

The Christian Assembly

Purpose of the Series

Isn't "Christian assembly" synonymous "church"? Well, no. As discussed in the Church Series, the Greek word in the New Testament translated as "church" is ἐκκλησία (ek-clayze-ee-ah or ek-clay-see-ah) simply means "an assembly or gathering of people" and did not have spiritual connotation. In fact, in Acts 19 verses 32, 39, and 41, where an angry mob gathered together in opposition to Paul, ἐκκλησία is translated "assembly". This angry mob was definitely *not* having church. This series seeks the following:

- When did the word start being associated solely with "an official Christian gathering"?
- When did "worship" become associated with these Christian gatherings?
- What was Communion like in the 1st century and how did it evolve into what churches do today?
- How did church assemblies evolve over the centuries and what events caused it to evolve?
- What would Christianity be like today had church meetings remained as they were in the 1st century?

Part 1: The Evolution of Communion in the 1st Century

I. Transubstantiation and Consubstantiation

- a. Views throughout modern Christianity
 - i. Transubstantiation: the belief that the bread and wine of the Eucharist (from the Greek εὐχαριστία – an expression of thanksgiving) mysteriously changes into the actual flesh and blood of Christ, is held by about 68% of Christendom (Roman Catholics, 50%; Eastern Orthodox, 12%; Oriental Orthodox, 6%; and much of Anglican and Episcopalians, 1%).
 - ii. Consubstantiation: the belief that the actual flesh and blood of Christ is "somewhere in, with, and under the bread and wine". This is the belief of the Lutheran Church (about 4% of Christians globally).
 - iii. Memorialist View: the belief that the Eucharist is purely a symbolic and/or spiritual memorial of Christ's sacrifice. The remainder of Christendom, 28%, are all Protestant denominations (Reformed/Presbyterian 7%; Baptists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals, 21%).
- b. I found this very interesting: 72% of Christendom believes in the mysterious physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Clearly, there is no other way in which a person could receive and eat the physical flesh and blood of Christ. Therefore, if this is what Christ commanded and required of Christians, the remaining 28% of Christianity is, at best, missing something extremely important and unique, and, at worst, has lost the

Spirit and are spiritually dead. Catholics, for example, strongly urge their members to partake of the Eucharist at least once per year.

- c. The primary passage used to arrive at the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist is John 6:25-63, with the key verses being 53-58.

- i. Indeed, this passage does, at least when taken literally, does seem to say that Christ's followers are to physically partake in his flesh and blood—those who heard Jesus at that moment saw it this way. It could very well be the reason why many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching, who can accept it?" and no longer followed him.
- ii. Opponents of this view focus on verse 63, which in the NIV-1984 says, "The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you *are spirit* and they are life." (emphasis added) Interestingly, the NIV-WS says, "The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life." I can only assume they did this to appease proponents of the physical Eucharist. No other translation does this (they all say, "are spirit and life") and the original Greek does not have "full", and "Spirit" is nominative not genitive (i.e. "of the" is not there).

- d. The second passage used to arrive at this belief is 1Cor 10:14-22. Here Paul is warning young Christians in Corinth, who up until recently were pagans sacrificing and partaking in the festivities of pagan temples, not to eat or drink of food sacrificed to pagan gods (who are actually demons). The key Greek word in verse 17 is κοινωνία (koi-known-iah), which means "a fellowship or close association between people with an emphasis on what is common between them". Major Bible interpretations translate this word as "a participation", "a sharing", or "a communion".

- i. Proponents say that "participation" and "sharing" imply physicality. Furthermore, they argue that verse 21 using, "the Lord's table", indicates the table used to prepare the Eucharist becomes, "the Lord's table".
- ii. Opponents say that Paul is referring to the people of Christ. We are used to "body" referring to the church but not "blood". Nevertheless, verse 17 clearly speaks of the loaf representing the people of Christ. Likewise, verse 21 indicates that you cannot belong to the people of Christ and the people of pagan temples.

II. The Evolution of Communion

- a. What did Jesus establish?

- i. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are quite unified in what Jesus says with only minor differences. [I should say, as a nod to my previous series, all three passages call the day on which the Last Supper takes place, "the First day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread." Strictly speaking, this is incorrect. What!? The original Passover is in Exo 12:1-11. Exo 23:15 defines the Festival of Unleavened Bread but only specifies the month but not the day (it says "Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv"). Numbers 28:16-25 defines the Festival of

Unleavened Bread in the Law as a 7-day period starting on the 15th of the first month after the day of Passover on the 14th. Therefore, they are two different holidays. It seems that through the centuries, the Jews redefined this a one 8-day holiday called the Festival of Unleavened Bread, whose first day is Passover which starts on the 14th day of the first month. This still fits within the Law and is likely an easier way to remember everything.]

