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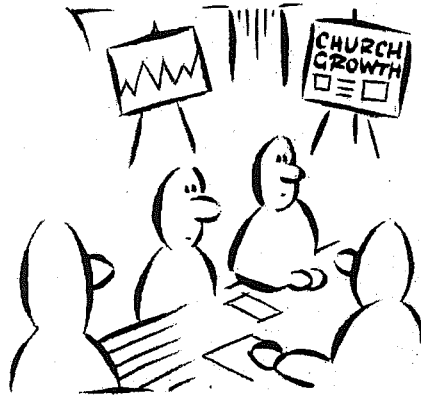
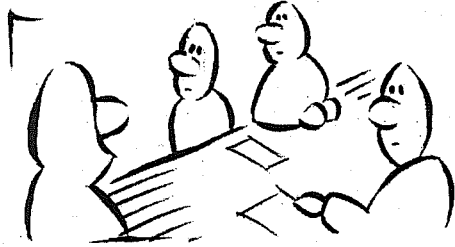
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WE NEED TO TAKE A HARD
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Minding Our Business: How Early Christians Worshiped



L. Joseph Letendre

A year and a half ago, churches where I live began displaying banners that read: "Peace Is the Church's Business." Though hard to disagree with, the statement made me uneasy. That it was part of an interdenominational protest against the Iraqi war did not seem to have anything to do with it. That the banners appeared on churches that supported medical violence against the unborn and legislative violence against the institution of marriage was not it, either. I eventually realized my disagreement was more theological than political: I worried that the banners were a case of what C. S. Lewis called "Christianity And," a form of reductionism that takes one element of a complex whole—in this case the gospel work of peacemaking—and treats it as if it were the most important thing. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis describes how reductionism can undermine faith:

Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him . . . come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the state at which the religion becomes merely part of the "Cause," in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favor of [the Cause]. . . . Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have

almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing.¹

To paraphrase Jacob Marley's ghost: Peace is just one drop in the comprehensive ocean of the church's business. An important drop, but a drop nonetheless. It takes a continual effort for pastors and congregations not to lose sight of the church's oceanic primary business. Thus, Jan Peterson, the wife of pastor and writer, Eugene Peterson, recalls: "When I asked him why he didn't preach on fair housing (I was serving on a county fair housing committee), he said, 'If people hear the Word of God, they will eventually practice fair housing.'"²

If peace is not the church's primary business, what is? Answer: worship, witness, and service. It is the first (and most important) of these—worship—that concerns me here. My questions are historical: How did early Christians worship? How can their ancient practice inform our own worship?

SCRIPTURAL HINTS

The New Testament says little about how the first Christians worshiped. This is not surprising; much of the New Testament was written to deal with questions confronting the early church: Should Gentile converts be circumcised? Could Christians eat meat that had been offered to idols? The details of worship were not so pressing an issue. When St. Paul discussed Christian worship, he was mostly concerned with maintaining good order and decorum (see 1 Corinthians 11; 12:26-40). St. James, in his epistle, worried about congregations showing partiality to the rich (2:1-4).

St. Paul's epistles do provide some hints. In Colossians, he writes: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (3:16). In Philippians 2:6-11, he provides an example of what early Christian "hymns and spiritual songs" were like. Many scholars believe this passage quotes the text of a hymn in existence before St. Paul wrote this epistle. Finally, his charging Timothy to "devote yourself to the public reading

of Scriptures, to exhortation and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13) makes it clear that the reading of Scripture and the preaching of sermons was a central part of Christian worship from the beginning.

There are also clues in the Acts of the Apostles. The first Christians in Jerusalem are described as "day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes" (2:46). Peter and John heal the man lame from birth "while going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1), implying that the first Christians kept the Jewish practice of praying at certain fixed times of the day. The account of Eutychus, the first (but by no means the last!) person to doze off during a sermon suggests that the "breaking of the bread" was linked with the preaching of the Word (Acts 20:7-12). As we shall see, this two-part invention was to form the foundation of Christian worship by the second century.

