WORSHIP, NT CHRISTIAN

L. W. Hurtado (University of Edinburgh)

Worship comprises those actions by which people express and re-affirm their devotional stance toward, and relationship to, a deity. These actions can be done by individuals, privately or in a public place such as a temple/shrine, or by groups of devotees gathered for corporate worship. Worship characteristically involves ritualized actions, but not all religious rituals really function as acts of worship. For example, some ritual actions can be apotropaic (i.e., to ward off evil from spirits), or intended to coerce a spirit/deity to obey the will of the person who performs the ritual (e.g., as in magical charms/spells). By contrast, worship more typically involves expressions of praise and adoration, and also appeals directed to a deity, the devotee(s) usually expressing subordination to, and/or dependence on, the intended recipient of worship, while also affirming a positive relationship with the recipient. In the NT, and in Christian tradition generally, although prayer and praise can be offered by individuals privately, Christian worship is more characteristically set in the gathered ekklesia, and that is the focus here.

From the earliest references onward, two the key identifying features of Christian worship are (1) the programmatic inclusion of Jesus as the central subject of praise and thanksgiving, and the one through whom and with whom God is worshipped, and (2) the particular importance of the “first day of the week” for corporate worship by the ekklesia. In other ways as well, early Christian worship is distinguishable from the more typical religious phenomena of the Roman context. In particular, blood-sacrifice (which in that setting was generally regarded as perhaps the most overtly religious action) did not feature in Christian worship, and likewise it did not involve temples/shrines, altars or images. But Christian worship was also supposed to be exclusivist. That is, the NT advocates a refusal to participate in the worship of any deity other than the God of biblical tradition. Many in the Roman world may have had their favorite deities, but this would not have involved the refusal or rejection of other deities and the due observances of them. Christians, however, were expected to regard other deities as illusions or even demonic beings, and certainly unworthy of worship.

Of course, ancient Jewish synagogue gatherings did not involve sacrifices or images either; but until its destruction in 70 CE the Jerusalem Temple and its sacrificial rites were, probably for most devout Jews wherever they lived, of central significance in affirming and maintaining the relationship of the people of Israel with their God. But, although according to Acts the Jerusalem Temple (so long as it stood) appears to have been regarded as a holy site also by Jewish Christians for pilgrimage, prayer and other religious activities (including at least some sacrificial offerings, e.g., 3:1; 20:16; 21:20-26; 22:17-18), early Christian worship was in general not conducted in, or oriented toward, shrines or other sacred sites/spaces. Indeed, apart from the regard for the Jerusalem Temple among Jewish Christians, the whole idea of a “sacred space” such as a shrine as especially fit for worship seems not to feature in earliest Christianity. Likewise, the exclusivist stance of earliest Christianity was inherited from the Jewish tradition. The crucial difference between early Christian worship and the Jewish tradition was the programmatic place of Jesus in the religious rhetoric and devotional practice of believers.

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Also, in distinction from the larger religious environment of the Roman era, early Christian worship was heavily verbal, typically comprising invocations, prayers, Psalms and odes/hymns, prophecy, teaching, faith-confessions, and (though perhaps not always in the earliest decades) readings from Scripture (the Old Testament) and other edifying texts (e.g., letters of Paul), as well as other liturgical expressions, such as benedictions. Furthermore, earliest Christian worship gatherings did not apparently include use of musical instruments or other phenomena familiar in the religious environment of the time, such as incense, officiating priests or elaborate ceremonies. For many “pagans” of the Roman period, thus, the Christian worship gathering may have seemed curious as a genuinely religious event, and more akin to a meeting of a philosophical circle.

Yet, although lacking many of the features characterizing worship in the larger religious setting of the time, and though conducted in mundane settings such as the home, the evidence suggests that earliest Christians ascribed a high meaning to their worship gatherings. They appear to have seen their worship as responding to, reflecting and attesting, heavenly realities (especially the exaltation of Jesus to God’s “right hand”), and also as prefiguring eschatological realities (particularly the universal acclamation of Jesus as “Lord”). Moreover, in the worship gathering God’s Spirit might speak through Christian prophets, giving revelations and divine words of direction. In short, NT texts urge that the worship gathering was not simply a human/earthly transaction, but partook in transcendent realities and was energized and enabled by God’s Spirit.

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   2. More Allusive than Descriptive
   3. Key NT Evidence

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A. Limitations of NT Evidence

Unquestionably, the NT texts give us evidence about earliest Christian worship; but we must also respect the limits of that evidence, and its circumstantial nature. For example, except for 1 Cor 11—14, we have scarcely any extended description of, or teaching about, corporate worship; and were it not for apparent problems to do with corporate worship in the Corinthian church we would likely not have this particular valuable but very limited body of material.

1. No Liturgical Order

In particular, it is not possible to determine whether any order of worship was followed in the churches reflected in the NT. Indeed, the earliest Christian description of a basic order of Christian worship is by Justin Martyr (1 Apol 67; ca. 160 CE), who portrays a sequence of readings from “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets,” followed by instruction and exhortation by a presiding figure, corporate prayers, and then the Eucharist. From various NT texts, we can surmise that actions such as acclamation, prayers, hymns/odes, teaching and a sacred meal were common; but we cannot infer any commonly preferred sequence in these and other actions. For example, when there was a meal, did it come first, followed then by other phenomena, or did these other actions come first (a so-called “service of the Word”), followed by the meal? Some scholars (e.g., Aune, Smith) have proposed that phenomena such as odes, prophecies, and teaching would have come after the meal, if the typical structure of the Roman-era symposium was appropriated (a group meal, which might be followed by discussion, or other entertainments, the precise nature of which depended on the nature of the group, and might even include drunken and orgiastic behaviour; see esp. Smith). But, although it is reasonable to suppose that early Christians might have followed this basic structure of the symposium, we do not have confirmatory evidence that they did so. Moreover, why should we assume that the sacred meal and such other components such as prophecy, teaching, or even the singing of hymns/odes had to form two distinguishable stages of the worship gathering? It is also perfectly plausible to suppose that the latter actions could have been performed during the meal. It is perhaps worth noting that in the earliest Christian text giving specific instructions about the eucharist, the Didache (in its present form variously dated ca. 70-140 CE), prophets appear to be expected to exercise their verbal gifts in prayers that form part of the Eucharist itself (Did 10.7).

In any case, we cannot find any clear ordering of worship actions in any of the NT texts. So the NT will prove disappointing for those conventional inquiries about liturgical history that have been concerned with tracing orders of worship.

2. More Allusive than Descriptive

Yet we certainly do have references to worship in the NT, and we can draw some observations about it. But the NT more presupposes early Christian worship than describes or prescribes it. So, it is necessary to gather up what are often short, even passing, references to and reflections of worship attitudes and practices, and attempt some synthesizing discussion.

Moreover, the identification of allusions to early Christian worship in the NT often requires some care and informed judgment. For example, if (as is widely surmised among scholars) the Gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes and of meals with the risen Jesus were not simply intended as stories about Jesus but also were written to reflect and inspire early Christian sacred meal practice, then these
accounts give some hints relevant to our understanding of early Christian eucharistic traditions.