1. Mat 26:26-28: *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*
 2. Mark 14:22-24: *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.*
 3. Luke 22:19-20: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."*
- ii. And John says...nothing, but John doesn't really cover the Last Supper—just kidding! John is the Gospel that covers the Last Supper by an order of magnitude more than the others combined. From John 13 to 17—five whole chapters—Jesus speaks almost exclusively about the promised Holy Spirit. The bread and wine part, were it mentioned, would have occurred in chapter 13 somewhere in verses 13-30 where Judas is identified as the betrayer.
1. I see this as huge regarding communion as a ritual. If Jesus had wanted to establish a unique but critical ceremony to be replicated weekly by his followers from here until the 2nd Coming whereby, they would physically and mysteriously partake in his real flesh and blood through the bread and wine.
 2. It's not an overstatement, that were it not for Paul's references to Communion in 1Cor 10 and 11, we would not know that the early Christians celebrated Communion at their meetings.
 3. Think of it, the statements of Jesus in Matthew and Mark make no mention of his disciples continuing to do this or telling it to future generations. Luke uses the phrase, "do this in remembrance of me", which could easily be interpreted as pertaining only to the apostles and only to that particular Passover meal.
- iii. Paul's statements in 1Cor 10 and 11.

1. The subject of 1Cor 10:1-33 is about separating oneself from pagan rituals, specifically sexual immorality and food sacrificed to pagan gods. At the end it speaks about a believer's freedom and obligation to protect other Christian's consciences. In verses 16-17 and 21 use the Lord's Supper as an example. Nevertheless, they do establish that the disciples were celebrating the Lord's Supper.
2. 1Cor 11:17-34 are pivotal. The subject is actually about correcting how the mistakes they are making, but in doing so Paul confirms an important fact in verse 23: *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you or I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you.* This means Jesus spoke to him about Communion when he "downloaded" the Gospel to Paul in revelations (Gal 1:11-12).

b. Earliest Christian writings about the Eucharist: The Didache (dih-duh-key) 90-110 AD.

Didache 9:1-4 – Concerning the Eucharist: "Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks in this manner: First, concerning the cup: 'We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy vine of your servant David, which you made known to us through Jesus, your servant. To you be the glory forever.'

And concerning the broken bread: 'We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through Jesus, your servant. To you be the glory forever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.'"

Didache 10:1-2 – Post-Communion Thanksgiving: "After you have been filled, give thanks in this manner: 'We give thanks to you, holy Father, for your holy name, which you made to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge, faith, and immortality, which you made known to us through Jesus, your servant. To you be the glory forever.'"

Takeaways from the Didache

1. Focus on Thanksgiving: The Didache emphasizes gratitude ("Eucharist" itself means "thanksgiving") for life, knowledge, and unity in Christ, rather than elaborating on the nature of the bread and wine.
2. Symbolism of Unity: The prayer for the bread connects its gathering (as scattered grain) to the gathering of the church from the ends of the earth, emphasizing unity in Christ.
3. Absence of Real/Physical Presence Doctrine: There is no explicit mention of the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ, suggesting that the earliest Eucharistic theology might have been more symbolic and focused on thanksgiving and unity.

Part 2: The Evolution of Communion from the 2nd to 4th Century

Review of last week: We started by comparing modern interpretations of the Eucharist. 72% of Christians believe in the mysterious, physical, actual presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the Eucharist (transubstantiation or consubstantiation), while the remaining 28% believes in the symbolic, Memorialist view.

Then we looked at the origins of the Lord's Supper from the Jesus himself in the Gospels and from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians. The Lord's Supper had humble, simple beginnings. As Jesus and his disciples relaxed and enjoyed the Passover meal, in what would be Jesus' final meal before his death, Jesus used the bread and wine parts of the meal as symbols of what was about to happen. Namely, his body was about to be broken so that his blood would spill out to forgive all mankind's sins and usher in the New Covenant. Only in Luke does he say, "do this in remembrance of me", and, surprisingly, John makes no mention of any of these statements in his Gospel even though his is the one which spends the most time by far documenting the Last Supper. Paul's statements about the Lord's Supper prove that it was a part of early church gatherings as did two passages from the Didache, a letter written at the end of the 1st Century to early Christians, which provided statements for presenting the bread and wine as well as for offering thanks after partaking them.

I. Communion began as symbolic remembrance

- a. Because it's so important, I want to start today by reviewing and reinforcing my belief that Communion started out as a symbolic remembrance of Christ and not mystical and physical. Then we'll follow the evolution of the Eucharist into the 2nd Century and end in the 4th Century. My goal is to try to trace when the mystical and physical aspects of the Eucharist appeared. Memorialists in the 28% probably don't need this, but it is paramount for the others if they believe early Christians believed the Eucharist physically contained the flesh and blood of Christ (many don't or don't care, because the rulings of the many ecumenical councils clearly rule that it does).
- b. Jesus and Paul made no explicit mention of this. Everything they said is more organically interpreted as symbolic.
 - i. John 6:25-63, which is used as the primary source by transubstantiatists, symbolically connects Jesus with the manna the ancient Israelites were given to survive in the desert (verses 48-51 and 58). Those who were there were thinking in a literal manner and were trying to manipulate Jesus into giving them more bread to eat (verses 26, 30-31, 32-34). Jesus is intentionally using provocative language to filter out the unspiritual (verses 43-44, 52, 63).
 - ii. The Lord's Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: the key here is to know what the Passover meal was for: The Israelites were commanded to remember what God did for them in Egypt (Exo 12 esp. v14, 17-20, 24-27) when he passed over the houses that had the blood of the recently slaughtered lamb on it and how they ate it in haste and had no time to use yeast to make the bread rise. The

“thanksgiving blessings” said at various times in the meal all pointed back to that fateful night when the Lord spared the Israelites and delivered them from Pharaoh. *You must understand what a deviation it was for Jesus to point them instead to what **he was about to do**.* [This audio lesson from Aaron Budjen](#) establishes this in detail.

