding desert.

Shortly before the fall of Dura-Europos, the inhabitants desperately attempted to thwart the Persian siege by heaping mounds of dirt against the western wall. In so doing, the houses nestled against this wall were buried and thus preserved for the archaeologists who uncovered them in the 1920s and 1930s.

Three of these private residences had been renovated for use as religious buildings. One had been transformed into a Mithraeum for the devotees of the mystery god Mithras. Another residence had undergone drastic structural modifications, including the destruction of many interior walls, to become a synagogue serving Dura's Jewish population. Down the street, another private house had been altered to become a Christian church.

This church at Dura-Europos is undoubtedly the most significant structure in the history of Christian architecture prior to Constantine. It is the earliest complete church building extant and contains some of the earliest Christian frescoes outside of the Roman catacombs.

The private residence was modified by removing one interior wall in the dining area, creating a larger room for Christian services. A small dais at the eastern end of the hall probably served as the worship center. Benches were installed around the walls of an interior courtyard, perhaps to mark off a place of instruction. In yet another room, a canopied baptismal font was erected, flanked by frescoes of Adam and Eve, and the Good Shepherd — perhaps signifying the Fall and Redemption. Baptism was probably performed by sprinkling or pouring, since this exquisite baptistery was too small to allow immersion.

Steady growth

The church at Dura-Europos occupies a midpoint in the evolution from early house churches to the monumental buildings of the age of Constantine. Though it began as a private house, after renovation all domestic use ceased, and the building became property of the church. Inscriptions on the interior — Remind Christ of the humble Siseos and Remind Christ of Proclus in your midst — probably hearken back to the donors of the house.

It is possible to observe the same process occurring in the rest of the Roman world, in regions as diverse as Croatia, Tunisia, and Britain. The so-called *tituli* churches in the city of Rome commonly bear the name (or title) of the owners who gave their houses to the church. Several of these, such as the titulus Equitii, the titulus Byzantis, and the titulus Clementis, show many of the same signs of architectural adaptation as at Dura. These tituli churches eventually became the earliest parish churches of Rome.

Why were these various private house churches transformed into formal church structures?

First, the church was steadily growing. Private dining rooms could no longer accommodate the burgeoning Christian communities, and Christians of higher social and economic status were eager to donate property to God's use.

Second, developments in the liturgy called for new surroundings. Especially important was the gradual separation of the agape meal

from the Eucharist. By the mid-second century this separation was complete, and thus the private dining room was transformed into the community assembly hall.

Still, the process was relatively slow. The early church's belief in the imminent return of Christ discouraged church construction, as did the threat of persecution.

Cemetery celebrations

Throughout this period, however, property was continually added to the church — including plots of land outside city walls, land that could be used as Christian cemeteries. The most famous were the subterranean cemeteries outside Rome known as the catacombs. Despite Hollywood images to the contrary, there is not a shred of evidence that Roman Christians ever hid in the catacombs.

During the first several centuries of the church's existence, however, Christians did worship in suburban cemeteries. Sometimes commemorative feasts were held at graves because of the widespread desire to worship "in the company of the martyrs." Some thought of the cemetery as the place where the dead slept until Christ's return (*cemetery* is from the Greek *koimeteria*, or "sleeping places"). Others believed that martyrs, though sharing triumphantly in Christ's kingdom, were also sacramentally present in their remains.

Christians worshiped in suburban cemeteries also because of the practical concern to keep out of sight of imperial and local authorities inside the cities. In many places, even these meetings came to official notice. We find the imperial prefect in Alexandria (c. 258) proclaiming: "It shall by no means be permitted you or any others either to hold assemblies or to enter into the so-called cemeteries."

Spacious prayer halls

When Emperor Valerian ceased his persecution of Christians, in 260, his son Gallienus ordered all church property, including church buildings, to be returned to Christians. This restoration ushered in the last major phase, prior to Constantine, in the evolution of church buildings.

Wikipedia

Most Complete Early Basilica. A later fresco of Old St. Peter's (dedicated to Constantine) as it looked c. 333. The structure was 835 feet long.

Unlike the house churches, which looked outwardly like private dwellings, the churches erected during this period were large structures. They were designed to accommodate the throngs of new believers who swelled the church's ranks. In some cases, Christian communities acquired property adjacent to the renovated house churches, tore down or modified their properties, and built spacious new prayer halls.

In addition, given the growing devotion to the martyrs, large churches were erected in the vicinity of hallowed cemeteries. These new structures, often located in suburban areas, eventually transformed the urban landscape of the late Roman world. Early church historian Eusebius depicts the church's expansive building program in these terms: "How can anyone describe those vast assemblies, and the multitude that crowded together in every city, and the famous gatherings in the houses of prayer; on whose account, not being satisfied with the ancient buildings, they erected from the foundation large churches in all the cities?"