Similarly, although it is clear that the singing (or chanting) of hymns was a feature of early Christian worship (e.g., 1 Cor 14:26; Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:16), we do not have any text explicitly identified by a NT author as a Christian hymn. But scholars commonly judge that some NT passages are quotations from, or adaptations of, hymns (e.g., Philip 2:6-11; Eph 5:14; Col 1:15-20). This judgment is largely based on the poetic qualities of these passages, e.g., their psalm-like phrasing and their compacted expressions. The only passages explicitly identified as hymnic are the chants that the author of Revelation sets in heavenly scenes, e.g., the ceaseless refrain of the four living creatures in 4:8, and the exuberant adoration voiced by the twenty-four elders in 4:11 and 5:9-10, and by all creation in 5:12-14. But it is reasonable to suppose that in these passages the author may reflect, or may have intended to inspire, the worshipful chanting of the churches of Asia to which he wrote. So, these passages may give us indirect indication of aspects of the worship of some early circles.

In short, one can find evidence of earliest Christian worship, but this requires a sensitive sifting of the NT, and judicious inferences ventured with appropriate regard for the circumstantial and varied body of texts involved.

3. Key NT Evidence.

Among the NT evidence to be considered, certain texts are particularly important to note. Some include overt references to early Christian worship, among which 1 Cor 11—14 forms the most extended body of such material, especially valuable because of the early date of 1 Corinthians (ca. 53-56 CE). In 1 Cor 11, Paul first deals with some sort of question about women’s head/hair appearance, quite possibly arising from (certain?) women thinking that their new spiritual status in Christ (evidenced by charismatic phenomena) meant that gender differences should be obscured. The precise question about women’s appearance, however, which occupies the bulk of 11:1-16, seems to have been specific to this church, as we find so such instructions in his other letters. The more relevant matter for this article is that Paul presupposes that Christian women contribute overtly to corporate worship, e.g., in prayer and/or prophecy (11:5). (So, if the now notorious statements in 14:34-35 exhorting women to silence in the church are authentically Paul’s, they cannot be taken as forbidding such contributions by women. Moreover, there are good reasons to think that these statements originated as marginal glosses that made their way into the text of 1 Cor in the process of copying it.)

Following this discussion of women’s head-attire, in 1 Cor 11:17-34, we have the most extended discussion of the early Christian sacred meal in the NT, a passage often drawn upon in Christian eucharistic traditions. The passage implies that a shared meal is a central feature of, and reason for, the gathering of the church (esp. v. 33). Paul’s concern here is to underscore the theological meaning and associations of the meal, and to exhort behavior appropriate for this setting, and he also claims a certain continuity between the tradition that he taught to the Corinthians and that which he had received (v. 23). We shall return to these matters later (E.6. below).

In 1 Cor 12—14, Paul gives further exhortations about right attitudes and behavior in Christian worship, especially concerning phenomena such as prophecy and tongues-speaking. It must be recognized that the extended treatment of the variety of gifts as components of the church-body in 12:4-31 has the gathered church as the implicit setting where these gifts are typically exercised. The lyrical extolling of Christian love (for fellow believers) in chap. 13 functions as Paul’s “still more
excellent way” to assess these charismatic phenomena, in preference to any misguided attempt to rank them as to importance or prestige (cf., e.g., 12:14-26). Then, in chap. 14 Paul gives an extended illustration of how this loving concern for others can be exhibited in the exercise of charismatic gifts in corporate worship, arguing that in this setting prophecy is to be preferred. Paul claims to practice, and even commends, tongues-speaking (14:2-4, 18) as a feature of Christian devotional life; but he urges that the inability to understand what is said in tongues-speaking means that this gift cannot edify others (esp. 14:5-6, 18-19, 23-25), unless someone interprets (vv. 13, 27). By contrast, prophecy, in virtue of being uttered in the vernacular language, can have a powerful effect of edifying and/or convicting the hearers (esp. vv. 14-25).

For our purposes, the most important observation is that in 1 Cor 12—14 Paul refers to the components of corporate worship as richly varied (e.g., “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation”), and contributed (at least in principle) by various participants (14:26). Indeed, he seems to assume multiple prophets present, each prophetic utterance to be weighed (diakrinein), apparently by the other prophets (14:29). There is no hint of a fixed order of worship, but Paul does urge that believers conduct themselves in keeping with the exalted significance of the gathered ekklesia, and in due regard for one another as fellow members of “the body of Christ” (12:27).

In Acts we have no such extended treatment of Christian worship, but there are a several likely scenes of believers gathered in a worship occasion, from which we can sift relevant evidence about settings and phenomena probably typical in this author’s experience. There is, e.g., the scene of corporate worship in Acts 13:1-3, where Paul and Barnabas are identified through a prophetic oracle for an itinerant mission. It is also possible (but not certain) that the events in Acts 20:7-12 are set in an evening worship gathering, which included a meal and Paul’s rather extended speaking (v. 7). In the narratives about the Jerusalem church, the reference to believers meeting daily in the Temple and sharing food in their homes (2:46-47) may allude to both venues for corporate worship, and the scene of believers gathered for prayer in the house of Mary (mother of John Mark), to which Peter goes after his miraculous release from jail (12:12), may be another reflection of Christians meeting for worship in the homes of those able to provide such accommodation.

B. Approach and Presuppositions

In addition to the demands of careful identification and analysis of relevant evidence, it is also important approach the question of worship in the NT properly. A good deal of earlier scholarship on the subject can be criticized for dubious assumptions and inappropriate questions.

For instance, contrary to some earlier scholarship, we do not actually know enough about any liturgical sequence(s) observed in Jewish synagogue gatherings to assert direct influence upon earliest Christian orders of worship (esp. Bradshaw). Various evidence (e.g., Acts 13:15; 15:21; Josephus AgAp 2.175; Ant 16.43) indicates that synagogue worship typically included Scripture reading and also prayer (much of the Eighteen Benedictions that became part of synagogue worship in later centuries probably derives from first-century synagogue prayers), and perhaps also recitation of the Shema (Deut 6:4, plus 11:13-21 and Num 15:37-41 in later usage), but we know little beyond this. For the same reason, occasional confident claims that early Christian worship can be sharply contrasted with Jewish synagogue practice (e.g., in the Christian use of hymns) are equally dubious. It is likely that early Christian worship was influenced in some respects by Jewish synagogue practice, but we do not have bases for any grand theory.
It is also dubious to treat the somewhat limited evidence of Christian worship in the NT as reflections of some early common order of worship from which later liturgical sequences derived. That developed orders of worship are attested later (e.g., the *Apostolic Tradition* ca. 215 CE) does not require that these orders derive from first-century Christian practices. The 150 years between the churches of Paul’s day and the evidence of orders of worship comprise plenty of time for them to develop. Bradshaw has also rightly criticized a tendency toward “panliturgism” in some previous scholarship, in which, without any confirmatory evidence, various NT texts were portrayed as reflecting liturgical settings (e.g., claims that the Gospels reflect supposed first-century Christian lectionaries, or that 1 Peter reflects an early baptismal liturgy).

It is yet another mistake to assume too much standardization in Christian worship sequence or practices in the first century. To be sure, there are indications that Paul strove to promote a serious sense among his churches of being co-religionists with one another and also with their predecessor Jewish believers in Judea (e.g., 1 Thess 2:14-16; 2 Cor 9:13-15; Rom 15:25-27), and in particular that he claimed a continuity in faith between Judean and gentile circles (esp. 1 Cor 15:1-11). It is, thus, reasonable also to assume some general similarity in the actions that comprised corporate worship, e.g., prophecy, prayer, reading Scriptures, and a sacred common meal. But we must also take account of the diversity of first-century Christianity in geography, languages, cultures, background influences, and social makeup.

So, although we have to synthesize to some degree the somewhat fragmentary evidence of Christian worship in the NT, we also must be recognize that the NT texts reflect different situations and settings, requiring some caution in how widely representative we may make the evidence that they give us.

