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# THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

TO JUSTIN MARTYR

By the Rev. A. W. PARSONS  
*Vicar of St. John's, Boscombe*

## The Primitive Church.

THE worship of the Primitive Church *followed the precedents both of the Temple and of the synagogue.* At first the Apostles were diligent in their attendance at the Temple, and the keen desire of St. Paul to keep the feast at Jerusalem (Acts xx. 16) shows that the services of Christian assemblies were as yet regarded as supplementary to the central shrine.

But it is important, as the Abbé Duchesne writes, "not to confuse the *cultus* of the Temple at Jerusalem with that of the synagogues. The former exercised no influence upon the Christian liturgy: the comparisons which mediæval interpreters loved to establish between the ritual of the Pentateuch and that of the Church are not to be taken seriously. All that has been said on this subject is due to mere ingenuity, with no foundation on tradition. Except then, in the principles which underlie all worship, the services of the Mosaic Dispensation are not a model for ourselves."

*The Christian Church to-day is in no sense a Temple.* Fairbairn's conclusions, with some modifications, may help us in this connection. He is speaking of all temples whether heathen or Hebrew.

The Temple was built in a sacred grove or in the place it consecrated, which signified that God was chained to the spot; thither man had to come to find Him and to present the offerings He loved. But we build our churches in cities and amid the haunts of men, for (John iv. 24):

"Where'er we seek Him He is found and every place is hallowed ground."

In the Temple the priest officiated and offered the sacrifices that pleased God; in the Church the people offer the sacrifices of prayer and praise and a man with a prophetic gift speaks concerning the truth of God. In the Temple man tried by shedding of blood to propitiate God; in the Church a Gospel of Divine grace is preached which commands all men everywhere to come to a God Who is reconciled. In the Temple men gave to God that they might get from Him what He alone could give; but in the Church men worship a God whose

favours they cannot purchase, Who ever does what becomes Himself and Who has Himself given to the uttermost.

At the same time we must recall that St. Luke evidently attached much importance to the fact recorded at the end of his Gospel, that after the Resurrection the Apostles were continually in the Temple, blessing God (xxiv. 53). Their assurance that Jesus was the Messiah, proved by His victory over death, made no breach in the continuity of their Jewish faith and practice. It rather revealed in their minds a new wealth of meaning in the old ritual, and so fired them as worshippers with a new enthusiasm. A. C. McGiffert, *History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age*, thinks that it may fairly be supposed that the effect of their Christian faith was to make all the early disciples more devout and earnest Jews than they had ever been. F. J. A. Hort, *Judaistic Christianity*, says, "We have distinct evidence that Christian Jews, like other Jews, frequented the Temple, the sanctuary of the nation, and thereby maintained their claim to be Jews in the true sense." After the baptism of fire on the day of Pentecost they are found continuing steadfastly with one accord in the Temple (Acts ii. 46). Peter and John went up to the Temple at the hour of Prayer (iii. 1); they found their best audiences in the Temple Courts and performed the first Christian miracle at its gates. They were arrested not by the religious, but by the secular authorities and the Sadducees for a disturbance of the peace. The reproof administered to them was as mild as their imprisonment was brief and the Christian Jews continued to meet in Solomon's Porch (v. 12). Until the appearance of Stephen created a new situation, the Apostles were daily in the Temple, teaching and preaching that Jesus was Messiah. The bearing of their teaching upon the Temple Worship itself was not perceived until Stephen declared that the worship of God in this Temple "made with hands" was not in accordance with the will of God. It was not so much the worship, however, which he condemned, as the spirit of the worshippers. He warned them, in the manner of the old prophets, that no amount of attention to outward ordinances could ever succeed in obtaining God's favour. He demanded a spiritual, as opposed to a mechanical religion.

For *St. Paul* the observance of the ancient ritual laws, which had long been a matter of principle, became at last a matter of indifference. He was consequently accused of "teaching all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses" (Acts xxi. 21). This he never did and to prove that the charge was groundless, he was advised, during his last visit to the Temple, to conciliate the great mass of Christian Jews by performing the vow of a Nazarite in the Temple. It had results which were not contemplated, for the Jews rose in arms against Paul as a profaner of the Temple, and the Romans arrested him as a disturber of the peace.