Despite some hyperbole, Eusebius makes clear that Christianity was becoming increasingly visible in the Roman Empire. Not everyone was pleased with these developments. Church buildings attracted the ire of Diocletian and his colleagues during the last and greatest persecution of early Christianity (303–311). It was left to the patronage of Constantine (312–337) to rebuild these churches in an even more splendid manner. □

Dr. Christopher Haas is assistant professor of history at Villanova University in Villanova, Pennsylvania, and author of Late Roman Alexandria *(Johns Hopkins, forthcoming).*

PRAYERS OF THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS

Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet. In asking such a thing I know I am overbold, but I dread what was threatened when you sa1d to me, "If I do not wash your feet I have no fellowship with you." Wash my feet then, because I long for your compamonship.

—*Origen (c. 185-254)*

SOURCES—Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (Macmillan, 1970). F. Forrester Church and Terrence J. Mulry, eds., *The MacMillan Book of Earliest Christian Prayers* (Macmillan, 1988). George Appleton, ed., *The Oxford Book of Prayer* (Oxford, 1985).

Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

—*Acts of the Apostles (1st c.)*

We pray and we entreat God, whom those men [persecutors) do not cease to provoke and exasperate, that they may soften their hearts, that they may return to health of mind when this madness has been put aside, that their hearts, filled with the darkness of sin, may recognize the light of repentance, and that they may rather seek that the intercession and prayers of the bishop be poured out for themselves than that they themselves shed the blood of the bishop.

—*Cyprian (d. 258)*

O Educator, be gracious to thy children, O Educator, Father, Guide of Israel, Son and Father, both one, Lord. Give to us, who follow thy command, to fulfill the likeness of thy image, and to see, according to our strength, the God who is both a good God and a Judge who is not harsh. Do thou thyself bestow all things on us who dwell in thy peace, who have been placed in thy city, who sail the sea of sin unruffled, that we may be made tranquil and supported by the Holy Spirit, the unutterable Wisdom, by night and day, unto the perfect day, to sing eternal thanksgiving to the one only Father and Son, Son and Father, Educator and Teacher with the Holy Spirit.

—*Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)*

RUINS of a fourth-century basilica at Kourion, on the island of Cyprus, overlook the Mediterranean Sea. A. Savin Wikipedia [FAL]

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!

—*The Revelation of John* (c. 95)

Do not think of the sins we have committed or of those we still commit. Put out of your mind the failings we give way to night and day. Do not impute our offenses to us, whether we did them on purpose or whether we could not help them. Remember, Lord, that men are apt to make slips; we are a spineless race, given to blundering; think of our build, our limitations. Our skins may be sound, but there are sores underneath.

O God, you are well disposed to us; give us the strength of your support. Give us encouragement, give the light that goes with it. Make us live by the dogmas of the faith preached by your holy apostles and the high teaching of the Gospels of our Savior, jesus Christ.

—*Ouchmounen Papyrus*

The radiance of the Father's splendor, the Father's visible image, Jesus Christ our God, peerless among counselors, Prince of Peace, Father of the world to come, the model after which Adam was formed, for our sakes became like a slave: in the womb of Mary the Virgin, without assistance from any man, he took flesh ....

Enable us, Lord, to reach the end of this luminous feast in peace, forsaking all idle words, acting virtuously, shunning our passions, and raising ourselves above the things of this world.

Bless your church, which you brought into being long ago and attached to yourself through your own life-giving blood. Help all orthodox pastors, heads of churches, and doctors [theologians].

Bless your servants, whose trust is all in you; bless all Christian souls, the sick, those tormented by evil spirits, and those who have asked us to pray for them.

Show yourself as merciful as you are rich in grace; save and preserve us; enable us to obtain those good things to come which will never know an end.

May we celebrate your glorious birth, and the Father who sent you to redeem us, and your Spirit, the Giver of life, now and forever, age after age. Amen.

—*A Syriac Christmas liturgy (Late third or early fourth century)*

Be off, Satan, from this door and from these four walls. This is no place for you; there is nothing for you to do here. This is the place for Peter and Paul and the holy Gospel; and this is where I mean to sleep, now that my worship is done, in the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [God] send me your Spirit; instill the wisdom of your Holy Spirit into my heart; protect my soul and body, every limb in my body, every fiber of my being, all possible harm and all traps Devil may set for me and temptation to sin. Teach you thanks, O Father, Holy Spirit.

—*Euchologium Sinaiticum*

We ask you, Master, be our helper and defender. Rescue those of our number in distress; raise up the fallen; assist the needy; heal the sick; turn back those of your people who stray; feed the hungry; release our captives; revive the weak; encourage those who lose heart. Let all the nations realize that you are the only God, that Jesus Christ is your Child, and that we are your people and the sheep of your pasture.

—*1 Clement (c. 96)*

REPEATING THE UNREPEATABLE

How did we get from Jesus' Last Supper to Holy Communion?

AIDAN KAVANAGH

At the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples to "keep on doing this as my commemoration." But after Jesus had left them, early Christians recognized that the supper Jesus shared with his disciples had indeed been his last, and thus was unique. The conundrum was: how do we keep on doing an unrepeatable event?

For instance, if, as seems likely, the Last Supper was a Passover meal, or *seder* (which means "order of service"), early Christians wondered if they should "do this" only once a year at Passover. Were they to obey his command literally only once a year, according to Jewish tradition? But that would have tended to keep them effectively within Judaism. This solution would have obscured the uniqueness of Jesus and wiped out the reality of the new era Jesus had promised.