C. General Characteristics.

1. Setting.

From various references in the NT, we can judge that the typical (though perhaps not the sole) setting of earliest Christian worship was in the homes of those able to accommodate such a gathering. Note, e.g., in Rom 16:3-16 Paul greets the church that meets in the home of Prisca and Aquila (vv. 3-5), as well as other groups of believers who appear to be based in the households of other leading Christians (those linked with Aristobulus, v. 10; Narcissus, v. 11; Asyncritus and others, v.14; Philologus and others, v. 15), and that the epistle to Philemon is also addressed to the church that meets in his home (Philem 1). In White’s analysis, over the first few centuries the settings of Christian worship shifted from these ordinary domestic settings to re-designed rooms and buildings dedicated as church meeting spaces, and then to purpose-built structures.

The typical domestic settings of early Christian worship were likely significant in reflecting and promoting greater intimacy and the familial-like ties of believers advocated in the NT. Also, because domestic space was regarded as particularly pertaining to women in the Roman era, this setting was likely more conducive to women participating actively in corporate worship, including presiding (as urged, e.g., by Osiek *et al.*), whereas the later shift to non-domestic worship settings (regarded as public space) probably contributed to fewer opportunities for women to play such roles in worship.

It is likely, however, that the specific domestic spaces in which Christians initially met varied, depending on the economic status of believers. The homes of wealthier Christians might well have accommodated groups of various as large as
forty or so, whereas poorer believers might have lived in simple quarters in multi-occupant buildings (insulae), accommodating only very small groups. We cannot be sure what size a group would have comprised any particular house church.

2. Leadership.

Just as it is difficult to find any common liturgical order in the NT, so it is also difficult to perceive any set leadership roles in corporate worship. Indeed, it is noteworthy that in Paul’s various and extended instructions about behavior and order in corporate worship in 1 Cor 11—14 there is no reference to any leaders or presiding figures. Instead, he appeals to the church as whole to participate in worship with a keen regard for one another and for the high significance of the church and its worship.

In other Pauline letters, however, there is a reference to “bishops [episkopoi] and deacons” (Philip 1:1), and exhortation to respect “those who labor among you and are over you [proïstamenous] in the Lord” (1 Thess 5:12-13), and in Rom 12:6-8 we have a short list of several types of roles that may have corporate worship as the typical setting: prophecy, teaching, exhortation, and “leading” (proïstamenos). In the so-called “Deutero-Pauline” letters, we have more extended description of the desired attributes of the “bishop” and the “deacon” (e.g., 1 Tim 3:1-14), and in various NT texts “elders” are mentioned as leading figures in churches (e.g., 1 Tim 5:17; James 5:14-15; 1 Pet 5:1-5). But it is not clear that any of these roles did or did not include responsibility for leadership in the worship service. Even in the Didache, which gives directions about celebration of Eucharist (9—10), and also urges the appointment of bishops and deacons (15:1-2), there is no explicit statement about liturgical leadership.

To be sure, across the second century CE, those charged with oversight of churches also came more regularly to take on liturgical leadership as well. First-century churches may have had someone (or some delegated group) to act as convener, but perhaps not always. In small and more intimately connected circles, formal leadership may have been less necessary, and may even have been deemed inappropriate. But, as larger congregations formed, designated leadership in worship quite likely seemed a good thing.

3. Holy Spirit.

The NT rather consistently links Christian worship with the Holy Spirit. We have noted already Paul’s references to various phenomena set within the corporate worship setting as “gifts” (charismata) of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-11); but Paul also refers to corporate Christian prayer and the confession/acclamation of Jesus as Lord as prompted by the Spirit (e.g., Gal 4:4-6; Rom 8:15-16; 1 Cor12:3). In other NT texts as well, e.g., the Spirit is presented as the empowerment behind such phenomena as prophecy in Christian worship (e.g., Acts 13:2), and in Rev 1:10 the author refers to being “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day,” which likely describes a worship setting.

This is, of course, consistent with the wider sense promoted in the NT that believers were recipients of God’s Spirit, the gift of the Spirit reflecting the exaltation of Jesus (Acts 2:33-36) and the consequent inauguration of eschatological blessings. Indeed, the bestowal of the Spirit constitutes the foretaste of the full eschatological redemption (e.g., Rom 8:23; Eph 1:13-14; Heb 6:4-6). In the NT, the whole of Christian existence is characterized and empowered by the Spirit (e.g., Rom 8:9-11), but the gathered Christian ekklesia is particularly an occasion for the manifestations of the Spirit, and for celebration of God’s present and anticipated eschatological redemption. So, the NT references to Christian worship suggest that it was to be characterized by energy and vitality, and a joy and enthusiasm that reflect the
experience of God’s enlivening Spirit and the consequent sense of eschatological and heavenly realities.

We get a vivid, even unsettling reflection of the sense of the gathered church as being a locus of spiritual power in Paul’s directions to the Corinthians about how to deal with the believer who was having a sexual relationship with “his father’s wife” (1 Cor5:1-13). When the believers have gathered in Jesus’ name and “with the power of our Lord Jesus”, they are to hand the offending man over to Satan “for the destruction of his flesh, with the aim of his spirit being saved on the day of the Lord” (vv. 4-5). There is a more positive reflection of the Christian worship assembly as an occasion for powerful Spirit-phenomena in 1 Cor 14:24-25, where Paul envisions a scene in which an “outsider or unbeliever” enters and, through the effects of prophetic oracles that reveal his/her inner thoughts, bows down and declares, “God is among you!”

4. Eschatology.

The NT evidence also indicates that Christian worship should be seen as predicated upon, and an anticipation of, eschatological redemption. Jesus’ resurrection is the initial stage of the resurrection of all the redeemed, and inaugurates his heavenly reign that is to culminate in the subjection of all things to him and to God (1 Cor 15:20-28). Christians now live in the eschatologically charged period between Jesus’ resurrection and his parousia, having been given life in the Spirit but awaiting the consummation of redemption, which is to include a full bodily transformation (e.g., Rom 8:9-11, 23-25; Philip 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2-3).

Consequently, in this situation Christian worship includes the declaration and prefiguring of these eschatological hopes. So, one of its principal distinguishing marks, the acclamation of Jesus as the one Lord, which is alluded to in several texts (e.g., Rom 10:9-13; 1 Cor 1:2; 12:3), is an emphatic anticipation of the future universal acclamation of Jesus that has been ordained by God (Philip 2:9-11). Likewise, the inclusion of various kinds of people in the ekklesia and her corporate worship (e.g., male/female, Jew/gentile, slave/free, Gal 3:28), i.e., the very social composition and character of worship, is to be seen as reflecting the new humanity that is to be formed through the gospel, and is fashioned after the risen Christ, transcending the divisions as well as the mortality and moral frailty of humankind in Adam (e.g., Rom 8:12-21; 1 Cor 15:45-58).

Together with the collective experiences of God’s Spirit, especially in prophecy and other such phenomena, this strong eschatological tone both reflects and seems intended to promote an atmosphere of worship marked by joy (e.g., Rom 14:17; 15:13) and confidence in God’s present and future intentions. The NT texts suggest that, though insignificant in size and outward and immediate social impact, the little ekklesias are to see themselves in their life and worship as witnesses to, and vanguards of, final redemption. As Aune (Cultic Setting) showed, in early Christianity (as also in the Qumran community) it is especially in collective worship that heavenly and eschatological realities seem to have been more vividly in focus and experienced, and the worship setting is seen as taking on a vertical dimension for participants. This outlook that earthly corporate worship is somehow connected with heavenly realities is, e.g., likely reflected in Paul’s frustratingly fleeting reference to the presence of angels in the worship setting of the ekklesia (1 Cor 11:10; see also Heb 12:22-24).