EARLY DESCRIPTIONS

The earliest actual descriptions of Christian worship are found in the writings of the "Apostolic Fathers," second-century pastors and preachers who strove to refute the heresies of Docetism and Gnosticism and defend the church against its pagan accusers. Some of the earliest may have known the apostles, and many ended their lives as martyrs. It was during their ministry that the canon of the New Testament began to take shape. Elaine Pagels and *The Da Vinci Code* notwithstanding, their writings provide a clearly traceable thread of consistent orthodox teaching and witness in the second century. Three works are of particular interest to students of early worship: the *Didache*, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, and the *First Apology* of Justin the Martyr.

The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, known as *The Didache*, is a pastiche of at least two documents, parts of which were composed at roughly the same time Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels. The *Didache* gives instructions about baptism, daily devotions, and "thanksgiving" (in Greek, "eucharist"). Baptism should be performed in running water and done "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Christians are to

fast on Wednesdays and Fridays (not like the "hypocrites . . . who fast on Mondays and Thursdays") and to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day.³

The *Didache* gives more detailed instructions about the eucharistic meal. It provides a definite order for the meal along with prayers for the sharing of the cup and bread. The *Didache* also makes it clear that this meal is sacred. The bread and cup are referred to as "spiritual food" and an appropriate day is prescribed for the meal: "On every Lord's Day—his special day—come together and break bread and give thanks first confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure."⁴

The meal is an exclusive gathering. The *Didache* warns, "You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's name."⁵ There are restrictions on who may participate: "Anyone at variance with his neighbor must not join you, until they are reconciled. . . ."⁶ Although the prayers quoted in the *Didache* do not mention the Last Supper or the body and blood of Christ, that the eucharist is to be eaten on Sunday implies that it was an act which recalled Christ's death and resurrection.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

The next important source are the letters of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who was arrested during the reign of the emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117). While being transported to his martyrdom in Rome, he wrote letters to several churches he would be passing. Seven of these letters, probably written around A.D. 104-107, survive.

Ignatius was concerned with preserving the unity of a church being pulled apart by Judaizers and Docetists, two groups discussed in the New Testament. St. Paul deals extensively with the Judaizers in his epistles, particularly Galatians. Docetism, an attempt to syncretize Greek philosophy with Christian doctrine, arose later. It was a heresy that denied the reality of the Incarnation. It taught that Jesus only "appeared" to be in the flesh and to suffer and die on the cross. Though this heresy had already been addressed in the New Testament—"every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in

the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist. . . . (1 John 4:2)—it would continue to trouble the church throughout its history.

Against these threats, Ignatius held up the ministry of the bishop and the eucharistic assembly as vital signs of unity. He warned the believers in Smyrna that "No one must do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop's approval. You should regard that Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes."⁷ He expected the Christians in Ephesus to be "meeting together . . . in one faith and in union with Christ. . . . At these meetings you should heed the bishop and the presbytery attentively, and break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ."⁸ The attentive heeding of the bishop and the reference to the one loaf again allude to the central place of preaching and the breaking of the bread in Christian worship.

For Ignatius, Eucharist assembly did more than simply indicate church unity, it forged it. To the church in Philadelphia, Ignatius wrote: "Be careful, then, to observe a single Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one cup of his blood that makes us one, and one altar, just as there is one bishop. . . ."⁹ Ignatius observes how the Docetists "hold aloof from the Eucharist and from services of prayer, because they refuse to admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which, in his goodness, the Father raised [from the dead]."¹⁰ The Eucharist was in itself a refutation of Docetism.

APOLOGY

The most detailed description of early Christian worship is found in Justin's *First Apology*, written around A.D. 165. Justin, a Roman philosopher, convert and martyr, was one of the earliest in a long list of apologists—writers who sought to defend and explain Christian faith and practice to a skeptical, sometimes hostile, audience. Recent inheritors of his mantle

include G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, and Peter Kreeft. Justin's *First Apology* is an evangelistic tract disguised as a plea for tolerance.