On the other hand, if they were to observe the meal more often than annually, how should it be done in a non-Passover format?

The early Christians soon realized they were going to have to be liturgically creative, even daring, if they were to keep on doing an unrepeatable event.

From Sabbath to Sunday

The earliest church decided to adopt a non-Passover meal format that could be observed any time and as often as necessary for the good of the infant church.

WHERE COMMUNION BEGAN: A medieval view of Jesus' final meal.

Wikimedia/Edal Anton Lefterov [CC BY-SA 3.0]

Such a format lay close at hand: in the weekly meal held in Jewish homes each Friday evening to hallow the beginning of Sabbath. The Christian meal, though, no longer emphasized Sabbath themes, but Sunday, with its themes of resurrection and a new era in the Messiah, who had consummated both Passover and Sabbath.

Thus, the weekly meal structure was taken from Judaism, but the contents were Christianized and the meal moved to Sunday. This resulted in the first "liturgical rule" for Christians: Lord's Supper on Lord's Day. With this step the Last Supper of Jesus modulated into the Eucharist of the church. It was the first way new wine was being poured into old bottles as the earliest Christians strove to obey the Lord's command.

From blessing to thanksgiving

In addition, the Jewish prayers over the bread and cup were reworked. The words changed from "blessing" God for food and creation to "thanking" God for revelation in "Jesus your child."

This verbal shift begins in the New Testament. In Matthew 26 and Mark 14, Jesus is shown "blessing" (NRSV) the bread; in Luke 22 and 1 Corinthians 11, he gives "thanks." The shift is complete by the time of the *Didache* (a Christian document with sections composed about A.D. 60), especially when we compare its prayer formulas with those of the Jewish *seder*.

For instance, at the Jewish Sabbath meals, the first of three short prayers said over a cup of wine mixed with water at the conclusion of the meal reads:

"*Blessed* are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, for you nourish us and the whole world with goodness, grace, kindness and mercy. *Blessed* are you, Lord, for you nourish the universe."

The corresponding prayer in the *Didache* reads:

"We *give thanks* to you, holy Fa-

ther, for your holy Name which you have enshrined in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have made known to us through Jesus your child; glory to you for evermore."

Indeed, in the *Didache* the entire Christian meal is seen as a *eucharist* (Greek for "thanksgiving): "About the Eucharist, eucharistize thus . . . ." The Jewish form remains; the content and vocabulary are new.

As one Jewish scholar has noted, ancient Jewish prayer protocol tended to "bless" God for creation, "thank" God for revelation, and "petition" God for redemption. Thus, when early Christians employed thanksgiving language in their meal prayers, they were highlighting Jesus as the revelation of God.

This early example of liturgical creativity was to be faithfully followed by all the Christian churches for the next fifteen centuries, and is still observed by Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. In recent decades the emphasis on giving thanks has been recovered in the Communion prayer in some churches of the Reformation.

The waning of the meal

It is clear from the New Testament that the Last Supper did not merely contain a meal but was a meal. It was Jesus' custom to impart, especially to those closest to him, his gospel while dining with them. Even after his resurrection he reveals himself to two discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus "in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:13–35), and to others by the Sea of Tiberias at breakfast (John 21:1–29).

The early Christians soon realized they were going to have to be liturgically creative, even daring.

The primitiveness of the *Didache* is evident in that it simply presupposes a meal. During the meal, eucharistic prayers are arranged after the pattern of the Jewish Sabbath meal. Before the meal, thanksgiving prayers are said over an initial cup of wine and the broken bread. After the meal, the three-fold thanksgiving prayer is said over a final cup of water mixed with wine (the "cup of blessing" mentioned by Paul, using the Jewish name for it).

But already in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul chastises the Christians at Corinth for becoming greedy and drunk at the Supper. There can be little doubt the meal was gradually separated from the prayers because such unedifying behavior recurred.

When the meal was moved out from between the short prayers (over broken bread and over the final cup of wine and water), these two prayers were set back to back, and in their original order: bread first and then the cup. The immediate disadvantage was that the observance became so brief as to be almost negligible (the *Didache* prayers can be said slowly in about thirty seconds).

This may well have been a central reason for expanding the originally brief prayers to one larger and more rhetorical. This prayer eventually included a remembrance not only of the Last Supper (which *Didache*'s prayers surprisingly do not allude to) but of all salvation history—from Genesis to the life of Christ to the present. We clearly see this development in early-third-century eucharistic prayers from Syria, Egypt, and Italy. By the end of the fourth century, the unified prayer had grown to many pages, as one can see in the Syrian *Apostolic Constitutions*.

Wikipedia

Christ's Banquet This cemetery painting from the early 200s shows a fish, representing Christ, and a basket of bread loaves, representing the Eucharist.

Early Church Potluck? This scene from the catacombs in Rome (c. 275–300) shows Christians gathered for an agape meal. The intriguing inscriptions read, "Irene, bring it hot" and "Agape, mix it."