*James the Just*, the Lord's brother, represented two ideas—the continuance of the Church in union with the Temple and the hope of Israel's Conversion. After his martyrdom his spirit and ideals survived for a time, but when, in 67, the Christians found it necessary, in view of the approaching crisis with Rome, to quit Jerusalem and migrate

to the Hellenistic city of Pella, beyond the Jordan, the hope of a Jewish national Church, with its worship centralized in Jerusalem, and giving both the law and the Gospel to all men, had to be postponed and was finally abandoned when the Temple was destroyed.

*The influence of the worship of the synagogue is more easy to trace than that of the Temple.* The synagogue did not define itself as an institution until the Greek period, i.e. the period subsequent to the conquests of Alexander the Great, 323 B.C. In the time of Our Lord they were found in practically every town and village where a Jewish population existed. Contemporary Jewish literature states that there was a synagogue in the Temple. Ancient synagogues were arranged differently from the modern. In the Talmudic period they seem to have been modelled on the Temple—the entrance was from the east and the ark containing the scrolls of the law was in the west. In the modern synagogue the position is exactly reversed—the ark is placed in the east and the reader, while on the bema, faces east.

With the destruction of the Temple, A.D. 70, Jewish worship naturally concentrated on the synagogues. Had the altar system of tabernacle and temple been the exclusive means of divine access available to the Israelites, the cessation of sacrifices would have marked a much greater liturgical disturbance than actually took place. As a fact continuity was preserved and the keynote of the transition was Hosea xiv. 3 (Heb. xiv. 2, R.V.): "Let our prayers make up for the bullocks of our sacrifices."

As I am able to say very little in the space at my disposal about ritual traces and elements in the O.T. it may be well at this point to remind you that the word *hostia* or *host* is used by the Vulgate for the Sin-offering, Burnt-offering and Peace-Offerings. Christians, like the Jews to-day, have no such literal sacrifices. We have no Sin-offering nor Burnt-offering except the one offering on the Cross, the virtue of which is continuous. Our Peace Offering is the sacrifice of praise (Heb. xiii. 13), that is, the joyful offering of a thankful heart, and that there may be no materializing misconception we are told that by this sacrifice is meant no material offering but "the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His Name." The only Christian "host" is the immaterial sacrifice of prayer, praise and thanksgiving.

It was along this path that the worship of the synagogue developed after the Destruction of the Temple. We trace three lines of development

- (1) Prayers of repentance and penitence (including fasting).
- (2) Thanksgiving and praise (this centred in the feasts).
- (3) Petitions.

Study and the recital of teaching passages of Post-Biblical literature were later institutions. In harmony with its origin the Synagogue worship is essentially of a democratic or popular type. It has no organic connection with the priesthood; its ministers were essentially laymen—at first it had no professional ministers at all, the Rabbis whom it singled out for special honour being simply learned laymen.

It is important, however, to remember that the Temple Worship profoundly influenced the structure of the synagogue liturgy and the

form and substance of its prayers. From the time when the worship at one central shrine was established (18th year of Josiah, 621 B.C.) down to the destruction of the Temple about seven centuries later, the worship of God was regarded as finding its complete and adequate expression only in the Temple service, with its elaborate cultus of priesthood and sacrifice.

G. H. Box writes : " The immense and manifold religious activities that concentrated themselves in the Temple worship can only be adequately realized when it is remembered how unique was the position occupied by Judaism's central shrine. It was absolutely the one and only sanctuary where the highest expression of the religious life of the whole people could be offered. Judaism possessed but one Sanctuary and that was in Jerusalem."

Moreover, for the purposes of the National worship the land of Palestine was divided up into 24 districts, corresponding to the 24 courses of priests, and one course from each district, consisting of priests, levites and lay Israelites was on duty in the Temple for a week at a time. Not all the priests belonging to a particular course could do duty at the sacrifice during the whole week when that course was on duty in the Temple ; the course was therefore divided into " fathers' houses." In the same way not all the laymen could be present. Consequently each course was represented by deputation at the sanctuary ; the others who had been left behind assembled in the local synagogues, at the time of sacrifice and engaged in prayer and the reading of Scripture.

