

## Life in the Early Church

We ended last week with some questions and I wanted to address a couple of them this week to fill in some of the gaps from last Sunday's overview of the first 300 years of the Christian church in action. One question was, "How did the church worship and how does their worship compare with what we do today?" and another question was about the content of some of the writings that were, late in the fourth century, excluded from the official canon of the New Testament.

Let's start with the question of worship. The first believers were all Jews and they didn't consider their faith in Christ to be anything other than belief that the promised Messiah had come and brought the salvation spoken of in the Old Testament. So, their worship continued to be centred around the Temple and the synagogue. The first believers, in Jerusalem, met daily in the courts of the temple and broke bread, or shared communion, in their homes (Acts 2:46). But as the church expanded throughout the Roman Empire, the focal point for these Jewish Christians was the synagogue service. The pattern of synagogue worship was like this:

- open with prayer (shema)
- 2 benedictions
- reading of 10 commandments (congregation says "Amen")
- 18 prayers and benedictions ("Amen" response)
- a reading from the law and from the prophets (in Hebrew)
- a sermon in the local language
- a benediction and "Amen"

The leaders of the synagogue consisted of a president, elders, a reader, an interpreter, clerks, a sexton for looking after the building needs and deacons who collected alms, gifts of money for those in need. Men and women were divided by a low wall or screen. During prayer, people would stand facing Jerusalem. Services were held on Sabbath (Saturday), Monday and Thursday. Hours of prayer were 9, 12 and 3.

The Christians who came from a Jewish background quite naturally stayed within this structure, at least partly because it provided them a perfect opportunity to share their faith in Jesus. Any male who had gone through his bar mitzvah was allowed to read Scripture, to lead in prayer or to speak -- and so the early Christians used this opportunity to explain how the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to Christ and how his life and death had fulfilled the promises of a Messiah. The Christians never left the synagogue on their own -- they were forced out after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

Even though the Christians were banned from the synagogue, the forms that they had learned and practised there continued to be used, although modified to fit with Christian beliefs.

Here's a chart that compares the core beliefs and practices of both Judaism and Christianity:

1. The Jews worship on the Sabbath, or Saturday, because this was the seventh day of Creation, the day on which God rested. Christians worship on Sunday because this was the day of resurrection, when Jesus defeated death.

2. The sacraments in Judaism were circumcision and Passover. The Christian sacraments are closely related. Our Lord's Supper commemorates the Passover meal that Jesus shared with His disciples on the night He was betrayed to His death. While the Jewish Passover was a reminder of the night when the blood of the lambs protected them from the angel of death in Egypt, so the Christian eucharist or communion meal causes us to remember the sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood for us. Circumcision was the physical sign that set a person apart as belonging to the people of Israel, and later the Jews in particular. Baptism is the physical sign, the testimony, that says, "I'm a follower of Jesus; I'm putting my trust in Him."

3. The Festivals of Judaism were many, including Purim and Passover, the Festivals of Trumpets, of Weeks, and of Booths. The Christians took over two of them from the beginning -- the Festival of Passover was modified by the church to celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection -- really, the fulfillment of the original Passover with the sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God. And the Feast of Pentecost, one of the harvest festivals of the Old Testament, also known as the Feast of Weeks, was transformed by the Christian church to be a celebration of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church.

4. The central role of sacrifice in the Jewish faith had been an offering of an animal to pay for one's sins. In the Christian faith, the sacrifice was given by Jesus -- that was the full atonement offering -- but the idea of personal sacrifice, of giving one's whole life to Christ as a way of honoring Him and thanking Him became very much a part of the worship of the early church.

5. For Jews, the place of worship was, ultimately, the temple in Jerusalem. For the Christian, there was now a temple made without hands, and the place of worship was everywhere you went. A person who delighted in God was always filled with worship and praise and thanks to Him.

The worship of the early church was characterized by informality and spontaneity. This was the age of the Spirit: all believers were filled with the Spirit and gifted by that Spirit for prophecy, for teaching, for serving, for speaking in tongues, for interpretation of tongues, for words of knowledge -- each one had something to bring to the church service. Each one expected to contribute. But, in line with Paul's teaching, the contributions were expected to be for building others up and expressed in an orderly and peaceful way. The churches were not expected to operate like Corinth did for awhile, with people showing off their gifts and competing with others for attention. Perhaps to help maintain order within the freedom that was there, Scriptures would be read, hymns were sung, benedictions and doxologies were spoken.