John Henry Parker, *The Catacombs of Rome* (Parker, 1877).

What happened to the meal?

The meal portion of the primitive Eucharist did not disappear, however. It migrated elsewhere in the life of the Christian community. The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (c. 220), for example, describes a formal meal, endowed by someone of the community and supervised by the bishop and other clergy. The meal was held to provide religious instruction and charity (it helped feed the poor).

Hippolytus was careful, however, to distinguish this meal, which he calls "the Lord's Supper," from the Eucharist, which he calls "the Oblation." The unbaptized catechumens could attend this Supper—as long as they did not sit at the table with the baptized—but they could not attend the Oblation.

The table talk at the Supper was to be on religious subjects and conducted by the bishop, the chief teacher of the church, or in the bishop's absence, by a presbyter or deacon. Should no clergy be present, "blessed" bread was not to be given to the baptized, because only clergy could invoke such a blessing.

The Supper, which later authors sometimes call an *agape*, or *love feast* (although Hippolytus never uses either term), was tightly disciplined to avoid scandal. Hippolytus, like Paul, cautions against excess at the Supper: "But when you eat and drink, do it in good order and not unto drunkenness, and not so that anyone may mock you, or that he who invites you may be upset by your disorder."

Eventually, this meal appears to have died out, at least as a regular feature of the church's common life. For one thing, *agapes* and meals held in cemeteries to honor the dead *(refrigeria)* sometimes became riotous and even dangerous, especially after dark (urban crime was no less a problem then than now). For another, the church found other ways to dispense charity and religious instruction.

As churches grew and settled into routine, full-time offices developed to deal with such needs in more efficient and "professional" ways. In the urban church of Rome, for example, a system of charity distribution centers known as *diakonae* ("deaconries") was established in poor neighborhoods and among the docks and warehouses along the Tiber River. In addition, academies for religious instruction were begun in Egypt in the late second century, and as the number of converts increased, so did the need for more adequate preparation for baptism. These institutions gradually displaced the Lord's Supper as the preeminent structure for providing charity and religious instruction.

The need for fellowship

But the serious need for Christian fellowship that the Supper, or agape, helped fill did not fade. Indeed, as the churches grew into urban settings, the intimate fellowship of the earlier, smaller communities must have seemed imperiled.

This was one reason some Christians withdrew into smaller groups of like-minded persons where fellowship and the common life could more easily be pursued. In fact, the period of the early church's greatest growth and urbanization (the third to sixth centuries) is also the period when the great monastic rules were composed.

In the Rule of Benedict, for instance, the common table was less a means of nutrition than it was a sort of Lord's Supper. The monks broke their fast around midday by receiving Holy Communion from their spiritual father, the abbot, and then went straight to the common table. The Communion and meal form one unit.

Today the eucharistic meal continues to spill over its historical forms to pervade the lives of Christians, doing so every time we approach any table in faith. And the *agape*, or love feast, aspect of this supernal fellowship with God in Christ lives on wherever two or three gather in Christ's name. □

Dr. Aidan Kavanagh is professor of liturgics at Yale Divinity School and author of On Liturgical Theology *(Pueblo, 1984).*

An Awe-Inspiring Ceremony

In the third-century, baptism was high drama

Baptism was an impressive ceremony in the early church. According to *Didache*, a second century church manual, those being baptised were expected to fast for a day or two before the rite. They were then to be baptised in cold, running water if possible ("living water"), and if not, to have water poured over them three times in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

At the time of the ceremony, those being baptized renounced Satan and pledged themselves to Christ. Tertullian, writing around A.D. 200 described this: "When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then when we are taken up (as newborn children), we taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey...."

Many churches required long periods of instruction before baptism. In 386, Ambrose made Augustine and other baptismal candidates attend 60 instructional sessions during Lent before he baptised them on Easter Sunday. Other churches might require three years or more of training, increasing a candidate's anticipation of the ritual.

Combined, accounts describe baptized persons descending into the water naked in a darkened room, then coming up as if rising from the dead to be anointed with oil, dressed in white, and then joining the congregation to partake of their first Eucharist.

Water up to the Calves: A third-century wall painting of baptism, found in the Roman Catacombs. The person being baptized stands naked. He is pictured as a child, perhaps because those being baptized were called "infants."

Questions during baptism

One of the fullest early accounts of what went into preparation for baptism and in the performance of the rite was penned by Hippolytus around A.D. 215. What questions were asked of candidates for baptism? Hippolytus tells us in detail:

And when he who is being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say thus: "Dost thou believe in God, the Father Almighty?"

And he who is being baptized shall say: "I believe."

Then holding his hand placed on his head, he shall baptize him once.

And then he shall say: "Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?"

And when he says: " I believe," he is baptized again.

And again he shall say: "Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost; in the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?"

He who is being baptized shall say accordingly: "I believe," and so he is baptized a third time.

And afterward, when he has come up [out of the water], he is anointed by the presbyter with the oil of thanksgiving, the presbyter saying: "I anoint thee with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ."

And so each one, after drying himself, is immediately clothed, and then is brought into the church.

