

History of Worship (Early and Medieval Church)

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” —Acts 2:42

Justin Martyr (mid-2nd c. AD)

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.” —*First Apology* 67

“Then bread and a cup of wine mixed with water are brought to the president of the brothers. He takes them and offers up praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He gives thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things from [Jesus’] hands. When he has finished the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their joyful agreement by saying Amen.... Then those whom we call deacons give to each of those present the bread and the wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and carry away a portion to those who are absent. We call this food ‘eucharist,’ which no one is allowed to share unless he believes that the things we teach are true, and has been washed with the washing that is for the forgiveness of sins and a second birth, and is living as Christ has commanded. For we do not receive them as common bread and common drink. But as Jesus Christ our Savior became flesh by the word of God and clothed himself in our flesh and blood to save us, so also we have been taught that the food which is blessed by the word of prayer handed down from Christ, by which our blood and flesh are nourished as the food becomes part of ourselves, is the flesh and blood of the same Jesus who became flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by themselves called ‘Gospels,’ have delivered to us what was commanded to them: that Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me, this is my body’; and in a similar way, after taking the cup and giving thanks, he said, ‘This is my blood,’ and gave it only to them.” —*First Apology* 65-66

Music in the Early Church

- Earliest church singing consisted of chanting psalms, canticles (biblical texts other than the psalter), doxologies, alleluias, hosannas, and *Kyrie Eleison*.
- A capella only (instruments were considered too pagan or Jewish)
- Earliest hymn by a known author: *Trinity Hymnal* no. 160
- Congregational singing of noncanonical hymns only began in the 4th century with Ambrose of Milan in the West and Ephraem the Syrian in the East.
- Pipe organ first introduced in the 7th century under Pope Vitalian; became more common in worship by 12th century.

Prayer in the Early Church

- Standing the whole time (pews were only invented in the 14th century!), arms raised with upturned palms, eyes open and faces toward heaven
- Only among baptized believers; visitors were dismissed before prayer
- Petitionary prayer cycle:
 - Topic announced by prayer leader (bishop in the West, senior deacon in the East)
 - Silent prayers of congregation
 - Petition summed up in audible prayer by prayer leader

Order of Worship in the Early Church

- Part 1: Service of the Word (for baptized believers, catechumens, and visitors)
 - Opening greeting and response: Usually the bishop said, “The Lord be with you”; and the congregation responded, “And with your spirit.”
 - Scripture reading (by deacon): Old Testament
 - Psalm or hymn
 - Scripture reading: New Testament (Acts-Revelation)
 - Psalm or hymn
 - Scripture reading: New Testament (Gospels)
 - Sermon (bishop sitting)
 - Dismissal of all but baptized believers
- Part 2: Eucharist (for baptized believers only)
 - Petitionary prayers
 - Holy Communion (in standing posture):
 - Kiss of peace (men kissed men, women kissed women)
 - Offertory:
 - Members each brought a loaf of bread and a flask of wine, which were placed on the Lord’s Table
 - Dialogue between bishop and congregation
 - Loaves broken
 - Distribution of bread and cup (leftovers taken home, eaten throughout week)
 - Benediction (by deacon)

Developments from the Fourth Century Onward

- More fixed, structured liturgy
- Priestly vestments, incense, lamps/candles
- Liturgical calendar, including Lent, Good Friday, and Christmas
- Latin in the West, Syriac in Syria, and Coptic in Egypt
- Reverence of saints (including invoking them for prayer) and relics
- Use of icons/images
- Elevation of sacraments (Mass), decline of preaching
- Congregational singing peaked, then declined (replaced by choirs)
- Introduction of musical instruments (West only)

Recommended Reading

- Nick R. Needham, “Worship through the Ages,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, Philip Ryken et al., eds. (P&R, 2003).