5. Content and Focus.

The content and focus of worship in the NT are God’s actions, especially God’s redemptive actions in and through Jesus. As a key illustration of this, the NT passages that have been identified by scholars as hymns/odes and confessional
formulae concentrate heavily on celebrating the actions of God and/or Jesus. E.g., Phil 2:6-11 declares Jesus’ self-humbling, sacrificial obedience, and consequent exaltation to unique glory, and Col 1:5-20 heralds his divine status and unique agency in creation and redemption. Likewise, in Rom 10:9-13, where we apparently have a reference to a practice of corporate confession of faith, the focus is on Jesus’ resurrection and its redemptive consequences for believers.

Another passage widely regarded as preserving an early confessional form (Rom 4:24-25) recounts Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection, and declares them as also acts of God. As yet a further illustration, the content of the heavenly worship portrayed in Rev 4—5 consists in praising God as almighty (4:8) and creator of all (4:11), and in praise to Jesus for his self-sacrifice and its marvellous redemptive consequences (5:9-12). It is certain that for the author this scene of heavenly worship is to inform and shape of worship in the earthly churches to which he directs his text.

In 1 Cor 11:23-26, Paul makes the shared ecclesial meal a recurring reference to Jesus’ redemptive death, and an anticipation of his future appearance. By contrast, the Eucharistic prayers in Did 9—10 make no explicit reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection; but nevertheless they express thanks for God for life, spiritual knowledge, and other blessings given through Jesus, reflecting thereby the sort of focus that we find typical in the NT and other texts of what became mainstream Christian tradition.

In addition to praise and thanksgiving for creation and redemption, we have references to “teaching”, “prophecy”, and other phenomena (including petitionary prayer) that appear to be set in the context of corporate worship (e.g., the list of “gifts” in 1 Cor 12:4-11), and it is likely that these had a certain breadth of content and emphases (see below section E). Nevertheless, it is clear that the NT presents worship as fundamentally a proper response to God’s creative and redemptive actions. That is, in this view worship is a grateful reaction to God’s prior acts, the declaration and celebration of them the core content and aim in worship. But perhaps the most obvious demonstration that early Christian worship was intended as a response to God’s actions is the choice of the “first day of the week” as the key day for gathered worship, Sunday worship thus a continuing commemoration of the day of Jesus’ resurrection.

D. “Binitarian Shape”.

As noted earlier, the key distinguishing characteristic of the nature of Christian worship in the NT is that it is directed to Jesus as well as God (the Father). Indeed, such is the place of Jesus in early Christian devotion that Paul can refer to Christians simply as “all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2), “to call upon” (epikaleō) used in the Greek OT to indicate worship of God (e.g., 1 Sam 12:18), and strikingly appropriated here and elsewhere in the NT to designate the ritual invocation of Jesus (e.g., Acts 9:14; 22:16).

1. Worship of Jesus.

In a number of other ways as well, the NT attests a remarkable programmatic incorporation of Jesus with God as recipients of Christian devotion, amounting to what may be termed a “binitarian” devotional pattern (Hurtado, One God). E.g., the identifiable hymns/odes in the NT are essentially concerned with Jesus, and these seem to have been both central and characteristic in early Christian worship (section E.4. below). As a particularly vivid illustration that likely reflects the devotional practice favored by the Jewish Christian author and his fellow believers in Asia, note again the scene of heavenly (ideal) worship in Rev 5:9-14, which includes praise given to Jesus (“the Lamb”) and culminates in a universal joint acclamation of God
(“who sits on the throne”) and Jesus (5:13-14). In John 16:23-24 believers are told to pray to God in Jesus’ name, a practice that appears to have been established long before John was a written. Indeed, in 1 Thess 3:11-13, we have what appears to be a prayer of Paul addressed jointly to God and Jesus.

Paul’s references to the Christian sacred meal as “the Lord’s supper” (1 Cor 11:20), “the cup of the Lord” and “table of the Lord” (1 Cor10:21; 11:27) clearly indicate the focus on Jesus in this central feature of early Christian corporate worship (E.8. below). We may also note that in the NT Christian baptism seems to involve the ritual invocation of Jesus’ name over (or by) the candidate (e.g., Acts 2:38; 22:16).

Indeed, in the NT the inclusion of Jesus as a rightful recipient of Christian worship is so not only presented as characteristic in Christian churches but even mandatory. John 5:23 seems to reflect this stance, insisting that it is God’s will that all should “honor the Son just as they honor the Father,” and that “Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” So, clearly, the distinctive inclusion of Jesus with God as the content and recipients of worship urged and reflected in the NT was not an experiment or an unconscious appropriation of pagan reverence of deified kings or heroes (apotheosis). Instead, it was intended as an obedient response to what early Christians perceived to be the will of God, and a failure to reverence Jesus in worship would be disobedience to God.

Moreover, the NT advocacy of reverence for Jesus does not reflect any diminution of the place of God (the Father) in Christian devotion. Jesus is not worshipped at the expense of God, so to speak, and certainly does not replace God or become the new de facto Christian God in some simplistic manner (as, however, does appear to have happened in some forms of popular Christian piety reflected in some apocryphal texts, and in some forms of popular Christianity down to the present time). The NT reflects a firm allegiance to the exclusive worship of the one God, a powerful scruple obviously inherited from the Jewish matrix of the Christian movement (e.g., Rom 1:18-32; Mark 12:28-31; Rev 19:10). This is another reason to doubt that reverence for Jesus reflected the pagan outlook of the time in which new deities could be added to the pantheon. Unlike pagan practice with the various deities and divinized humans, in the NT, Jesus does not get his own rituals or shrine, or his own times for him to receive worship. Instead, in the NT worship of God (the Father) is to be offered through Jesus, and is to include Jesus as both subject/occasion and co-recipient, for he is the “image” (eikôn) of God and the one who shares in God’s glory and has been installed by God as the unique ruling “Son” to whom such reverence is now due.

In other words, in the NT we do not simply have two divine recipients of devotion, but rather a linked or “shaped” duality, so to speak, in which Jesus’ place in worship is consistently defined with reference to God. The reverence and devotion directed to Jesus is presented as according to God’s will and intended “to the glory of God the Father” (Philip 2:11). The NT does not reflect a simple “di-theism” of two divine beings, but instead what we might term a “binitarian” stance in theology and worship, in which Jesus’ exalted position and place in Christian devotion are both defined and justified with reference to actions and will of the one God, and God is defined with reference to Jesus. So, e.g., Paul refers to the deity to whom prayer and praise is directed as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; and also Eph 1:3). In short, in NT perspective, Jesus can be given worship only with reference to the one God (e.g., as God’s “image” and unique “Son”), and God can be identified and worshipped adequately only as the Father who sent forth Jesus and ordains that he be now reverenced. In this, distinctive devotional pattern we
nevertheless see the continuing strong influence of ancient Jewish emphasis on “one God”.

However, this “binitarian” devotional pattern represents a remarkable and apparently novel development, which did not have a real precedent or analogy in the Roman religious environment, neither in pagan nor in Jewish worship practices (esp. Hurtado, * Origins*). It represents neither the addition of a second god by apotheosis (as in pagan practice) nor the sort of honorific rhetoric given to angels, patriarchs or royal and messianic figures (as in Jewish texts). Moreover, the worship of Jesus is not only the most distinguishing feature of early Christianity, it is also probably the most notable development characterizing the circles of Jesus’ followers in the post-Easter period. Although the NT bears witness to a broadly-shared triadic-shaped religious outlook in which God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit all feature (this triad obviously forming a basis of the later doctrine of the Trinity), the Spirit never is referred to in the NT as a *recipient* of worship in the ways that God and Jesus are. So, the religious rhetoric of the NT is triadic, but in the pattern of devotion there is a duality, a “binitarian” pattern.