- iii. The subject of 1 Cor 10:14-22 is a warning against eating food sacrificed to pagan gods. It uses the Lord’s Supper as an example of how rituals enable individuals to actively engage with their deity, creating a genuine connection whether it be to the one God or to a demon.
- iv. In 1 Cor 11:17-32 Paul corrects several mistakes the Corinthians make during their Lord’s Suppers. If one is predisposed to a mystical view, they will read certain statements in a mystical way; but reasonable, down-to-earth interpretations make more sense.
 - 1. Verse 19: “No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval”. Mystical View: God will show who’s right through supernatural means. Realist View: God will show who’s right through natural consequences.
 - 2. Verses 20-21a: It’s a real meal they’re eating but some go off and eat separate from the group.
 - 3. Verses 21b-22: For the poor this meal is also important as sustenance; for the others it’s any something together that is important, therefore, don’t eat or drink too much as you will humiliate the poor.
 - 4. Verses 23-26: This is what Communion is for.
 - 5. Verses 27-29:
 - a. Mystical View: One must meditate and spiritually prepare before partaking the Communion. The “body of Christ” is the actual body of Christ. The “judgement” is a punishment from God.
 - b. Realist View: One must be aware of how much food there is and know the status of their fellow Christians. The “body of Christ” is the Christians who are gathered there. The “judgement” comes from the individuals who were hurt emotionally and physically (if they didn’t get enough to eat).
 - 6. Verses 30-32: Mystical View: These verses are the best for them. Those who take communion in an unspiritual manner will be judged by God such that they get sick and maybe even die. Realist View: Weak and sick are natural consequences of eating too much, and falling asleep is a consequence of drinking too much. These natural consequences ought to wake up those who are abusing the communion.
 - 7. Verses 33-34: Paul returns from his dark serious words back to a more pragmatic instructions to simply eat together and don’t eat too much.

II. Ante-Nicene Fathers reveal the evolution of the Eucharist

- a. I believe mankind's tendency to over spiritualize and ritualize religious activities; the Eucharist evolved into the concept of **Real Presence**, which is the belief that the real flesh and blood is present in the bread and blood after they are prepared/blessed for the Eucharist. They began to see themselves as preparing the Eucharist in order to offer Christ *again as a sacrifice* for their sins.
- b. This is difficult for modern Memorialists to understand, as they believe Christ offered as himself as the final sacrifice; but what started as a simple remembrance evolved to a reenactment of God sacrificing his son (breaking the bread and pouring the wine), followed by the Real Presence belief of the bread *becoming* the flesh of Christ and the wine *becoming* the blood of Christ. The person preparing the Eucharist evolved from an individual who had a role in the meal to something more like a Levitical priest preparing a sacrifice for the altar. We see an increasing number of worship-oriented words in the Christian writings as they pertain to the Eucharist.
- c. In the Council of Nicaea's Canons, little is found about the Eucharist, indicating the council was satisfied with how various assemblies were handling the observance of the Lord's Supper. Canon 18 is very revealing, as it specifically calls the Eucharist "the Sacrifice", and it establishes a hierarchy of who receives the Eucharist first and of positions of who can give the Eucharist to whom. Why call it "the Sacrifice" and why establish a hierarchy unless the simple supper and remembrance of Jesus had evolved into a ritual with the Real Presence of Christ?

1. **Clement of Rome, First Epistle to the Corinthians (c. 96 AD)** – Clement references the Eucharist but focuses on its symbolic meaning, particularly in relation to obedience and unity:

"It is necessary, therefore, that we should do all things in order, which the Lord has commanded us to perform at stated times... to offer the gifts and ministrations, as He has commanded" (1 Clement 40:1-4).

2. **The Didache (c. 100 AD)** – Although the authors are unknown, scholars agree on the general time of writing and that they were likely contemporaries of the original Apostles. The short book is an early Christian manual formalizing gatherings and ethics. It describes the Eucharist primarily as a communal act of thanksgiving with the emphasis on gratitude, unity, and remembrance and no mention of a literal transformation or Real Presence.

"We give You thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David Your servant, which You made known to us through Jesus Your servant... Remember, Lord, Your Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Your love" (Didache 9:1-4).

3. **Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans, chapter 7, (c. 110 AD)** – strongly affirms that the Eucharist is the flesh and blood of Christ:

“They [heretics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because *they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ*, which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again.”

4. **Justin Martyr, *First Apology* (chapter 66) (c. 156 AD)** – Justin describes the Eucharist and connects it to Christ’s real presence:

“For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word...*is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.*”

5. **Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* (Book 5, Chapter 2) (c. 185 AD)** – The Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ:

“The bread, over which thanks have been given, *is the body of their Lord*, and the cup *is His blood.*”

6. **Tertullian, *Against Marcion* (Book 4, Chapter 40) (c. 210 AD)** – Tertullian refers to Jesus using bread not simply as a representation of His body but also to it becoming his actual flesh. He does this by pointing out the *creational power of God’s words* to become what they encompass, as happened during the creation of the universe.

“He made the bread, which He took and distributed to His disciples, *His own body*, by saying, ‘*This is My body.*’”

7. **Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* (c. 247 AD)** – In chapter 11, verse 14, Origen emphasizes the spiritual significance of the Eucharist, downplaying a literal or physical transformation.

