

Early Christian Worship

Sources

The Didache (“Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”)

Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 65-67

Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (1974)

I. Going to Church

A. Day: Sunday

1. “The Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10; Justin, *Didache* 14)
2. Sunday worship *not* a creation of the RCC
 - a. Ignatius (c. 110) differentiates Sabbath & Lord’s day
 - b. Justin Martyr’s rationale for Sunday
 - 1) Commemorates God’s Creation
 - 2) Commemorates Christ rising from the dead
 - c. Constantine gave a *recognition* of Sunday

B. Early church buildings: Houses

1. NT: Churches met in houses (Priscilla & Aquila and Philemon)
2. Earliest church building: Dura-Europos Church (Syria)
 - a. A converted house (200s)
 - b. Source for early Christian art

C. Time: “before dawn”

II. Church Service (From Justin Martyr mostly)

A. Order of Service

1. Sing responsively a hymn to Christ as a god (Pliny)
 - a. Lyrics known for some hymns
 - b. Music unknown
2. Place of Scripture
 - a. A reader reads “memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets ... as long as time permits”
 - b. Probably only portions available
 - c. Perhaps most Christians’ only access to Scripture
3. “President” instructs, exhorts, & urges imitation
4. Public Prayers—standing (Justin)
5. Receive an offering

B. Afterwards

1. Some kind of fellowship meal afterwards (Pliny says after departing & reassembling)
2. Perhaps the love feasts hinted at in NT (cf. Jude 12)

C. Easter

1. Widely celebrated by c. AD 150
2. Related to Passover
3. Usually accompanied by fasting
4. Disputes over date of celebration

III. Sacraments

A. Communion

1. *Eucharist*, a “thanksgiving” feast (Jesus “had given thanks” 1 Cor. 11:24)
2. Begin w/ prayers & greeting w/ holy kiss (cf. Rom. 1 & 2 Cor., 1 Thess.)

3. Offering of prayers esp. thanksgiving for elements (“for considerable length” says Justin, and all the people say amen)
 4. Deacons distribute elements
 5. Symbolism
 - a. Body & blood of Christ
 - b. Bread also as symbol of the gathered church
- B. Baptism
1. Preparation
 - a. Fast
 - b. Prayers
 2. Act of baptism (*Didache 7*)
 - a. In the name of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit
 - b. In running water, or if not available, in “other water”
 - c. In cold, or if not available, in warm
 - d. Third option: pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit
 3. Testimony: Affirmed “Rule of faith” (Apostles’ Creed)
- IV. Church Polity
- A. Types
1. Presbyterian: rule by elders (presbyters)
 2. Congregational: rule by the congregation
 3. Episcopacy: rule by hierarchy of bishops
 - a. Divine right episcopacy (apostolic succession): Catholic, Anglican, etc.
 - b. Pragmatic episcopacy (no succession): Methodists, etc.
- B. Development
1. NT: Equivalence of “bishop” and “elder” (Acts 20:17, 28)
 2. Early: “Bishop” = overseer of scattered groups in a city
 3. Change to “monarchical” bishop
 - a. Hierarchy rejecting the equality of clergy
 - b. Theories of Origin (Schaff)
 - 1) Continuation of apostolic pattern
 - 2) Expansion/distortion of eldership
 - c. Collegiate episcopacy: “Ecclesiastical Catholicism” in early church

Final Note: These elements are *descriptive*, not authoritative