2. Forces and Factors.

Such a notable and unparalleled historical development presents a problem for historical explanation. It is understandable that some scholars prefer to reduce the problem, either by downplaying the evidence (proposing that the reverence for Jesus reflected in earliest NT texts did not really amount to worship of him, e.g., Casey), or by contending that the Jesus-devotion in the NT is only a particularly intense example of the sorts of reverence that were given in ancient Jewish tradition to martyrs and royal/messianic figures (e.g., Horbury). Still others contend that, though early Christians were opposed to the idea of deified kings and heroes, nevertheless early Christians nevertheless were influenced by pagan notions of apotheosis (e.g., Collins). But all such arguments are subject to criticism for not really doing justice to all the evidence, and/or for invoking putative explanations that themselves require explanation. E.g., *how* would early Jewish Christians of the first few years (among whom this intense Jesus-devotion first appeared) supposedly appropriate ideas of royal-apotheosis and emperor-reverence, which devout Jews typically regarded as foolish blasphemy?

So, the worship of Jesus reflected in the NT is not so easily brushed aside as is thought by some scholars, and historical analysis requires an effort to account for it. Several factors can be invoked. Jesus’ own impact upon his contemporaries (both followers and opponents) is surely an obvious reason that he remained central in the religious outlook of his followers. Furthermore, shortly after his execution followers became convinced that God had raised him from death and exalted him to heavenly glory, and this conviction re-validated him and further assured Jesus’ continuing centrality for them. It is also likely that Jewish traditions about God having a principal agent (e.g., a high angel, or revered patriarch) provided early believers a basic conceptual category for accommodating Jesus as uniquely exalted “at God’s right hand.”

But this Jewish principal-agent category did not allow for the figure to receive worship, and so the extent and intensity of early Christian Jesus-devotion requires some further factor(s). A comparison of other major religious innovations in history indicates that they frequently arose from powerful religious experiences that generated a significant re-configuring of the beliefs and/or practices of recipients (esp. Hurtado, *How on Earth*). There is good evidence that earliest Christianity was characterized by such phenomena (e.g., visions of the risen/glorified Jesus, and
heavenly scenes that include the exalted Jesus), and it seems fully plausible that such experiences contributed to the novel conviction that God now ordained that Jesus should receive worship. Thereby, a new “mutation” in Jewish devotional practice appeared, generating a devotional pattern that quickly became characteristic of early Christianity and that demanded and shaped subsequent doctrinal reflection as well.

E. Major Phenomena of Early Christian Worship.

We have noted earlier that we cannot find in the NT clear evidence of any regularized liturgical sequence, but we do have indication of major features and characteristic components of early Christian worship.

1. The “Lord’s Day”.

All four canonical Gospels set Jesus’ resurrection on “the first day of the week” (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), and it is commonly accepted that at a very early point Sunday became the particularly significant day for corporate Christian worship, Sunday worship thus a weekly commemoration of Jesus’ resurrection (Rordorf). Already in the letters of Paul (ca. 50-65 CE), we have a reference to this day, suggesting that bears a special significance (1 Cor 16:2), as is reflected also in Acts 20:7. In Rev 1:10, the phrase “the Lord’s day” (kyriakes hēmera) designates Sunday, this distinctive way of referring to the day reflecting its established status in the early Christian outlook. This way of referring to Sunday is reflected in other early Christian texts as well (e.g., Did 14:1, which has the curious phrasing “kyriakon kyriou,” “the royal day of the Lord” or “the Lord’s own day”).

Jewish Christians, who also identified themselves as members of the Jewish people, participated in synagogue worship on the Sabbath day, at least until after the Jewish revolt of 66-72 CE, when Jewish believers came under much stronger pressure to renounce faith in Jesus or suffer expulsion from synagogues. Even thereafter, it is likely that Sabbath observance continued among many Jewish Christians. But it also seems that at a very early point, both Jewish and gentile Christian circles met particularly on Sundays as Christians. Then, as Jewish Christians progressively became a smaller portion of the Christian constituency, Sabbath observance declined, but Sunday remained central and became still more emphatically the day of gathered Christian worship (e.g., Justin, 1 Apol 67).

2. Invocation and Confession of Jesus.

We have noted that early Christians can be described simply as those who “call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 1:2), and that this likely refers more broadly to the worship of Jesus. But, more specifically, it probably refers to the particular liturgical practice of invoking the exalted Jesus, especially in the context of gathered Christian worship. It is not clear whether this (probably collective) ritual action functioned to inaugurate the worship service, or was done at some particular point within it. In any case, this calling upon (the name of) Jesus seems to have been a characteristic and crucially distinguishing feature of earliest Christian worship, marking off and identifying believers in their devotional practice.

Moreover, there is good evidence that the practice of invoking Jesus originated in the earliest circles of believers, and was certainly not unique to Greek-speaking gentile churches such as those founded by Paul. It is now widely granted by scholars that the Aramaic expression included by Paul in 1 Cor 16:22, Marana tha, derives from the liturgical practice of circles of Aramaic-speaking Jewish believers (probably in Roman Judea), and that the expression is likely best translated “O Lord, come!” It remains debated among scholars whether this appeal was for the return of Christ in eschatological glory, or for his presence in the gathered worship setting. We may well have the same expression rendered in Greek in Rev 22:20, “Come, Lord Jesus!”
where it clearly is used in a strongly eschatological context. But it might well be that the expression was an appeal both for Jesus’ immediate presence in the worship setting and also for his eschatological return.

Whatever the case, it is very significant that the appeal functioned as a component in early worship services, further confirming the programmatic importance of Jesus in the devotional practice of first-century Christian circles. That Paul includes the expression un-translated here suggests that he expects the Corinthian church to know it, likely because it was one of the Semitic liturgical expressions that he taught his converts to use, reflecting Paul’s desire to promote a strong sense of religious solidarity among them with their religious predecessors and co-religionists in Judea. The liturgical provenance of the expression is corroborated by its inclusion in the prescribed Eucharist prayer in Did 10:6, which also has a strong eschatological flavor, and is widely assumed to derive from Jewish-Christian circles (or circles influenced by Jewish Christians).

Moreover, this liturgical appeal to the risen/glorified Jesus simply has no analogy or precedent in what we know of Jewish devotional practices of the time. This is not to be compared with the secretive appeals to angels found in some Jewish magical texts. The appeal to Jesus that we see reflected in the NT is an open, corporate, and apparently quite regular component in Christian worship, both in Jewish-Christian and gentile-Christian circles, and represents a notable innovation.

It is also rather clear that NT worship involved a ritual (collective) “confession” (homologeō) of Jesus as Lord. Several NT passages are taken as indicative of this practice. The reference in Rom 10:9-13 to confessing “Jesus is Lord” (Kýrios Iēsous) is one such, and the same confessional formula appears in another passage likewise reflecting a liturgical setting, 1 Cor 12:3. The acclamation in Phil 2:11, Kýrios Iēsous Christos, is simply a slightly extended form of the same confession, which in all these cases emphasizes Jesus’ divinely-exalted status as the “Lord” of the gathered ekklesia, and, indeed, of the whole creation.