“When you partake of the bread and wine, remember that these were *symbols* of the body and blood of Christ.”

8. **Cyprian of Carthage, *To Caecilius on the Sacrament of the Cup of the Lord* (c. 253 AD)** – Cyprian emphasizes the sacredness of the Eucharistic elements and their connection to Christ’s sacrifice. He references the Apostle John’s crucifixion account in 19:34, where Jesus’ dead body was pierced by a Roman soldier causing a “sudden flow of blood and water”, because some groups had adopted a practice of using only water (*aqua sola*) in opposition to the apostolic tradition of following Christ’s example in the Last Supper.

“The cup of the Lord is not water only, but wine mixed with water...*the blood of Christ is shown forth.*”

9. **Council of Nicaea (325 AD), Canon 18** – Specifically calls the Eucharist “the Sacrifice”, and it establishes a hierarchy of who receives the Eucharist first and of positions of who can give the Eucharist to whom.

“It has come to the attention of the holy and great Synod that, in some places, deacons are administering the Eucharist to presbyters. Neither canon nor custom permits this: that those who have no authority to offer **the Sacrifice** should give the Body of Christ to those who do offer it. Moreover, *some deacons receive the Eucharist before the bishops or presbyters*, which is contrary to order and discipline. Let all this be corrected, and let the deacons remain within their own limits, knowing that they are ministers of the bishop and inferior to presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist in proper order, after the presbyters, from the bishop or a presbyter. If any deacon refuses to comply, he is to be removed from his office.”

Summary – The late 1st century writings have a clear Memorialist view. Early 2nd century, Christian writers began to speak about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. All references to the Lord’s supper except one (Origen) in the middle to late 2nd century and 3rd century writers stipulate and herald the Real Presence.

Addendum: I found 8 references to the Lord’s Supper in 8 different Ante Nicene (i.e. before Council of Nicene in 325 AD) writings. However, there are at least 25 recognized Ante Nicene writers that I list below along with when they lived and their major contribution. Therefore, not everyone wrote about the Lord’s Supper.

1. **Clement of Rome** (c. 35–99 AD) - Wrote *1 Clement*, one of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament.
2. **Ignatius of Antioch** (c. 35–107 AD) - Wrote several letters emphasizing church unity, the Eucharist, and opposition to heresy.
3. **Polycarp of Smyrna** (c. 69–155 AD) - A disciple of John; wrote *Letter to the Philippians* and was martyred for his faith.
4. **Papias of Hierapolis** (c. 60–130 AD) - Bishop of Hierapolis; his works (now lost) are quoted by later historians like Irenaeus and Eusebius.
5. **The Author of the Didache** (early 2nd century, exact identity unknown) - *The Didache* is an early Christian manual on ethics, church practice, and sacraments.

-- 2nd Century Writers --

6. **Quadratus of Athens** (fl. 125 AD) - One of the earliest Christian apologists; wrote a defense of Christianity to Emperor Hadrian.
7. **Aristides of Athens** (fl. 120–140 AD) - Early apologist; wrote *Apology* defending Christianity.
8. **Justin Martyr** (c. 100–165 AD) - Early Christian apologist; wrote *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*.

9. **Tatian the Assyrian** (c. 120–180 AD) - A student of Justin Martyr; wrote *Address to the Greeks*.

10. **Athenagoras of Athens** (c. 133–190 AD) - Wrote *A Plea for the Christians* and *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.

11. **Theophilus of Antioch** (c. 120–183 AD) - Bishop of Antioch; wrote *To Autolycus*, an apologetic work.

12. **Irenaeus of Lyons** (c. 130–202 AD) - Wrote *Against Heresies*, a major defense against Gnosticism.

13. **Hegesippus** (c. 110–180 AD) - Early historian of the church; much of his work is quoted by Eusebius.

14. **Melito of Sardis** (d. c. 180 AD) - Bishop of Sardis; wrote a *Paschal Homily* and an *Apology* to Marcus Aurelius.

15. **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215 AD) - Wrote *Exhortation to the Greeks* and *Stromata*, combining Christian doctrine with philosophy.

-- 3rd Century Writers --

16. **Tertullian** (c. 155–220 AD) - Father of Latin Christianity; wrote *Apology*, *Against Marcion*, and *On Baptism*.

17. **Minucius Felix** (fl. late 2nd – early 3rd century) - Wrote *Octavius*, a dialogue defending Christianity.

18. **Hippolytus of Rome** (c. 170–235 AD) - Theologian and possible first antipope; wrote *Refutation of All Heresies*.

19. **Origen of Alexandria** (c. 184–253 AD) - One of the greatest early theologians; wrote *On First Principles* and *Contra Celsum*.

20. **Cyprian of Carthage** (c. 200–258 AD) - Bishop of Carthage; wrote *On the Unity of the Church*.

21. **Novatian** (c. 200–258 AD) - Roman theologian; wrote *On the Trinity*.

22. **Gregory Thaumaturgus** (c. 213–270 AD) - Disciple of Origen; known for his *Panegyric to Origen*.

23. **Dionysius of Alexandria** (c. 190–265 AD) - Bishop of Alexandria; wrote letters combating heresies.

24. **Arnobius of Sicca** (d. c. 330 AD) - Early Latin apologist; wrote *Against the Nations*.

25. **Lactantius** (c. 250–325 AD) - Christian apologist; wrote *The Divine Institutes*.