During the second century, the church service became more structured, more

liturgical. Specifically, the purpose for meeting was moving away from experiencing the unity of the family of God and celebrating the victory of Christ, to combating heresy and unifying belief. So, while the first century saw people sharing a love feast in homes and celebrating communion as part of that, in the second century the communion was moved to the Sunday morning service. The songs that were sung were songs that taught doctrine. The free-wheeling exercise of the gifts of the Spirit was replaced by a more rigid liturgy that would typically look like this:

1. The service started with reading of the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets
2. The president would give a talk based on the reading
3. The congregation would stand for prayer
4. For a time, this was followed by the kiss of peace, but that got out of control and was eventually abandoned.
5. Then the Lord's Supper, or communion, was observed
6. A collection was taken for aid to the widows, the poor
7. The meeting was dismissed.

This information comes from Justin Martyr writing about the middle of the second century.

Already, we can see a separation between the clergy and the laity, with most Christians becoming spectators who sat passively through the service. And by this time, new converts weren't baptized right away, but went through a time of teaching first.

By the third century, things had stiffened up even more. Origen describes a two-part worship service with the first part open to people who were not yet baptized and the second part only to baptized communicants or members. The liturgy surrounded the celebration of the Lord's Supper and baptism with rites that only a priest could perform -- again, making a distance between the practice of the key elements of the faith and the person in the pew.

More important, the beginning of the third century saw a significant moral decline in the life of the churches. Bruce Shelley, writing in *Church History in Plain Language*, says

*The extraordinary moral fibre of the church had weakened . . . By the year 220 it was evident that the Christian churches, together with their bishops and clergy, were no longer what they had been. (p. 74)*

He also expressed that the rise of bishops and clergy seemed to coincide with a lack of the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of most Christians:

*Even in the 3rd century many felt that the coming of episcopacy meant the departure of the Spirit. (p.72)*

Episcopacy means the structure of church leadership that is based on a group of bishops. Bishops were overseers of churches in an urban center like Alexandria or Rome and were over the elders and deacons. As time went on, the church became more and more organized according to a hierarchy, with bishops in the prominent positions of power

Near the beginning of the fourth century, the emperor Constantine began to follow Christ. With the abolition of the persecution of the Christian church, impressive church buildings appeared in the principle cities of the empire. The business of the leaders of the church became more focused on resolving doctrinal issues and in maintaining order and uniformity throughout. And yet, and here's the amazing thing, the church continued to grow. People continued to tell others of the difference Jesus had made in their lives. God continued to inspire people to glorify Him. There are lessons we can learn from this short stretch of history, for sure, and I'll give you a chance to discuss that in a few minutes.

The second area I want to look at, before we move on to the next few centuries of church history, is the books that were not included in the canon. I mentioned them by title last Sunday, but didn't give you any analysis of why they were omitted -- so let's make up for that now.

First of all, to set the stage, you need to know that there were many, many documents written during the first 300 years of the church that claimed to have something to say about Jesus and/or other key New Testament figures. I was shocked to read that there were over 50 texts that consist of descriptions of the events surrounding the fate of Mary the mother of Jesus, including "The Home Going of Mary", "The Falling Asleep of the Mother of God" and "The Descent of Mary". The last of these is a gnostic writing from the second century in which Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is burning incense in the temple, sees a vision and, when he's finally able to speak and describe his vision, the people around him kill him. These kinds of writings add nothing to our knowledge of real historical events and served only to promote some fringe view that was ultimately rejected.

There were many gnostic writings that focused on the life and teachings of Jesus. Examples include the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth and the Sophia of Jesus Christ. Most scholars agree that these works are from the late second or early third century, are not written by the people whose names appear on them, and their purpose is to advance a gnostic world view. Because none of these late texts were seriously considered for inclusion into the canon of the New Testament, let's look at some that were.

*The Shepherd of Hermas* was a very popular writing in the second century. Hermas presents himself as a simple and happy follower of Jesus who, through a series of visions, is confronted with his sins and is called to do penance and to correct the sins of his wayward children. As a whole, the Shepherd gives us insight into the development of early Christian ethics. It includes instructions to a husband whose wife has been unfaithful and his obligation to take her back if she repents. The focus of this work is the need for Christians to live holy lives, to do penance for their sins and for the church to restore them when they do. Despite its popularity, there is little evidence to suggest that it was written much before the middle of the second century which would disqualify it for being part of the canon. The Muratorian fragment, which includes Hermas in its list of New Testament writings identifies the author as the

brother of Pope Pius I, whose role as Pope did not begin before 140 A.D.: The “fragment” contains this statement:

*But Hermas wrote “The Shepherd” very recently, in our times, in the city of Rome, while bishop Pius, his brother, was occupying the chair of the church of the city of Rome. And therefore it ought indeed to be read; but it cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the Apostles, for it is after their time.*

Another writing that was considered by some for inclusion into the New Testament was the Epistle of Barnabas. This appears to be a letter written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 and before the final defeat of the Jews in 135. It is written against the Judaizers that we have met so many times in Paul’s letters and teaches that Christians are the true covenant people of God because the Jews had not been faithful to the covenant. The writer insists on a clear separation of the Gentile Christians from observant Jews and thoroughly opposes Jewish legalism.

