THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

TO JUSTIN MARTYR

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(*Concluded*)

Lindsay's *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* has described in a graphic way the meeting for edification in one of the Gentile Churches founded by St. Paul.

" The brethren fill the body of the hall, the women sitting together, in all probability on the one side and the men on the other ; behind them are the enquirers ; and behind them, clustering round the door, unbelievers, whom curiosity or some other motive has attracted, and who are welcome to this meeting " for the Word."

The service, and probably each part of the service, began with the benediction : " Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," which was followed by the invocation of Jesus and the confession that He is Lord. One of the brethren began to pray ; then another and another ; one began the Lord's Prayer and all joined ; each prayer was followed by a fervent and hearty " Amen." Then a hymn was sung ; then another and another, for several of the brethren have composed or selected hymns at home which they wish to be sung by the congregation. . . .

After the hymns came reading from the O.T. Scriptures and readings or recitations concerning the life and death, the sayings and deeds of Jesus. Then came the " instruction "—sober words for edification, based on what had been read, and coming either from the gift of " wisdom," or from the intuitive power of seeing into the heart of spiritual things which the apostle calls " knowledge." Then came the moment of greatest expectancy. It was the time for the prophets, men who believed themselves, and were believed by their brethren to be specially taught by the Holy Spirit, to take part. They started forward, the gifted men, so eager to impart what had been given them, that sometimes two or more rose at once and spoke together ; and sometimes when one was speaking the message came to another, and he leapt to his feet, increasing the emotion and taking from the edification. When the prophets were silent, first one and then another, and sometimes two at once, began strange ejaculatory prayers, in sentences so rugged and disjointed that the audience for the most part could not understand, and had to wait till some of their number, who could follow the strange utterance, were ready to translate them into intelligible

language. Then followed the benediction : " The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all ": the kiss of peace and the congregation dispersed. Sometimes during the meeting, but oftenest when the prophets were speaking, there was a stir at the back of the room, and a heathen, who had been listening in careless curiosity or in barely concealed scorn, suddenly felt the sinful secrets of his own heart revealed to him, and pushing forward fell down at the feet of the speaker and made his confession, while the assembly raised the doxology : " Blessed be God the Father of the Lord Jesus, for evermore. Amen." The elements of such worship-prayer, praise and instruction—combined to make what Duchesne in a happy phrase calls " a Liturgy of the Holy Ghost after the Liturgy of Christ, a true liturgy with a Real Presence and Communion."

The normal character of primitive Christian worship then is thanksgiving, at once praise and prayer, which, as Menahem said, remains after other kinds of " prayers " have ceased. Christians offer up through Jesus " sacrifices of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to His name (Heb. xiii. 15, cf. 1 Pet. ii. 5 ; Rev. i. 6 ; v. 8 ; viii. 3 ff.).

As for outward sacrifices, only the thankoffering remains, viz., deeds of beneficence and fellowship " for with such sacrifices God is pleased " (Heb. xiii. 16). " He knows little of himself who is not much in prayer, and he knows little of God who is not much in praise." These words, says Dr. A. E. Burn, express the habitual thought and practice of the Apostolic Church.

Dr. Bartlett in *E.R.E.* sums up the evidence of the N.T. in this way : " Evidently the forms of worship in the Apostolic Age were not fixed or uniform. The new Christian spirit brought a fresh element of spontaneity (2 Cor. iii. 17) into the forms of common worship, which otherwise followed in the main synagogal usage. To this the earliest converts, both Jews and proselytes, were accustomed and it would naturally be adhered to, save for any feature distinctive of the New Messianic form of their faith, such as the breaking of bread with thanksgiving to God for the Messianic redemption in Christ and in His Name. This note of adoring gratitude to God for His goodness in creation and redemption which explains the term ' Eucharist ' as used for the central act of Christian worship remains through all ages its abiding characteristic."

Early Christian Writings to A.D. 155.

The forms of worship in the Sub-Apostolic Church were still determined mainly by those of the synagogue as modified by the " prophetic " spirit in the Primitive Church. Our first glimpse of Christian Worship, as reported in the well-known letter of Pliny, c. 112, shows us the Christian assembly meeting on a stated day (Sunday) and singing a hymn to Christ as to a God, and a pledging of themselves in solemn form (sacramento) against theft, adultery and other social wrongs. No doubt the other elements of Synagogue worship were also present in primitive Christian worship though they are not named by Pliny. The letters of Ignatius (115, Streeter) prove that the essential

atmosphere of this early Christian worship was loving unity. " For if the prayer of one and another hath so great strength, how much more that of the Bishop and of the whole Church. Whosoever therefore cometh not to fellowship (lit : together, cp. Acts ii. 1, 44, 47) stands apart from the altar (Thusiastērion), the holy place where the assemblage of God's people (which Methodius later styles a " bloodless altar ") offers up the sacrifice of prayer and particularly that of the " Eucharist." For a similar reason, because they are specially devoted to the offering of the sacrifice of prayer, widows are called by Polycarp, " God's Altar." These expressions show how intense was the early Christians' sense of the sacredness of prayer as the supreme form of worship and how spiritual was their idea of Christian sacrifice.