Because of rumors about Christian worship, Justin included a detailed account of the baptismal service and regular Sunday worship. Naturally, priority is given to the reading and preaching of Scripture. "The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things."¹¹ Elsewhere, Justin calls the memoirs of the apostles "Gospels." Thus, by Justin's time, the church already was treating the Gospels as Scripture on a par with the "the prophets," that is, the Old Testament writings. After the sermon, bread and "a cup of water mixed with wine" are brought to the "president" who "offers thanksgiving at some length . . . to the best of his ability." The prayer ended with the "Amen!" of the congregation. The bread and wine and water were then distributed to everyone present by the deacons, who also brought it to those who were absent. Again, participation in the Lord's supper is restricted. Justin remarks that "this food we call Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things we teach are true, and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth [baptism], and who lives as Christ handed down to us."¹² He goes on to tell his pagan readers:

[W]e do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.¹³

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

From the very beginning Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Early Christians had thus

adopted (and adapted) two Jewish practices for their worship: the reading and preaching of Scripture and the sharing of a sacred meal. The use of Scripture in worship come, of course, from the synagogue. The Gospels describe Jesus as preaching in the synagogues and reading from the scroll of Isaiah at his synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-20). The meal that Christians used was called the *berakoth* (from the Hebrew word for "blessing").¹⁴ It took its name from various prayers blessing God that accompanied the meal. Indeed, these prayers provided the outline and much of the content for the extemporized prayers at the Christian eucharist that Justin mentions.

The most important *berakoth*, was, of course, the Passover seder. However, this was not the only time a formal meal with prescribed psalms and prayers was shared. The *berakoth* was used on the other holy days of the Jewish calendar and on the Sabbath, and some elements of it were part of every meal shared in a Jewish household. Significantly, the *berakoth* began with the blessing and breaking of bread and the blessing and sharing of a cup of wine. At the Last Supper, Jesus infused the *berakoth* with a new meaning when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

As the church's worship developed, a process of "continuity and discontinuity" emerged: a continuity of form and a discontinuity of content. The first Christians incorporated elements of Jewish worship in their services (continuity of form), but the old forms were invested with new meaning (discontinuity of content). When the first Christians gathered, they used, as Jesus had with his disciples, elements from Jewish prayer and worship. These practices were, as St. Paul reminds his readers in 1 Corinthians 11:23, passed on to the Gentile converts.

However, when Christians gathered for the breaking of the bread, they were doing something new: they were meeting their risen Lord, for Jesus had promised that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20). In his apocalyptic vision, St. John revealed the truth about the church and its worship: in the midst of the churches stood the exalted Christ (Revelation 1:12-13) and at

the center of worship stood, "as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6), the Lamb of God.

A cross-pollination between early worship and the gospel narratives of Jesus' resurrection appearances can be detected. Both contain the indispensable ingredients of worship. This is most evident in Luke's account of the disciples meeting Jesus on the road Emmaus (24:13-35), where all the ingredients are present in order: the gathering of disciples, the exposition of Scripture, the breaking of bread, and the going forth to bear witness. These are the four basic verbs of worship: gathering, hearing, eating, and going.

GATHERING TOGETHER

With the exception of Mary Magdalene, the Gospel accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances always involve a gathering of at least two disciples. In both Testaments, the formal gathering of God's people is frequently the prelude to God's action. Numerous examples can be cited: the giving of the Ten Commandments, Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal, the Sermon on the Mount, and so forth. Likewise, the Bible considers the congregation as the proper context for prayer, proclamation and praise: "I will thank you in the great congregation . . . in the midst of the congregation I will praise you. . . . I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people . . ." (Psalm 35:18; 22:22; 116:18).

The Hebrew word used to designate the formal assembly of God's people is *qahal*. The Greek Septuagint translated it as *ekklesia*, the root of words like "ecclesiology" and "ecclesiastical." St. Paul used this word more than any other New Testament writer (65 times) to mean either a local congregation or the worldwide fellowship of believers constituting one body of whom Jesus was the head. Early Christians understood "church" as their Old Testament ancestors had: the formal gathering of God's people in order to hear his words, remember his deeds, and offer him due praise and thanksgiving. They understood themselves to be "the assembly (*ekklesia*) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23).