Part 3: The Effect of the Real Presence on Worship

Review of last two weeks: We started talking about the various major interpretations of the Eucharist: Memorialist (purely spiritual remembrance), Consubstantiation (the real flesh and blood of Christ appears within the Eucharist), and Transubstantiation (the Eucharist is prepared becomes the real flesh and blood of Christ as it is consumed). Note that Consubstantiation and Transubstantiation are terms for *how* the flesh and blood of Christ occurs in the Eucharist, whereas the term, Real Presence, is more general and indicates a view that, one way or another, mystically, the real flesh and blood of Christ enter the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

We studied the evolution of the Eucharist from Christ's death until the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. I didn't have time to fully cover all references to the Lord's Supper, but I updated the outline (found on my website, theWitheredFigTree.com) to include a full list of each Ante Nicene (before the Council of Nicaea) writer who spoke about the Eucharist and what they said. I also added a handy list of all 25 of the Ante Nicene figures.

- 1) 30 AD to ~ 110 AD: Memorialist view
- 2) ~110 AD to ~325 AD: Real Presence view matures and solidifies.
- 3) 6th–9th Centuries: During this period, the doctrine of the Real Presence became more prominent, though transubstantiation as a term or concept was not yet codified.
- 4) 9th Century: The Eucharist became a topic of theological debate, notably between Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus of Corbie, who advocated for a more spiritual interpretation of Christ's presence. This debate heightened interest in the Eucharist and led to further theological reflection
- 5) 12th Century: Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160) in his Sentences, contributed to the theological foundation for the later formalization of transubstantiation. The term "transubstantiation" began to be used in theological discussions during this time.
- 6) Transubstantiation View (Fourth Lateran Council (1215); this was the first ecumenical council to formally define the doctrine of transubstantiation.
- 7) Reformers in the early 16th century to the present – The Lord's Supper was one of the reasons for reformation. All the denominations of the Reformation have Memorialist views except Lutherans and some Episcopalians.

You might be asking yourself, why bother learning the history of the Lord's Supper? Great question! The reason is *the Real Presence in the Eucharist radically affected the purpose of the Lord's Supper*, and this in turn radically affected the purpose and make up of assemblies held by Christians. Believe it or not, our modern church services, regardless of their view of the Eucharist, *are still impacted by these decisions*. If we trace out the history of the Christian Assembly, might we find decisions we now disagree with, and, consequently, might that affect how we hold our modern-day church services?

As with last week, I want to give a shout out to [Dr. Tom Wadsworth](#) and his 7-part series on the evolution of Worship.

I. What is Worship?

- a. Worship is what we do at church services, right? We worship through our fellowship, our singing, the sermon, and the Lord's Supper, right?
- b. The contemporary definition of worship: *Acts of devotion directed toward God that evoke a spiritual experience.*
- c. This differs greatly from the Temple-period Jewish definition: A reverent, fearful, and humble devotion to God at the Temple involving readings from the Torah, sacrifice of animals, and recitation of pre-ordained hymns and psalms.
 - i. Just once a year on Yom Kippur, the High Priest purified himself before entering the Most Holy Place.
 - ii. He entered with incense, so that the cloud would cover the Ark of the Covenant (Leviticus 16:12-13).
 - iii. He sprinkled blood on the mercy seat to atone for his own sins and those of the people (Leviticus 16:14-15).
 - iv. This was the only time anyone could enter the Most Holy Place, *emphasizing the holiness and separation of God's presence.*
- d. The role and purpose of the Temple changed at the moment of Christ's death on the cross.
 - i. The Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that the curtain of the Temple was torn from top to bottom.
 - ii. The curtain was made of fine linen, woven with blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and embroidered with cherubim (Exodus 26:31-33). These colors symbolized heaven (blue), royalty (purple), and blood/atonement (scarlet).
 - iii. According to Jewish tradition (Josephus & the Talmud), the veil in Herod's Temple was: 60 feet high, 30 feet wide, 4 inches thick (sources say "the width of a man's hand").
 - iv. Hebrews 10:19-20 declares that Jesus opened the way for believers to enter God's presence: *"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body."*
- e. Under the New Covenant, we now possess God's Holy Spirit, and, therefore, we are the Temple of the Lord: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, *"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."*
- f. Therefore, wherever Christians gather, that building becomes the temple of God and whatever they do collectively in the building is now worship, right?
 - i. This summarizes the modern view of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Here, the church is always the temple, even including an altar, a tabernacle, and priests. You also have priestly garments and priestly hierarchies.
 - ii. Reformer churches, especially Evangelical, emphasis is intentionally taken away from the building. Instead of an altar with a priest, you have a podium with a minister.

- Often the room where the church worships is still called the “sanctuary”, which is a temple-term. Everywhere, the gathering is called a “service”, which most don’t even realize is a temple-term, as in, “the priests perform religious services at the temple”.
- iii. Churches have different degrees of reverence. In some one is to remain silent in the sanctuary and dress as best as they can. In others, speaking out, dancing, and even running around are allowed.
 - iv. Nevertheless, in nearly all modern churches, the seats/pews point towards “the front” where the altar or podium is. This indicates that congregants are communicating with God and not with each other.