In Ignatius " Eucharist " usually denotes the Holy Communion Service, the whole act of worshipful thanksgiving associated with the memorial bread. This act seems also in the *Didache* (xiv. 4) to be called the Christians' " pure sacrifice " of praise to God's Name (cp. Mal. i. 11, 14) and its profoundly spiritual nature is shown by the warning that the Church's sacrifice will not be a pure offering if unbrotherly feeling be present even between two of the worshippers.

At this point we must quote from Justin's Apology (155, Streeter) which gives us our one connected picture of Christian corporate Sunday worship in the 2nd century. On Sundays there is a gathering together of the local Church and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read as long as time permits. Then the President gives an address. Next we all rise together and send up prayers " making common prayer for ourselves . . . and for all others everywhere earnestly . . . that we may be deemed worthy . . . by our deeds also to be found good livers and keepers of the commandments, that so we may be saved with the eternal salvation." When we cease from the prayers we salute each other with a kiss. Next, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the President, taking them, sends up as best he can prayers in like manner and thanksgivings " sends up praise and glory to the Universe through the Name of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and makes thanksgiving (eucharist) at length for our having been deemed worthy of these (blessings) at His hands . . . and the people chime in with the Amen. Then takes place the distribution to each, and the partaking from the elements for which thanks were given, and to the absent, portions are sent by the hands of the deacons.

Eucharistic worship in Justin, as in Irenæus (185, Streeter) and during the 3rd century for the most part, if I may anticipate, has no relation to sin in the worshippers. Christians as such are consecrated by union with Christ and as such are counted worthy of the high function of offering as priests their prayers and giving of thanks as acceptable sacrifices to God. Thus far then the Eucharist has no propitiatory aspect even for the living, let alone the dead, although on the anniversary of martyrs from Polycarp (Martyrdom, 156) onwards, eucharistic worship was offered in their name also (since they were the supreme human examples of the offering of the body as a living sacrifice) and the Communion of saints was conceived as including also the Church Triumphant.

Canon Meyrick, in *Scriptural and Catholic Truth and Worship*, is right in his general statement that the history of the Sub-Apostolic and Early Church betrays the existence of no doctrine that does not appear in the Gospels, or the Acts or the Epistles.

Christian Worship in all the early Christian writings is the fulfilment of Paul's injunction: "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well pleasing to God, your rational service." It is this worship which Justin Martyr contrasts with that of the Pagans as worship of the Creator of the Universe who needs no blood offerings and libations and incense but is worthily honoured only by praise "in words of prayer and thanksgiving over all our food." Such worship generally is not distinguished from the Eucharist but each alike is a form of the "unbloody sacrifice" which Christians may offer to God. But we do find the prayer of "Eucharist" or Thanksgiving to be the heart of primitive Christian worship as it was of Judaism. This thanksgiving, however, covers the whole of life. There is an echo of this conception in our own Communion Service. "It is very meet, right and our bounden duty that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto God." At first no doubt, the thanksgivings were extempore, but it is of the nature of extemporaneous addresses, frequently repeated, to become, after a time, forms; we know from Justin Martyr and the *Didache* that when the minister was competent even the Consecration Prayer in the H.C. was extempore down to the middle of the 2nd century. There is, by the way, some well-grounded proof that the Apostles consecrated the Elements by the use of the Lord's Prayer.

In the *Didache* there is a provision that a person to be baptized is to fast one or two days previously and also "let him that baptizes and any others that can, fast." No such regulation is given as to fasting before Holy Communion, nor could the practice have existed while the Holy Communion was administered together with the *Agape* or evening meal.

After the separation of the Eucharist from the *Agape* (both are found together in some places up to the date 300, though most churches severed the connection between the two about A.D. 100) certain liturgical changes took place due partly to the inclusion of the Eucharist in a morning service of the synagogue type. Ere long (under the influence of current sacramental ideas other than Jewish) it took on a mysteriously realistic character alien to the original Jewish notion of a meal of religious fellowship with blessing or Eucharist of God. (There I almost quote Dr. Vernon Bartlett.) The former of these developments, the liturgical, was fostered by the ancient notion of worship outside prophetic Judaism, that some *material* offering was essential to worship. Hence the oblation of a humble and contrite heart came in time to appear to most Gentile Christians to fall short of perfect worship; and this led to the Eucharistic prayers receiving a new meaning as an offering of the elements to God in worship, as a gift to the Giver of all. To this there was added, by a natural reaction of old associations as to such worship—particularly in connection with the mysteries (the superficial likeness of which to the Christian Eucharist Justin feels and apologizes for)—the notion that God met the earthly gift with a Divine Gift in

return, by filling it with a new and mysterious quality. In Justin this has led to the belief that the words of institution, cited in the Church's Eucharistic prayer, were a formula of Divine power, producing in the elements themselves the presence of the body and blood of Christ. This laid the foundation of the so-called Catholic conception of the Eucharist and of the corresponding devotional attitude towards the elements themselves, the full fruit of which is hindering the true development of liturgical worship to-day.