There was a historical uniqueness to the Christian assem-

bly. When St. Paul wrote "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), he was describing not only the "demographics" of a Christian congregation, but the "guest list" for the Lord's Supper. Nowhere else in ancient Rome could such a diverse group of people gather at one table where "we who are many are one body for we all partake of one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

HEARING THE WORD

In his Gospel, St. Luke records that an exposition of Scripture formed part of Jesus' resurrection appearances. On the way to Emmaus, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). Later, when he was with his disciples, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (24:45). Even the "two men" who speak to the women at the empty tomb minister the Word: "Remember how [Jesus] told you while he was still in Galilee . . ." (24:6). If worship was the church's meeting with her risen Lord, the "opening" of Scriptures had to be a part of that meeting.

For most of church history, the congregation provided the context for the reading of God's Word. Historical and technological reasons made this unavoidable. It was not until Gutenberg invented movable type that inexpensive books became widely available and large numbers of Christians became literate. Before then, the majority of Christians received the Word of God in oral, not written, form. Scripture was something heard, not read, and Christians could only hear the Bible when it was read aloud to them in church.

This may be more than an accident of history, and modern Christians should consider what impact our current practice of reading the Bible piecemeal in isolation has had on our interpretation. Thus, M. Eugene Boring begins his commentary on Revelation in the *Interpretation* series by reminding us that "Revelation was designed to be read aloud and heard all at once, in the context of worship. This is not optional; the Apocalypse must be grasped as a whole."¹⁵

It should also be mentioned that worship played a decisive role in the eventual fixing of the New Testament canon (a process that took centuries). The multiplication of false gospels and epistles in the second century made it necessary for the church to establish which texts were appropriate to be read and preached at worship. The process began as early as when St. Paul told the Colossians, "When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea" (4:16). In the second century, the church rightly feared that spurious texts would cause confusion, so it began to list those writings it deemed to be authoritative and inspired. The church's concern was realistic: the confusion it feared has reappeared in our own times.

EATING THE SUPPER

After his resurrection Jesus ate with his disciples on three occasions. Luke's account of the meal in Emmaus, where Jesus takes, blesses and breaks the bread, echoes the Last Supper, which was, in turn, a *berakoth* like those discussed above. St. Paul identified the practice of breaking the bread as something which "I received from the Lord [and] delivered to you" (1 Corinthians 11:17). For St. Paul, as later for Justin, the breaking of the bread was done in obedience and explicit command of Jesus. In the New Testament, it is an act of remembrance, but the early church soon understood it also as an act of thanksgiving (hence, *eucharist*) for the salvation God had wrought through his Son. There was more. In Luke, Jesus exclaimed, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:14). Texts like Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4-5 clearly attest that worship is the "business of heaven." When gathering to worship on earth, Christians receive a foretaste of God's Kingdom. The blessing comes, for "the kingdom of God is at hand."

GOING FORTH TO SERVE

In the Gospels, nearly everyone who meets the risen Lord does the same thing: they go and tell the good news to others,

either spontaneously, or because they had been told to do so. Early Christians responded to their meeting with Christ in worship in the same way: they followed the Great Commission. They did something else. Justin discusses the collection taken at the end of the eucharistic meal:

What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among [us], and, briefly, he is the protector of all those in need.¹⁶

The living Lord, whom Christians met in worship, whose gospel they proclaimed, they also served in the person of the needy, for they had heard what was done to the least was done to Christ. Thus, it is worship, the church's meeting with her Lord on the day of resurrection, that is the soil and foundation of her witness, her service, and, yes, her peacemaking.

Author

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Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Touchstone [reprint]), 39.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Living the Message* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), xii.
3. Richardson, Cyril C., translator, *Early Christian Fathers*, Volume 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 174.
4. *Early Christian Fathers*, 178.
5. *Early Christian Fathers*, 175.
6. *Early Christian Fathers*, 175.
7. *Early Christian Fathers*, 115.
8. *Early Christian Fathers*, 93.
9. *Early Christian Fathers*, 108.

10. *Early Christian Fathers*, 114.
11. *Early Christian Fathers*, 287.
12. *Early Christian Fathers*, 286.
13. *Early Christian Fathers*, 286.
14. A detailed discussion of the *berakoth* and its influence on the early church's celebration of the Lord's Supper can be found in Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).
15. M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), vii.
16. *Early Christian Fathers*, 287.