II. Greek words translated as “worship” in the Septuagint OT and the NT.

- a. **προσκυνέω** (proskyneō) – To prostrate oneself to their deity or a high-ranking individual like a king. e.g. 1Cor 14:25 “So they [an unbeliever] will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’”
- b. **λατρεία** (latreia) – To serve with sacrifice. e.g. Rom 12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”
- c. **λειτουργέω** (leitourgeō) – To perform priestly ministry. e.g. Hebrews 10:11 “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.”
- d. **θρησκεία** (thrēskeia) – religion, religious acts. e.g. James 1:26 “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.”
- e. **θεοσέβεια** (theosebeia) – reverence, esp. to a deity. Used only once in 1Tim 2:10, “...appropriate for women who profess to worship God.”
- f. These are all from the NIV-WS, and you can see they’ve gotten smart to the nuance of the word worship, choosing to use other words instead.

III. The New Testament does not associate “worship” words with the Christian Assembly

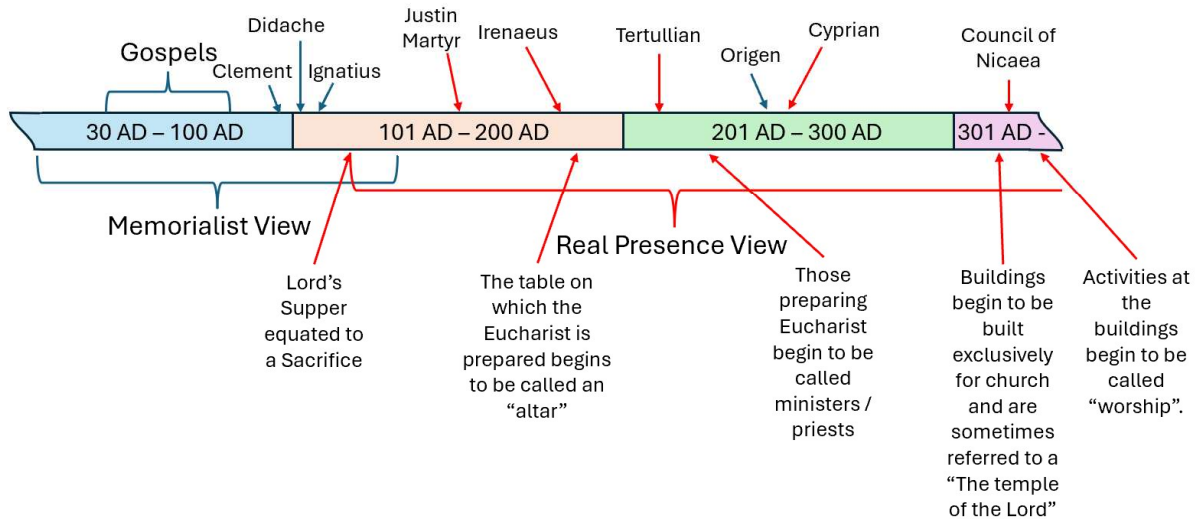
- a. Believe it or not, the New Testament does not use the Greek words from above to refer to ἐκκλησία, the Christian gathering.
- b. Some passage headings do. E.g. 1Cor 11:2 “On Covering the head in Worship”, 1Cor 14:1, “Intelligibility in Worship”, 1Cor 14:26, “Good order in Worship”, 1Tim 2:1, “Instructions on Worship”, Heb 9:1 “Worship in earthly tabernacles”, and Heb 10:1 “Christ’s sacrifice once for all”.
- c. All references in the NT from Acts to Revelation either refer to Jewish worship, the worship of unbelievers, reverence, or our spiritual worship (e.g. Rom 12:1).

IV. Evolution of the Lord’s Supper from a Memorialist view to Real Presence View and its effect on the assembly

- a. The Eucharist became the Real Presence.
- b. The Eucharist is then seen as a *sacrifice*.
- c. The table on which the Eucharist was prepared is then called an *altar*.
- d. The preparers of the Eucharist are then called ministers and *priests*.

- e. Buildings are then built exclusively for church and were referred to as *temples of the Lord*.
- f. Finally, the activities in the building are referred to as *worship* as it remains until modern times.

Evolution of the Lord's Supper from a Memorialist view to Real Presence View and its effect on the assembly



Next Week: We'll go over the effect of the Eucharist on worship in the writings of the Ante-Nicene writers themselves.

Part 4: Ante Nicene Writers and the Sacrifice and the Altar

Review of last week: Last week I started to speak about the effect of the Real Presence of on Christian assemblies in house churches. Before I could get into that, I had to talk about worship in the modern church setting. Although modern Christianity has a diversity of worship types, they all still share the common trait of people assembling in a building to worship God together to reinvigorate and sustain one's relationship with God. This statement probably doesn't even seem wrong to most of us as it's all we know, and we have no alternatives.

We tend to think of worship as a practice of all religions, but as is the case of most aspects of religion, Christianity is meant to be different. God coming to earth as a human and willingly sacrificing himself so that the Holy Spirit, the living presence of God inside of us, could indwell within us are all exceptionally unique aspects of Christianity. This cannot be understated! In fact, not only do other religions not have any of these, but they are also altogether foreign to them, nor would they even want them.

Our source for the evolution of the church from 100 AD until the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD is the so-called Ante-Nicene Fathers (I think "writers" is a better name).