Then the bishop, laying his hand upon them, shall pray, saying: "O Lord God, who hast made them worthy to obtain remission of sins through the laver of regeneration of the Holy Spirit, send into them thy grace, that they may serve thee according to thy will; for thine is the glory, to the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit in the holy Church, both now and world without end. Amen."

Then, pouring the oil of thanksgiving from his hand and putting it on his forehead, he shall say: "I anoint thee with holy oil in the Lord, the Father Almighty and Christ Jesus and the Holy Ghost."

And signing them on the forehead he shall say: "The Lord be with thee"; and he who is signed shall say: "and with thy spirit."

And so he shall do to each one.

—*The Editors (revised 2017)*

Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge, 1935). Used by Permission.
Baptism Scene, 3rd century (fresco), Paleo-Christian, (3rd century) / Catacombs of San Callisto, Rome, Italy / Index / Bridgeman Images

FOLLOWING IN THE FIRST CHRISTIANS' FOOTSTEPS

How much should we imitate the worship practices of the early church?

RALPH P. MARTIN

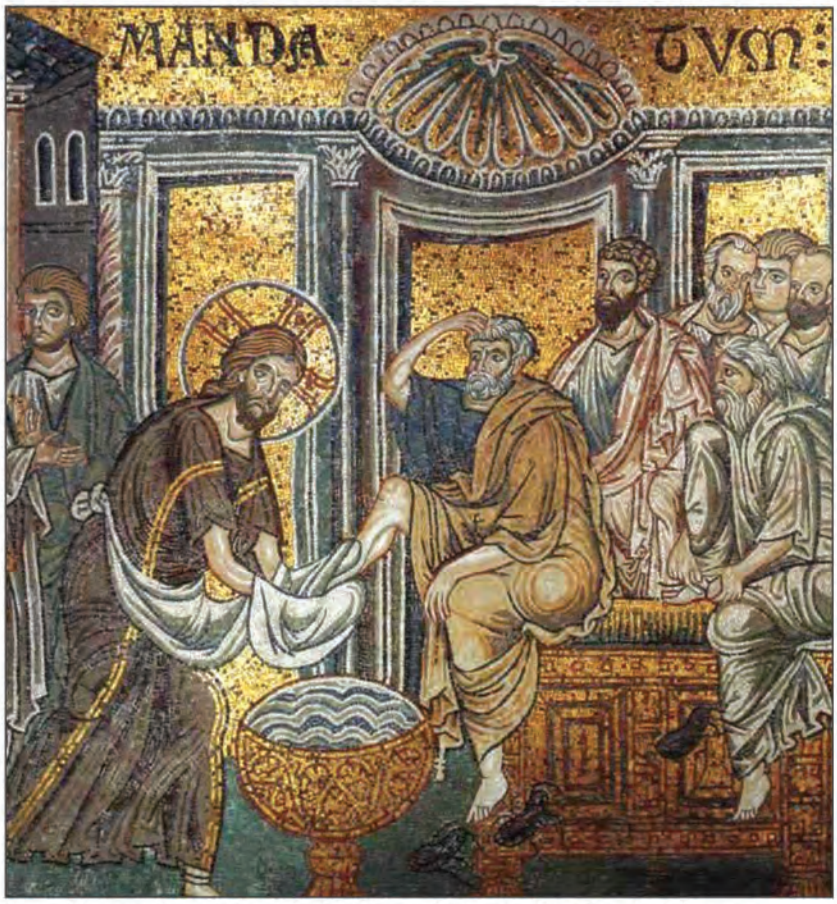
Many worship practices that meet us in the pages of the New Testament and early Christianity are tantalizingly obscure: Why were Christians being baptized for the dead? Why were women required to wear coverings on their heads? Why did believers wash one another's feet?

What do we make today of these and other practices? Should we continue them?

Many are clearly mandated, or fully described and valued, in the New Testament. Yet we find many of them difficult to fit into our contemporary worship.

Sometimes our problem is lack of knowledge. Much description of worship in the New Testament gives the impression that worship practices were developed *ad hoc*—occasioned by the needs of the hour. Sometimes we do not know the intended significance of various worship settings and occasions.

But often we can read the texts only too clearly. The question is, what principle is being illustrated and enforced? So we continue genuinely to puzzle over why early Christians practiced certain rites—and whether and how we should follow their lead.



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Jesus Washes Peter's Feet in this Byzantine mosaic. The significance of foot washing has not always been clear to Christians.

Washing feet

We might take as a helpful case study the practice of foot washing. The practice is prescribed in the New Testament and was observed in the early Christian communities. Yet it has been both practiced and neglected by churches in our day. Should foot washing be part of our worship?

The New Testament support for foot washing is found in John 13:4–5, 12–15: *[Jesus] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. . . .*

When he had finished washing their

feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Washing the disciples' feet reflects a civilization that knew only unpaved roads, open-toed sandals or bare feet, and a hot climate to tax the weary foot traveler. Bathing feet was a mark of hospitality for visitors in both Israel and Greco-Roman society (Luke 7:44; 1 Tim.5:10).