When we pass to the N.T. the main fact seems to be that our Lord's own example and teaching are associated with the synagogue rather than with the Temple, the seat of the sacrificial and priestly system of worship. To Him the Temple was primarily a " House of Prayer." His teaching on worship is mainly on genuine prayer as opposed to formal prayers, " vain repetitions," and even the Lord's Prayer is given as an example of the right sort rather than as a form for regular repetition.

Such a valuation of forms of worship, in proportion as they express simply and directly the spirit of worship, is not only continuous with that of the prophets and of parts of the Psalter but appears in the Apocrypha and in some Rabbinic utterances such as that of R. Menahem of Galilee (about the Christian era) : " One day all sacrifices will cease, only the thanksgiving prayer will not cease." This saying seems to point to a Messianic era of perfected worship, when sacrifices for sin would no longer be needed and this is just the position in which the first followers of Jesus felt themselves to be, as spiritually united to the Messiah. In the Epistle to the Hebrews their new relation to God is worked out as conditioned by the representative self-oblation of God's sinless Son (Heb. x. 1-18 ; ii. 10, 11). Through Him all Christians are made priests to God as united in spirit with the Great High Priest and as such have access for communion with God of the most intimately spiritual kind (x. 19-22). This conception, as we shall see, conditions the whole of the practice of the Primitive Church as regards worship.

It is to the Apostolic Church that we must now direct our attention.

### The Apostolic Church.

Meetings at fixed times for worship began at once in the Apostolic Church and were gradually shaped by the needs of the time, for as Gwatkin says in *Early Church History*, there is no reason to suppose that the Lord Himself left any regulations for conducting them. At Jerusalem, as we have seen, the first Christians went up to the Temple to pray. Elsewhere they frequented the synagogues as long as they were allowed. But they had meetings of their own from the first and they developed the services of the synagogue in a very independent way. Gwatkin says, and the other authorities I have consulted agree, that : " They had the same general structure of prayer and thanksgiving, reading and exhortation. But the prayer seems to have been extempore, with (if we may judge from Clement of Rome) a decided touch of the synagogue prayers and a strong tendency to fall into grooves."

They must also have had a distinctly Christian element emphasized by the early appearance of Christian hymns. Hymns are nearly always the first literary efforts of infant Churches and the Apostolic Age was no exception. We find more than traces of them in the N.T. itself (1 Tim. iii. 16 ; Eph. v. 14) and our *Gloria in Excelsis* is so related to Polycarp's last prayer before the fire was lighted that its earliest form may date from long before A.D. 155. The reading would at first be of the O.T., much in the Jewish way, unless there was an Apostolic letter to be read, or some other edifying communication. But the reading of the N.T. (Gospels as well as Epistles) must have been introduced quite early in the 2nd century. Then came the sermon, which must have differed greatly from the Jewish. Our first sample of one after N.T. times is the so-called Second Epistle of Clement (120-160, Streeter), apparently preached at Corinth in the middle of the 2nd century. " It is poor stuff no doubt " (that is Gwatkin), but it conforms to the rule that every Christian sermon must be directly or indirectly a preaching of Christ. After the sermon came the distinctively Christian ordinance of the Lord's Supper. In the N.T. and the *Didache* (90, Streeter) it is the solemn grace which closed the evening meal, but at Rome in Justin's time it had already been separated from the *Agape* and transferred to the Sunday morning service. We find evening communion, however, as late as the 5th century. With this change another may have been connected. In the N.T. and the *Didache* no distinction seems to be made among Christians. Even a heathen may come to the prophesyings and there are practically no catechumens to be shut out from the *Agape*. But with the transfer of the Lord's Supper to the Sunday morning it assumed more the character of a Mystery which none but the baptized might see. In the *Didache* there is no sign of a priest and the celebration is the common act of the whole Church. Only the baptized are to partake of the Eucharist, which is that holy thing that cannot be given to the dogs, though not because the Eucharistic elements are regarded as conveying some mysterious power or are in any sense sacrificial ; for as yet there is not much advance on Rom. xii. 1.

(To be continued.)