3. Prayers.

We can be certain that prayers formed part of early Christian worship, but it is far less certain exactly what these prayers comprised. Given the lack of trans-local ecclesiastical structures, it is likely that prayer-practice varied from one location to another. There are indications, however, that forms of the “Lord’s Prayer” were used in some (perhaps many) Christian circles by the late first century, and perhaps even earlier. This custom probably lies behind the inclusion of the varying forms of the prayer in Matthew (6:9-13) and Luke (11:2-4), and a form nearly identical to the Matthean prayer also in Did 8:2, although there it is prescribed for usage three times daily, which suggests a setting in personal/private prayer rather than corporate worship. But this does not mean that the prayer was used purely in private settings.

It is worth noting also that in letters sent to some of his own churches (Galatians) and also to Rome, a church that he did not establish, Paul refers to believers being prompted by the Holy Spirit to address God as “Abba, Father!” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-16). It is not absolutely clear whether he alludes to individual or corporate actions, but we should probably not exclude either setting. If, as sometimes suggested, Paul here reflects the use of the Lord’s Prayer, that would take the practice back at least to the first few decades, and these two references would also reflect an impressively wide trans-local prayer-practice in Christian groups.

In 2 Cor 9:11-14, Paul envisions the delivery of the collection for Jerusalem from his churches producing thanksgiving and prayers for them from the Judean recipients. This may reflect more generally the practice of prayers of thanksgiving
and intercession in corporate worship. It is not certain, but entirely likely, that Paul’s exhortations for “prayer and supplications with thanksgiving” in 1 Thess 4:5-6 may apply to prayer in the congregational setting. This is still more likely in the case of the exhortation in 1 Tim 2:1-2, which includes the direction that prayers be offered for “kings and all who are in high position”. In sum, we can conclude that corporate prayers of thanksgiving and intercession were typical features of worship.

The prayers reflected in the NT are generally directed to God (the Father), especially, it appears, those offered in corporate worship; but this seems also true for private prayers. For example, Paul’s descriptions of his own prayers of petition and thanksgiving for the various churches to whom he wrote portray them as directed to God (e.g., Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; 2 Cor 1:3-4; 1 Thess 1:2-3; Philip 1:3). Indeed, in the NT and other early Christian texts representative of emergent “proto-orthodox” Christianity in the first few centuries, liturgical prayers are overwhelmingly addressed to God. It is interesting that in Christian apocryphal texts, however, we find a much higher percentage of prayers directed to Jesus, perhaps reflecting the more populist ethos of some of these texts, or simply one expression of their divergence from the emerging mainstream Christian tradition.

Yet liturgical prayer in the NT is typically marked by the place of Jesus in early Christian faith. So, e.g., prayers and thanksgiving are offered to God “through Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:8), or “because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:4-5), or God is identified as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (e.g., 2 Cor 1:3). As another expression of this, John 16:24-27 encourages believers to ask/pray to God in Jesus’ name, which may have involved the actual invoking of his name in prayers, but likely also reflects a view of believers as having a standing before God “the Father” because of their belief in “the Son”. Jesus’ salvific work involved the redemption of believers so that they can be “a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev 1:5-6), and so the prayers of the redeemed in the NT typically reflect this orientation. Then lengthy and elegantly-written prayer in 1 Clem 59-61 (ca. 95 CE) is a notable example of this “binitarian” shape of early Christian liturgical prayer-practice, the petitions and the praise directed to God through and because of Jesus (esp. 59:2;61:3).

4. Psalms and Hymns
The exhortations to believers to address one another in “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” in Col 3:16; Eph 5:19 reflect another feature of worship in the NT. Given the domestic setting, however, and the absence of any mention of musical instruments, we should probably think of something closer to a simple chanting, rather than more elaborate melodic compositions of modern hymnody. The “psalms” in these two references are most likely biblical Psalms. We know that the Psalms were favorite proof-texts for earliest Christians (e.g., Pss 2; 8; 110), from the frequency of the citation and allusion to them in the NT and as reflected, e.g., in the catena of citations in Heb 1:5-13. It is also noteworthy that Psalms is the single most frequently attested text in Christian manuscripts of the first three centuries. It appears that the biblical Psalms were broadly seen as expressive and predictive of Jesus, and so Christians chanted them as scriptural anticipations and celebrations of him. The structural features of the individual Hebrew Psalms were preserved in the LXX: the balancing lines, and without the typical features of Greek poetry (e.g., rhythm, metre). These features lent them to chanting (as has remained the practice in more liturgical forms of Christian worship). But, of course, unlike modern churches, early Christian congregations did not have multiple copies of texts, and so we must imagine either that the chanting was done or led by a reader (lines then echoed by the group), or that
certain Psalms became sufficiently familiar that a goodly number of the congregation could chant them collectively.

It is more difficult to say confidently whether the “hymns and spiritual songs” (hymnois kai odais pneumatikais) in Col 3:16; Eph 5:19 represent two distinguishable types of melodic praise, or whether the two terms designate the same phenomenon. In either case, we likely are dealing with new compositions that arose within circles of believers, and were prompted by what they took to be the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The reference to spiritual hymns/odes, thus, designates their charismatic character. In 1 Cor 14:15 Paul refers to singing “with the spirit” (tō pneumati) and “with the mind” (tō noī), which appears to designate respectively singing in tongues and singing in a one’s own language, in both cases the songs seen as prompted by the Holy Spirit; and corporate worship is the implied setting. Just a few verses later (14:26), Paul includes “a hymn” among the list of Spirit-prompted contributions that he presents as characterizing the Christian assembly. These spiritual songs may often have been uttered initially in a mode somewhat akin to prophetic oracles, impromptu and experienced as inspirations from God’s Spirit. For earliest Christians, they were one of the signs of the Spirit’s presence among them, manifestations of which were particularly sought and expected in corporate worship.

In those NT passages widely thought to be (or derive from) early Christian “hymns”, we likely have examples of these Spirit-odes. The earliest example is usually thought to be in Philip 2:6-11, a passage that consequently has received considerable scholarly attention (see, e.g., Hurtado, How on Earth, 83-107). The contents are a recitation of Jesus’ actions of self-humbling and obedience to God, even to the point of crucifixion in vv. 6-8, and in vv. 9-11 God’s answering actions of exaltation and the bestowal of “the name above every name,” with the intention that Jesus should be given universal acclamation as “Lord” (Kyrios) “to the glory of God the Father.” If, indeed, the passage preserves an early Christian hymn, believers would have intended their own acclamation of Jesus as Lord in gathered worship as demonstrating their obedience to God’s intention and an anticipation of the future universal obeisance portrayed in the concluding statement.

Col 1:15-20 is another passage widely thought to preserve an early hymn, and in these verses, again, the focus is on Jesus’ significance. But here he is lauded as having primacy in/over all creation (vv. 15-17) as well as in the church and redemption (vv. 18-20). Nevertheless, his divine status is expressed with reference to God, e.g., as God’s “image” (v. 15) and the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” in order to effect reconciliation of all things to God (vv. 19-20).

In the scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation noted earlier, the prophet John includes hymnical praise directed to God (4:11), to Jesus (5:9-12), and to them jointly (5:13-14); and at other points John recounts praise that appears to be expressed in poetic/hymnic mode (e.g., 19:1-8). We have noted that these texts may reflect the sorts of enthusiastic praise with which John was familiar in the churches of Asia, and that he also intended the heavenly praise to inspire and shape the worship of these churches.