As established in Part 2, the impetus was a change in the Eucharist. As can be seen in the timeline figure below, the evolution of the Eucharist started early in the 2nd century with the Lord's Supper changing from a meal (i.e. a supper) to the Eucharist being seen as Jesus being sacrificed again and again. This occurred when the church interpreted certain statements from Jesus and Paul (John 6:53-56, Luke 22:19, 1Cor 10:16-21, 1Cor 11:27-31) to mean the physical flesh and blood of Christ supernaturally appeared in the Eucharist between when it was blessed and consumed. This belief is called the Real Presence.

Even though the original Lord's Supper was the Passover meal and Paul's description in 1 Corinthians is that of a real supper, one can see that if the only consequential parts of the supper are the bread and the wine—and not even all the bread and wine present, but only the one loaf and one cup which are blessed—then that is all that is required.

What follows are excerpts from various Ante-Nicene writers from the beginning of the 2nd century to the middle of the 3rd. As we read them, look out for language about the Lord's Supper being a sacrifice, who is allowed to consecrate (prepare) it, and on what it is prepared.

Ignatius of Antioch c. 107 AD – These quotes indicate the Eucharist is the flesh and blood of Jesus and that it is prepared on a table called an altar.

- **Letter to the Smyrnaeans:** "They [heretics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again."

- **Letter to the Smyrnaeans:** “Take care to have but one Eucharist; for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup.”
- **Letter to the Ephesians 5:2:** “If anyone is not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God.”
- **Letter to the Philadelphians 4:** “Be careful to observe one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for unity in His blood, one altar, just as there is one bishop.”

Justin Martyr c. 155 AD, First Apology - These quotes confirm that by the mid-2nd century, the Eucharist had become a formalized church rite (as opposed to a communal feast), that a special person called “the president” (to refer to the leader of the Eucharistic celebration) prepared it with a prayer and deacons disseminated it, that only baptized believers in agreement with the teachings of the church could take it.

- **Chapter 66, Only baptized believers could partake:** “And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined.”
- **Chapter 66, The Eucharist consisted of only bread and wine, blessed by a leader:** “For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.”
- **Chapter 65, the Eucharist was separate from the Agape Meal and part of a service, not as a full meal:** “Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands.”
- **Chapter 65, the Eucharist was part of a structured worship service:** “And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water; and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.”
- **Chapter 67, the Eucharist was part of a weekly worship gathering on Sunday:** “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.”

Tertullian c. 210 AD – By the beginning of the 3rd century, the supper had firmly been replaced with a sacred rite of the Eucharist, only taken by members in good standing who had spiritually prepared themselves by fasting and abstaining from sin (possibly from marital sex too). The preparer of the Eucharist, called a “solemn oblation” (which means “a sacrifice to God”), is called a priest and the table is called an altar.

- ***De Corona 3* - The Eucharist is a sacred rite, emphasizing fasting beforehand, showing it was no longer part of a meal:** “The sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord commanded to be taken at mealtimes, and by all, we take even before daybreak in congregations, but from the hand of none but the presidents.”
- ***De Resurrectione Carnis 8* - The Eucharist was only for baptized, spiritually prepared Christians:** “The flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may be filled with God. It is the Eucharist. The unworthy are forbidden, lest they take judgment upon themselves.”
- ***De Oratione 19* - The Eucharist was a true sacrifice to God:** “The priest who celebrates the Eucharist, standing before the altar, should call upon the Lord with all his heart and faith, and make the solemn oblation.”
- ***De Oratione 14* - Christians must ceremonially prepare themselves before receiving the Eucharist:** “Shall we attend the Lord's banquet with unwashed hands? How much more improper is it to attend the Eucharist with a soul impure?”

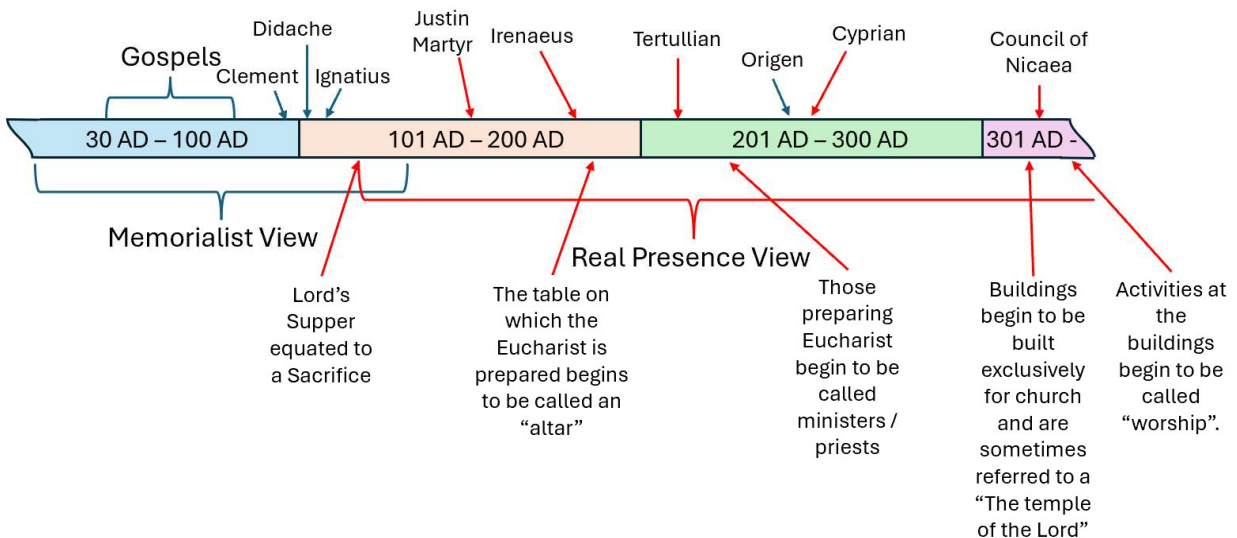
Cyprian of Carthage, c. 250 AD – The Eucharist was no longer a full meal, required a properly consecrated cup, must be partaken to remain saved, is a “true and full sacrifice”, and brings unity to the church.