Early Christians preserved the practice as part of baptism or even as the manner of baptism itself. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (about A.D. 380), taught that just as a person's sins were washed away in baptism, so foot washing removed the hereditary sins from Adam. The Roman Catholic church (with other liturgical churches) has preserved foot washing, with modified meaning, in its observance of Maundy Thursday.

Though Protestants reject a sacramental reasoning, foot washing has continued among German Pietist groups and Anabaptist denominations like the Church of the Brethren, as well as some Adventist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches. These take their stand on the plain directive of the Lord: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Foot washing to them is both obedience and a lesson in humility.

What is puzzling, though, is not that many Christians continue this practice but that it has never become as prominent in the church as has Communion. Foot washing is commanded by the Lord, perhaps even more strongly than is Communion. On grounds of logic and clarity the case is apparently irrefutable. Why then do the majority of Christians observe the command to break bread and take the cup in the Supper, yet regard the foot-washing directive as nonbinding?

Cultural background

First, there is a unique cultural setting to the foot-washing ceremony—our feet do not get soiled and stained in modern road conditions. The same does not hold for the Eucharist, since taking bread and wine, or eating and drinking, are universal across cultures. For some, the bread and cup are dubbed "elements" because they are elemental to all life.

Second, many believe that what Jesus intended by "example" signifies for later disciples more than water ablutions in a church service. He was dramatically symbolizing the spirit that prompted such an act, namely a disposition to serve those who need assistance. They would equate Jesus' command to wash one another's feet with Paul's words about showing kindness to others with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:8) and performing "humble duties for fellow Christians" (1 Tim. 5:10, GNB).

We may cull from the New Testament various puzzling practices. Many carry an element of prescription; New Testament texts indicate they should or must be done. And in each one there are vital issues at stake.

At the same time, for each practice there is a cultural background that needs to be respected. The directives were particularly necessary and intelligible in that age when the church was launched.

Today, churches will debate when and how such practices should be observed. Some Christians will follow the form of early worship practices; others will seek a universal underlying meaning. In either approach, the principles remain and are as valid and obligatory as ever. □

Dr. Ralph P. Martin is professor of biblical studies at the University of Sheffield in England and author of Worship in the Early Church *(Eerdmans, 1974).*

Washing Souls by Washing Feet

Baptism today often means sprinkling water on the head. At one time, for some Christians, it amounted to washing feet.

Most early Christians practiced baptism by immersion, but a minority took their cues from John 13:10: they believed baptism by the washing of feet precluded the need to wash head and hands. This view began in Syria and spread west by the late 100s. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (in modern France) conjectured that Jesus, during his descent into hell, purified the dead by baptizing them by washing their feet.

Not everyone agreed on foot washing's sacramental value. By the early 300s, the rite was so controversial, one important church council outlawed it. At the end of the fourth century, though, Ambrose, bishop of Milan, defended footwashing's baptismal significance: while full baptism purified someone from *personal* sins, he argued, foot washing purified the neophyte from *original* sin.

In the early medieval period, foot washing increasingly was seen merely as the supreme example of humility. And the rite was moved to Maundy Thursday, the night the Last Supper is commemorated.

Today, several Protestant groups hold foot washing in high regard. Seventh-Day Adventists, in reverse of Ambrose, believe baptism represents justification once and for all, and foot washing, ongoing sanctification. Some even regard the ordinance as a "miniature baptism."

—*Mark Galli*

"Let Us Repent Immediately"

Excerpts from an ancient Christian sermon

Second Clement, *written circa A.D. 125, is the earliest known Christian sermon outside of the New Testament.*

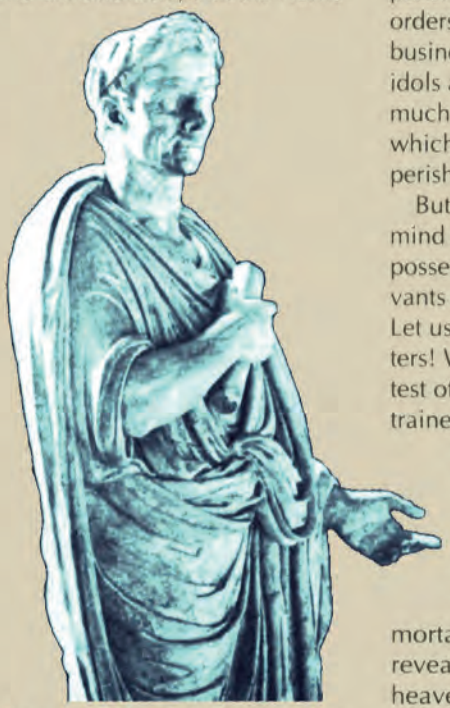
Brothers, we ought to think of Jesus Christ as we do of God, as "Judge of the living and the dead." For he has given us the light; as a father he has called us sons; he saved us when we were perishing. What praise, then, shall we give him, or what repayment in return for what we received? Our minds were blinded, and we worshiped stones and wood and gold and silver and brass, the works of men; indeed, our whole life was nothing else but death. For he had mercy upon us and in his compassion he saved us when we had no hope of salvation.