Hengel has drawn attention to the probable importance of early spiritual songs as perhaps the crucial mode in which earliest christological claims about Jesus’ messiahship and heavenly exaltation were developed further. In the setting of gathered worship, and in an atmosphere of profound religious devotion and intense feelings of the presence of God’s Spirit, we can imagine that such Spirit-odes were voiced and then taken up by the group as part of their worship. If it is correct that a few of these songs are preserved in passages in the NT, this may indicate that some of
them became used repeatedly, and perhaps were shared trans-locally among churches. In any case, the singing/chanting of hymns/odes of praise, particularly reciting the acts of God in Jesus, appears quickly to have become a regular feature of Christian worship.

5. Prophecy and Related Phenomena.

These Spirit-odes can also be thought of as one form of the prophetic-like phenomena that are linked with Christian worship in the NT. Various NT texts indicate that prophesies and prophets were common features in various early Christian circles (esp. Aune, Prophecy), and they are typically set in the context of the gathered ekklesia. We can note again Paul’s references to prophecy in his extended treatment of various issues that arose in the Corinthian church in connection with corporate worship in 1 Cor 11—14. Prophecy is certainly referred to there as one of the Spirit’s gifts (12:4-11), as one that can be exercised by women as well as men (11:4-5; and also Acts 21:9), and a gift that is particularly preferable to tongues-speaking in corporate worship because it can readily be understood by, and so edify, fellow believers present (14:4-12). It is important to note that Paul’s purely pragmatic and functional preference of prophecy over tongues-speaking in this passage is based entirely on the importance of mutual edification as the controlling principle of corporate Christian worship. It is his extended example of making agapē (lyrically portrayed in 1 Cor 13) the “more excellent way” to regard the various charismata.

We note, also, his further instructions in 14:29-33 that prophecies should be limited to two or three, that “others” (others with prophetic gifts?) should assess what is said (v. 29), and that prophets should defer to one another (v. 30-31), the aim being “that all may learn and be encouraged” (v. 31). Paul insists, thus, that charismatic phenomena in gathered worship should not involve chaotic excitement but, instead, that the Spirit’s manifestations, which those gifted are responsible to exercise in an orderly manner, are to be deployed with a view to promoting “peace” in the ekklesia (v. 32-33).

In 1 Thess 5:19-22, Paul’s exhortations, “Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything,” may address concerns in the Thessalonian church about certain prophetic oracles that have generated anxieties such as those that Paul deals with earlier in this letter (e.g., the fate of deceased believers, 4:13-18, and the timing of Jesus’ return in glory, 5:1-11). Paul urges against any reactionary prohibition of Spirit-charisms such as prophecy, but also advises that all manifestations be tested (dokimazō), with a view to holding on to “the good” (kalon) (vv. 19-21).

In several NT texts we have depictions of, or allusions to, the exercise of prophecy in gathered worship. In addition to the scene in Acts 13:1-3 noted already, where a prophetic oracle in the context of worship orders Paul and Barnabas to be set apart for a divine mission, in other passages in Acts we have references to oracles ascribed to a prophet named Agabus (11:27-30; 21:10-11). In all these cases, the oracles are directions and/or warning with quite specific contents and intended force. This also seems to be reflected in the oracles that the seer John is told to communicate via letters to the seven churches addressed in Rev 2—3. In each case, the individual church is given specific commendations and/or warnings, and it seems certain that each oracle was to be delivered (in this case, read out) in the setting of the gathered church.

It is not entirely clear whether some of the other charismata listed in 1 Cor 12:4-11, specifically “a word of wisdom” and “a word of knowledge” (v. 8), are to be understood as fully distinguishable phenomena, or as varying expressions of
prophecy. In any case, it appears that in gathered worship believers might convey what were presented as revelations given by the Spirit that perhaps comprised guidance or other information.

6. Teaching.

Likewise, it is not entirely clear how to take Paul’s reference to “a teaching” (didachē, 1 Cor 14:26) as one of the phenomena of corporate worship, and whether it too was seen as a prophecy-like utterance, i.e., inspired by the Spirit, and perhaps impromptu. In Eph 4:11, we have “pastor-teachers” (tous de poimēnas kai didaskalουs) listed among the gifts of the exalted Christ to his churches, along with apostles, prophets, and evangelists. So, in this particular text, it appears that teaching and prophecy are distinguished.

Moreover, in other NT texts, teaching is presented, not so much as a charism, and more as a responsibility for which people with the right abilities are to be chosen. For example, an aptitude for teaching is one of the essential attributes of those who aspire to be an episkopos in 1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:9, and in 2 Tim 2:2, the author urges that reliable individuals be chosen who can teach others faithfully in accordance with the tradition. Such individuals are probably “the elders who rule well” and “labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17), and are thereby “worthy of double honor” (which probably means some financial remuneration; cf. the reference to individuals teaching wrong doctrine “for base gain” in Titus 1:11, and the exhortation to “elders” to perform their roles freely and not for “shameful gain” in 1 Pet 5:2).

So, it appears that teaching is presented in the NT as one feature of gathered worship, and that, although the individuals who faithfully perform the tasks of tending and teaching can be regarded as Christ’s gifts to churches, the activity of teaching was probably distinguished from charisms such as prophecy. The thrust of NT references to teaching is that it should exhibit faithfulness to the gospel and the traditions, which are often ascribed to apostolic figures.

7. Readings.

By the first century CE, readings from the Torah and the Prophets seem to have been a regular part of Sabbath synagogue gatherings (as reflected, e.g., in synagogue scenes in Luke 4:16-20; Acts 13:15, 27; 15:21), and readings of OT and also Christian writings seem to have become also a part of Christian worship at a very early point. By the mid-second century CE, Justin (1 Apol 67) includes readings from “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets” as a regular feature of the worship gatherings of believers, followed then by instructions and exhortations from “the president” of the gathering. But we have earlier reflections of the reading of texts as a part of Christian worship.

1 Tim 4:13 urges maintenance of the practice of public reading (anagnōsis) in worship, along with exhortation and teaching, and it is usually thought that the readings in view here were OT scriptures. A number of other NT texts refer to the reading of Christian texts as well in the gathered ekklesia. In the earliest of these references, 1 Thess 5:27, Paul orders that his letter be read out “to all the brethren,” and, indeed, it is commonly accepted that all his letters (at least those whose authorship is not contested by scholars) were intended to be read in a gathering of the particular church addressed. This seems to be reflected in his references to the intended and unintended responses of churches to his letters (e.g., 1 Cor 5:9-13; 2 Cor 1:13; 10:9-10). In Col 4:16, we have a reference to a further developing practice of copying and sharing Paul’s letters among churches. Whatever its authorship, Colossians is certainly evidence that this practice was underway at some point in the first century. Indeed, 2 Pet 3:15-16 seems to reflect a collection of Pauline letters,
and, strikingly, also refers to the use of Pauline letters as scripture (v. 16). Whatever the authorship and date of 2 Peter (e.g., ca. 70-120 CE), it is an important early witness to an authoritative role of Pauline epistles in Christian circles, a Pauline letter-collection the likely embryo of the subsequent NT canon.

The fleeting exhortation in Mark 13:14, “let the reader [ho anagínōskôn] understand,” is probably also to be taken as reflecting an intended reading of the Gospel of Mark publicly among gathered believers. This would suggest also that the other Evangelists as well primarily intended their accounts of Jesus to be read out in corporate worship. Thus, Justin’s reference to the liturgical reading of the apostolic “memoirs . . . which are called Gospels” (1 Apol 66) would only reflect the later regularization of a practice that had its beginnings at least several decades earlier than when he wrote.