In Justin (155) and later in Irenæus (185), however, this idea appears only as the belief that the worshippers' bodies are prepared for resurrection by partaking of Christ's resurrection body and blood. There is no suggestion that such presence of Christ's body and blood is of benefit to the *soul*. Adoration of Christ as present in the elements and the notion that He in them was being offered as the Christian Sacrifice do not appear until the fourth century.

The Mystery Religions.

The striking likeness of some Christian rites to those practised in certain of the so-called Mystery Religions did not escape the observation of Justin Martyr, as we have already noted, and this likeness has been the subject of much discussion recently. Dr. Burkitt in the *Legacy of Israel* writes : " Whatever be the cause of the resemblance between the Eucharist and the rites of Mithra, the Christian Religion is a cult whereby the worshippers, who have all been individually admitted members of the Society by a holy rite, believe that they obtain the favour of Heaven now and a happy immortality hereafter by partaking of a sacred meal, whereby they get in some way communion and fellowship with the God whom they worship." Dr. Burkitt is emphatic in his belief that the Christian Sacraments are certainly no part of the inheritance taken from Judaism. They are not derived from the Temple worship nor, except in certain minor details, from the services of the synagogue. Indeed, he finds the Jewish elements in Christianity easy to enumerate. They are two : Jesus and the Bible.

Dean Inge at the date of *Contentio Veritatis* thought that there had been borrowing from the Mystery Religions. But recent criticism, so far as I may estimate its drift, does not incline to favour the account of Christianity as a " Mystery Religion " (see N. P. Williams, *Ess. Cath. and Crit., Origin of Sacraments*, p. 392). It cannot now be assumed with the former confidence that all these mystery cults were exemplifications of a single conception or that their rituals were variations of a common and that a sacramental principle, or that of these rituals Christian worship in its apostolic or sub-apostolic phase was one. (See A. Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, p. 192). Dr. Wotherspoon's *Religious Values in the Sacraments* says : " It may be admitted that there are analogies and in a sense parallels to the Christian Sacraments in some of the Mystery religions, if, that is, they were religions. To call them so is, I think, an extension of that word . . . . If on the Christian side there was a borrower it must have been St. Paul (St. John concurring and following) and a more improbable borrower from Heathenism than that Hebrew of the Hebrews, Pharisee of the Pharisees,

it would be hard to imagine." Mr. K. D. Mackenzie, in his contribution to *Essays Catholic and Critical* has pointed out that if St. Paul had either so borrowed or had been supposed to borrow, he would have heard of it from his watchful critics, the Christian Jews.

Gwatkin in his *Early Church History* has some strong things to say on the subject of the influence of the Mystery religions. He writes : " Baptism and the Supper and the Church may be adapted from Judaism ; but it is as certain as any historical fact can be that they were instituted by the Lord Himself, not copied vaguely from the heathen world by the second generation of Christians. This latter theory does worse than set aside some exceptionally strong historical evidence, for the whole trend of early Christian thought must be fundamentally mistaken before it can be supposed that the table of the Lord was copied from the table of devils."

Dr. Vernon Bartlett may sum up for us (*E.R.E.*) when he says : " The Gospel of Christ itself emerged out of the religion of Israel, and accordingly its genius or distinctive nature defined itself largely in relation to Judaism, both as to faith and as to worship. In both Jesus claimed to 'fulfil' the religion of the Hebrew prophets, whose emphasis was on the heart or inward attitude . . . obedience of life was the truest sacrifice, and moral relations, rather than ritual or formal acts of worship, were the primary form and means of communion with God. . . . Where known moral relations are at fault, worship is inacceptable ; the gift of homage is to be left unoffered until it can be offered with a good conscience (Matt. v. 23). Our Lord never treated ritual or cultus as determinative of man's real relation to God, as did the Judaism of His day—a fact revolutionary in the history of ancient religion. Nor did He while creating a new religious bond between His disciples and constituting them a new Israel within Israel spiritually, make them a new community for purposes of worship or prescribe new forms of worship proper. 'Pray without ceasing and in every thing give thanks,' rightly became the watchword of the Christian life. Worship thus becomes relatively independent of any given forms of expression, so far as these are not bound up with normal human life, the fulfilment of all relations as unto God and not unto men."

Surely Dr. Bartlett is right in stating that there can be no absolute rules or laws of worship in Christianity. As Bishop Lightfoot put it : " The Kingdom of Christ . . . has no sacred days or seasons, no special sanctuaries, because every time and every place alike are holy. Above all it has no sacerdotal system. It interposes no sacrificial tribe or class between God and man, by whose intervention alone God is reconciled and man is forgiven. Each individual member holds personal communion with the Divine Head." The conception is indeed, as he adds, strictly an ideal, which cannot be applied rigorously either in the practical life of individuals or of the Christian Society, the Church. But it remains the regulative principle behind all Christian institutions of worship, as of organisation generally, giving them a conventional value, as expediencies tested by much experience, yet as such to be treated reverently, especially for the sake of others, that is, in love as well as faith.