But how do we acknowledge him? By doing what he says and not disobeying his commandments, and honoring him not only with our lips but "with our whole heart and with our whole mind." And in Isaiah he also says, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."

Let us, therefore, not just call him Lord, for this will not save us. For he says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will be saved, but only the one who does what is right." So then, brothers, let us acknowledge him in our actions by loving one another, by not committing adultery or slandering one another or being jealous, but by being self-controlled, compassionate, and kind. And we ought to have sympathy for one anther and not be avaricious.

For if we do the will of Christ, we will find rest; but if we do not, if we disobey his commandments, then nothing will save us from eternal punishment. And the Scripture also says in Ezekiel, "Even if Noah and Job and Daniel should rise up, they will not save their children" in the captivity. Now if even such righteous men as these are not able, by means of their own righteous deeds, to save their children, what assurance do we have of entering the kingdom of God if we fail to keep our baptism pure and undefiled?

Therefore, brothers, let us repent immediately. Let us be clear-headed regarding the good, for we are full of much stupidity and wickedness. Let us wipe off from ourselves our former sins and be saved, repenting from the very souls of our being. And let us not seek to please men. But let us not desire to please only ourselves with our righteousness, but also those who are outsiders, that the Name may not be blasphemed on our account. For the Lord says, "My name is continually blasphemed among all the nations," and again, "Woe to him on whose account my name is blasphemed."



A Roman Orator in typical dress.

Why is it blasphemed? Because you do not do what I desire. For when they [the pagans] hear from us that God says, "It is no credit to you if you love those who love you, but it is a credit to you if you love your enemies and those who hate you," when they hear these things, they marvel at such extraordinary goodness. But when they see that we not only do not love those who hate us, but do not even love those who love us, they scornfully laugh at us, and the Name is blasphemed.

Let us repent, therefore, with our whole heart, lest any of us should perish needlessly. For if we have orders that we should make it our business to tear men away from idols and to instruct them, how much more wrong is it that a soul which already knows God should perish?

But do not let it trouble your mind that we see the unrighteous possessing wealth while the servants of God experience hardships. Let us have faith, brothers and sisters! We are competing in the contest of a living God, and are being trained by the present life in order that we may be crowned in the life to come.

"To the only God, invisible," the Father of truth, who sent forth to us the Savior and Founder of immortality, through whom he also revealed to us the truth and the heavenly life, to him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. □

Guy Carleton Lee, *The World's Orators, comprising the great orations of the world's history. Vol. II. Orators of Ancient Rome.* (G. P. Putnam's Sons; The Knickerbocker Press, 1903).

Lamb of God—Apse Mosaic of Euphrasian Basilica. Wikimedia/Shesmax

LAMB OF GOD from the Euphrasian Basilica, built early in the sixth century in the region that became Croatia. Employing biblical imagery, the early church sometimes sang of Christ as a lamb sacrificed for the atonement of our sins.

CHANTING IN HONOR OF CHRIST

How early Christians expressed their joy

Singing has always been a vital part of Christian worship. In about the year 112, Roman governor Pliny noted that Christians "met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god." Though it is sometimes difficult to distinguish early Christian poetry from hymns, here are two brief selections that were likely sung by early Christians.

Children, praise the Lord,
Praise ye the name of the Lord.
We praise Thee, we hymn Thee, we bless Thee,
Because of the greatness of Thy glory.
O Lord the King, the Father of Christ,
Of the spotless Lamb, who taketh away the sin of the world,
To Thee belongeth praise,
To Thee belongeth song,
To Thee belongeth glory, to the God
And Father, through the Son, in the Spirit,
To the Most Holy, unto ages of ages.
Amen.

O Mystery most wonderful! Our guilt is washed away;
He took our flesh, that God on Him Our load of sin might lay.
What can be more sublime than this, That God should meet our need,
That love should scatter every fear, And death give life indeed?
—Ambrose □

De Pressensé, *Christian Life and Practice in the Early Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1877).
Brownlee, *Hymns from the East and West* (James Nisbet, 1898).

Recommended Resources

Worship in the Early Church

ROBERT E. WEBBER

Twentieth-century liturgical scholarship has searched for the origins of Christian worship.

The most recent conclusions are set forth by Paul F. Bradshaw in *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (SPCK, 1992). Bradshaw challenges most current scholarship and argues that little can be known about early Christian worship. According to him, most documents describing early Christian worship are written later than assumed and have been reshaped by various layers of tradition.

However, the search for early Christian worship continues, concentrating on its Jewish roots. Three helpful recent works are: Carmine Di Sante, *Jewish Prayer: The Origins of Christian Liturgy* (Paulist, 1991); Eugene Fisher, *The Jewish Roots of Christian Liturgy* (Paulist, 1990); and Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship* (Notre Dame, 1991).

Wikipedia/Berthold Werner

Mosaic near Capernaum brings to mind the early Christian love feast.

Special topics

A number of books probe particular issues of worship in the early church. For example, the daily office [schedule of prayer] in cathedrals and monasteries is studied in Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1982).

The Eucharist of the early Christians is treated in Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick, eds., *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (Morehouse, 1992); and in Willy Rordorf, et al., *The Eucharist of the Early Christians* (Pueblo, 1978).