The anti-Jewish nature of this epistle is actually extreme and the author reinterprets many of the Old Testament laws in ways that would not have been considered legitimate, either then or now. For example, this writer argues that the Old Testament laws against eating pork are meant to be figurative and are meant to instruct the believer not to be like pigs, grunting to God when we’re hungry but ignoring Him when we are satisfied. You can see that that would be a non-starter in the first century and didn’t gain much traction after that.

There were many early writings that started with “The Acts of ...” in their title. There was a work called “The Acts of Andrew”, another titled “The Acts of John” and others included “The Acts of Barnabas”, “The Acts of the Martyrs”, “The Acts of Paul and Thecla”, “The Acts of Philip”, even “The Acts of Pilate”. One I mentioned last Sunday that was considered, although briefly, for inclusion into the canon, was called “The Acts of Peter”. This was written in the second half of the second century and contains accounts such as a miracle contest between Peter and Simon Magus, Peter resurrecting smoked fish, Peter making dogs talk and this writing is the first to describe the tradition of Peter being crucified head down. It is a late document, very dissimilar to the New Testament writings and failing the test of “the ring of truth” in the way it describes events in Peter’s life.

There were three gospels written within the community of Jewish Christians and used within those congregations. None have survived to our day and we know about them only through quotations in the early Church Fathers who wrote during the second, third and fourth centuries. One of these was the Gospel of the Hebrews which circulated among very traditional Christian churches in Egypt during the early part of the 2nd century. They believed that strict observance of Jewish law was essential to salvation. Even with the small number of fragmentary texts we have of the Gospel of Hebrews, we can see some inconsistencies that are troubling to any who want clear doctrines in their teaching. In one fragment, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as the power that came into the world and was called Mary. In another, the Spirit takes the place of

Satan in the temptation of Jesus and in others, Jesus becomes the narrator, as if He was the author of the book. All in all, this gospel relies more on the Greek and Roman myth of the descent of Divine Wisdom and shows an obvious anti-Gentile bias.

One more, to finish off, is called the Didache or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It is divided into three sections, dealing with Christian ethics in one, with the sacraments of baptism and communion in a second, and finally with how the church should be organized. It is considered the first example of a book of "church orders". Some of the early church fathers considered it a part of the New Testament, but others claimed it was late and lacked a true connection to the twelve apostles. Ultimately, it was rejected as being a late first century work rather than having a direct relationship with the original apostles.

Through the years, scholars and bloggers have both leveled criticisms at the church for omitting this book or that document ... and there are many, many documents from the first and second centuries that might have been considered ... but, ultimately, the church got it right. If you read just a sampling of the writing in these rejected documents, you see that it doesn't fit. It sounds like a late addition or a tangent to the important early history and faith of those who walked with Jesus and were charged by Him with the task of taking His message to the world.

What do we learn? Why does it matter? It matters that we have confidence in the Bible that tells us about Jesus. If we don't have that confidence, then it becomes easy to reject the parts we find difficult, it becomes easy to doubt our faith. The reality is that we have excellent reasons for holding the Scriptures in high regard, in trusting their testimony of Jesus and of the meaning of His death and resurrection. We shouldn't give that away or sell it short.

The second thing that matters is the unity we find in the way various writers portrayed Jesus, His mission and His character. When you compare the New Testament documents with the ones that were not included, you gain an appreciation for how objective they are. You aren't hit with a ton of personal biases from the authors like you are with some of these other writings. From that you gain a sense that you are really meeting Jesus, and you are really hearing the heart beat of the early church.

When I look back at the worship of the early church, what strikes me is how quickly they lost the sense of family and fellowship and began to focus on uniformity of doctrine and practice. The church moved from being sons and daughters of God on mission with Jesus our brother and leader and Lord, to being a religious institution offering religious services to comfort and instruct the faithful ... and it happened quickly. The love feast was gone before the end of the first century. The liturgy replaced the gifts of the Spirit, also in short order. Why were those things valuable in the early days of the church and less valuable later on? Because the church was threatened by false teachings and the bad behavior of some, and wanted to tighten things up. We feel that same impulse over and over again. We feel like we should, maybe, tighten things up, be more disciplined, take a stronger stand against sin, start

on time, be more orderly. But the risk is that we lose the sense of family, the personal connections, and start to trust our authority or our rules instead of trusting the Lord to work in each person's life for His glory. There are tons of lessons to learn from the first centuries of the life of the church -- let's be humble and eager learners as we continue to marvel at what God has done.