Indeed, at least in the first two centuries CE, the reading of texts in corporate worship is probably the clearest indication of those texts functioning as scripture. This means that corporate Christian worship is one of the factors to be taken into account in understanding the historical process that led to texts forming a Christian canon.

8. The Sacred Meal.

A shared meal formed a key part of numerous religious occasions and gatherings in Roman antiquity (Smith). This is reflected in Paul’s response to questions about Christian participation in the meals that formed part of what he terms “the worship of idols” (eidōlolatria) in 1 Cor. 10:14-22. Here, Paul makes a direct comparison/contrast between meals held in the name of this or that deity and the church-meal as “a participation [koinōnia] in the blood/body of Christ” (v. 16), and as “the cup/table of the Lord” (v. 21). The “Lord” in these statements is obviously the exalted Jesus. So, given the typical place of a shared meal in religious gatherings in that time, it is not unusual at all for a meal to figure centrally also in Christian gatherings, and probably from the earliest years. There may well be additional influences, but the early Christian sacred meal also reflects the wider cultural environment of the time.

From these church-meals derived the later forms of eucharist familiar in Christian traditions. But the NT rather consistently refers to a full meal, and the domestic setting typical of earliest Christian corporate worship obviously facilitated this sort of event. E.g., Acts refers to the Jerusalem church “breaking bread” in their homes (2:42, 46), probably meaning a practice of group-meals held as part of Christian gatherings, and Acts 20:7 pictures such an occasion. Moreover, the sorts of behavior that Paul criticizes in 1 Cor 11:17-34 reflect a full meal in which, e.g., one can be drunk from excessive wine or left hungry by other inconsiderate participants (vv. 21-22, 33). Similarly, the stern condemnation of certain people as “blemishes [spilades] on your love-feasts [agapais]” in Jude 12 reflects shared meals in Christian assemblies.

The varying terms used in the NT to designate Christian sacred meals, “Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor 11:20), “love-feast” (Jude 12), or simply “breaking bread” (Acts 2:46) suggest various meanings or emphases ascribed to the meals. An earlier scholarly view that there were two distinct types of meals, an original “breaking of bread” (focusing more on believers’ solidarity and eschatological expectations), succeeded by a more recognizably eucharistic meal (focusing more on Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection), however, is now rightly viewed as an over-simplification. Instead, we should probably allow for varying emphases exhibited in different Christian circles synchronically and from the earliest moments of the Christian movement.
Moreover, although interpretation and emphases may well have varied from one circle to another, it is also likely that in any given circle multiple meanings were associated with the Christian sacred meal. Note, e.g., *Did* 14:1-3, which directs Christians gathered on “the Lord’s own day” to “break bread and give thanks (eucharisteō),” and goes on to refer to the same meal as a shared sacrifice-meal (*thusia*).

As another illustration, Paul’s statement that in the church-meal believers “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26) rather clearly links an emphasis on Jesus’ death with an equally strong eschatological orientation and emphasis. This combination of emphases on Jesus’ redemptive work and on eschatological expectation is reflected also in the Gospels accounts of the Last Supper, which are commonly understood by scholars as intended to be read as prefiguring and authorizing the Christian sacred meals of the original readers (Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-20).

However, an explicit reference to Jesus’ redemptive death seems not always a feature of Christian sacred meals, as is demonstrated especially in the eucharistic prayers in *Didache* 9—10. This extra-canonical text is widely regarded as preserving liturgical material from a very early time, quite possibly from Jewish-Christian circles, or at least from Christian circles with a strong Jewish-Christian influence. Their roots in very early tradition are reflected in the reference to Jesus as God’s “servant” (*pais*), a Davidic-messianic title (e.g., Acts 4:25; *Did* 9:1) applied elsewhere to Jesus only in several early prayers (Acts 3:13; 4:27; *1 Clem* 59:2-3), all of which likely derive from Jewish-Christian practice. The eucharistic prayers in *Didache* give thanks to God for Jesus’ as the unique agent of messianic fulfilment (9:2), and for the life, knowledge (of God), faith, and immortality bestowed through him (9:3; 10:2-3), and they look forward to the eschatological consummation of God’s purposes (9:4; 10:5-6), but make no direct reference to his death.

But, although Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection are not directly mentioned in these prayers in *Didache*, he is obviously central, the focus and continuing basis of the thanksgiving given to God. Moreover, there is no reason to read into these prayers some supposed reluctance to see Jesus’ death as redemptive, or to posit some radically different form of Christianity from which the prayers derive. For there are numerous other indications that *Didache* has historical connections with the beliefs and practices reflected also in the texts that became part of the NT (e.g., the regular use of the “Lord’s Prayer”, *Did* 8:2-3). Moreover, the explicit references to Jesus’ death, and the familiar “words of institution” setting the bread and cup within the context of Jesus’ last supper, when they were used in first-century circles, may have formed part of an introduction to the eucharist-meal, and not part of the prayers recited as part of the eucharist.

In sum, the Christian sacred meals reflected in the NT and other very early Christian texts likely were varied in what was done and in what they meant for participants. But in all cases, Jesus was the central figure for whom and with whom thanks were offered to God, and the meal itself was a central feature of Christian corporate worship across various circles of the Christian movement. Further, as a group-meal, there was an emphasis on the solidarity of those who partook; it was a corporate action, and not that of individuals in some private act of devotion. Finally, the meal seems typically to have been interpreted as an anticipation of eschatological redemption, which could be portrayed as a great banquet (e.g., Rev 19:9).

9. Other Liturgical Formulae.

In addition to the invocation and ritual confession of Jesus, we have indication of other formulae used in worship in the NT. The numerous occurrences of “Amen”
in the NT likely reflect its usage in Christian corporate worship (esp. 1 Cor 14:16; 2 Cor 1:20; cf., e.g., Rom 1:25; 9:5; 15:33; Gal 1:5; 6:18). Likewise, Paul’s characteristic use of “Grace and peace” as a salutation in his letters (e.g., 1 Thess 1:1; and with variations as in Philip 1:2), and his use of “grace-benedictions” to conclude them (e.g., 1 Thess 5:28; Philip 4:23; Gal 6:18) are commonly seen by scholars as Paul’s adaptation of formulas that have their provenance in the worship setting. His appropriation of these formulas, apparently intended to fit out his letters for reading in worship, provides us with allusions to their usage.

**F. Summary/Conclusion.**

As illustrated in this discussion, several extra-canonical texts give valuable further evidence about early Christian worship and its initial developments. Among these, *Didache* preserves our earliest set of directions for baptism and eucharist, and Justin (esp. *1 Apology*) gives the earliest description of a basic order of worship. But, as the case in dealing with NT texts, we should not presume a trans-local uniformity of worship-practice or a uni-linear development. Also, we cannot claim direct derivation of any liturgical order from worship practices reflected in the NT or these other early texts. Indeed, it is difficult to find evidence of any clear order of worship in any references to worship in the NT. But we do have indications of the sorts of actions that formed typical parts of Christian worship in first-century circles, and of what these actions likely meant. Moreover, we can sense something of the atmosphere of worship: the intimacy and sense of being personally known to the other participants facilitated by the typical domestic setting, the experience of Spirit-phenomena such as prophecy, and a sense of being participants in actions of transcendent and eschatological significance in which heavenly realities were reflected and ultimate ones were prefigured. Also, as we have noted, whatever the variations, collective worship seem always to have had Jesus as the explicit focus and occasion. Believers worshipped God in response to God’s great acts of revelation and redemption in Jesus.

**Bibliography**