An excellent study in the Christian year is Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Pueblo, 1986).

An excellent resource of primary materials on evangelism and worship is Edward Jarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul, 1971). A helpful introduction to the relationship between worship and evangelism in the early church is Robert Webber, *Liturgical Evangelism: Worship as Outreach and Nurture* (Morehouse, 1986).

For an understanding of the place of the charisms, or spiritual gifts, in early Christian worship, see Ronald A. H. Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Hendrickson, 1984).

Music and the arts

Those interested in music and the arts in worship will have to be content with books that contain a chapter or two on the subject but are not exhaustive treatments. For music, I suggest Don Hustad, *Jubilate*, 2nd ed. (Hope, 1993). For dance, see Ronald Gagne, Thomas Kane, and Robert VerEeckes, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship* (Pastoral Press, 1984). For art, see Brother Axelrod-Seton Shanlay, *Clip Art of the Christian World: Christian Art from Its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (Pueblo, 1990). And finally, for architecture of the early church, see Paul and Tesa Clowney, *Exploring Churches* (Eerdmans, 1982).

Primary documents

For the primary documents of early Christian worship, I suggest Lucien Deiss, *Springtime of the Liturgy* (Liturgical Press, 1979) and the newly released book by James White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Westminster-John Knox, 1992). The best interpretation of these documents is Allen Cabaniss, *Pattern in Early Christian Worship* (Mercer, 1989). □

Dr. Robert E. Webber is professor of theology at Wheaton (Illinois) College and editor of The Complete Library of Christian Worship *(Abbott Martyn, 1993).*

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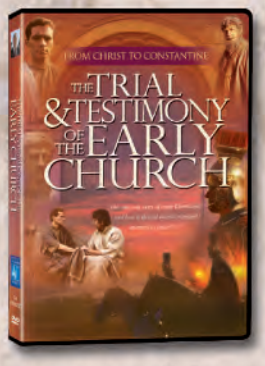

Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

This informative series of six half-hour programs, produced in consultation with an international team of scholars, takes you to the actual locations to show what the early church was like, how it spread, and the persecution it endured. Host for the award-winning series is Steve Bell. Actors Nigel Goodwin, Russell Boulter, and Jane Campion dramatize leading figures and events from the early church. The six programs are Foundation, Spread, Accusation, Persecution, Testimony, and Transition. Included on the DVD in PDF are a leader's guide, student handouts, program scripts, and a script of an early church document, *Octavius of Minucius Felix*. Documentary, 3 hours.

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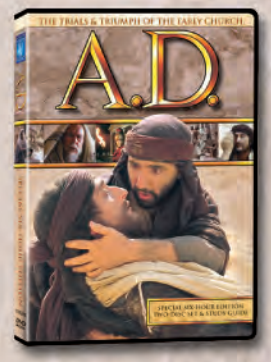

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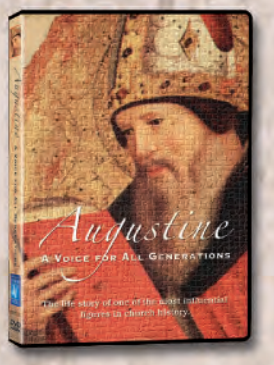

Augustine: A Voice for All Generations

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is one of the greatest theologians of the Christian Church. His works, including *The City of God, On the Trinity,* and *Confessions,* have had an inestimable impact on the Church and, by extension, on Western Civilization at large. Yet, where did such faith begin? After rejecting his mother's Christianity as simplistic and restraining, Augustine embarked on a path towards self-gratification, marked by the pursuit of money, political power, and sexual pleasure. Hosted by Augustine expert Mike Aquilina and shot on location in Rome and Milan, this documentary travels back to the fourth century to discover why Augustine has become a "Voice for All Generations." Documentary, 55 minutes.

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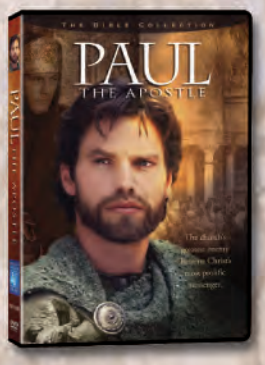

Paul the Apostle

From the Emmy award-winning director Roger Young (*Joseph* and *Jesus*) comes the spectacular story of Paul the Apostle. This augmented adaptation, largely based on the biblical account, profiles Christ's most prolific messenger. Paul, originally known as Saul of Tarsus, was at the forefront of efforts to stamp out the early church until Jesus stopped him on the road to Damascus, forever changing his life and mission. He joyfully faced persecution, imprisonment, and peril in order to share the love and redemption offered by Christ.

Beautifully shot in the Moroccan desert, *Paul the Apostle* is a sweeping saga of the man who brought the Gospel to the Western world. Drama, 145 minutes.

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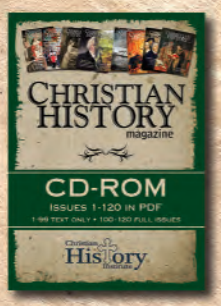

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