- ***Epistle 63:14* - The Eucharist was a real sacrificial offering administered only by an ordained priest or bishop:** “For if Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, is Himself the high priest of God the Father; and He first offered Himself as a sacrifice to the Father, and commanded that this be done in remembrance of Him, then assuredly the priest truly acts in Christ's place when he imitates what Christ did and offers a true and full sacrifice in the church to God the Father.”
- ***Epistle 62:2* - The Eucharist was no longer a full meal:** “The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated only with the elements that the Lord Himself used: bread and wine, nothing else.”
- ***Epistle 63:2* - The Eucharist required a properly consecrated cup:** “The cup of the Lord is not to be mixed with water only, nor is the wine to be taken alone without water, for both elements must be present as established by the Lord Himself.”
- ***Epistle 63:7* - The Eucharist was necessary to remain saved:** “For as Christ says, 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, you shall have no life in you' (John

6:53), so must we always be mindful that we receive His body and blood, lest we be separated from Christ."

- **On the Unity of the Church 6 - The Eucharist must be celebrated in unity with the church and only in the church:** "There is one God, and one Christ, and one Church, and one faith, and one people joined together in the solid unity of one body! He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his mother."

Note: I'm not saying that we should treat the Ante-Nicene writers like the Bible and do what they did. We're looking at them to get the history of the church and how it changed. This is important since most modern Christians don't know how the early church evolved. When we look back, we can see how their gatherings changed over time.



Part 5: The Advent of Church Buildings and Worship

Some clarifications of prior episodes:

First, I want to clarify how beliefs spread in the early church. There were differences in the beliefs of Christians mostly at the regional level. For instance, as discussed in earlier episodes, Origen stood out because he disagreed with Real Presence in the Eucharist. Today, we'll see that many of the Ante-Nicene writers repeated the phrase, "no temples, no altars, and no images". Yet, altars and temples are precisely what appeared in the whole church shortly after Constantine. How did this happen? In many ways, unity within the movement was preserved because new ideas spread slowly and there were few councils (we'd call them conferences nowadays). There were 14 pre-ecumenical councils before the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea, in 325 AD ("Ecumenical" is just a fancy religious term for "of or relating to the worldwide church"). Therefore, the 14 pre-ecumenical councils were all *regional*. In addition, 6 of them happened just before the Council of Nicaea while only 4 were in the 2nd century and 4 were in the 3rd century. Interestingly, the first 3 councils dealt with when Easter should be celebrated—a topic that's not even the important in modern times. Temples and altars seem to have appeared because the first ecumenical council was in Rome, and Rome became the center of Christianity because of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea.

Second, the most difficult and tenuous point I've tried to make is that the table on which the Eucharist was prepared began to be called an altar towards the end of the 2nd century. There's only one reference I've found for this in the apocryphal writing, "The Acts of Peter" (c. 185 AD) and I didn't include it in prior episodes. I did include two quotes from Ignatius that used the term "altar" and those are from the beginning of the 2nd century. Therefore, what's important is that slowly over time, terms for the Eucharist like "sacrifice", "altar", and "priest" appeared in some regions during the 2nd and 3rd centuries. I was able to exchange some emails with [Dr. Tom Wadsworth](#) and we discussed the "altar". Remember to check out his 7-part series on the evolution of Worship (the link is in the description).

I. At First there were "No Temples, no Altars, and no Images"

We'll see in the following quotes from Ante-Nicene writings that, throughout Christianity, Christians took pride in their differences from pagan worship. They did not have sacrifices on altars in temples with statues. Even though at the same time (and some of the same writers), they were calling the Eucharist a sacrifice. It seems they did not equate the Real Presence in the Eucharist with the slaughtering of animals on an altar in a pagan temple. Nevertheless, it was this belief (that the Eucharist was a sacrifice of sorts) which evolved into an altar with priests in a communal building that some called, "the temple of God".

Epistle of Barnabas 16:1-10, c. 115 AD: “Finally, I will speak to you about the temple and how those wretched people...set their hope on the building; as though it were God’s house. God truly dwells in us...This is the spiritual temple that is being built for the Lord.”

The Martyrdom of Polycarp 12.2, c. 155 AD: “The entire crowd...cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: ‘This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship.’”

Justin Martyr’s *Apology* 1.13, c. 160 AD: “What sober-minded man, then, will not acknowledge that we are not atheists, worshipping as we do the Maker of this universe who has no need of streams of blood and libations and incense.”

The Martyrdom of Justin Martyr, c. 165 AD, we find the conversation: “Rusticus: Where do you Assemble? Justin: Where each one chooses and can. Do you think that we all meet in the very same place? Not so, because the God of the Christians is not circumscribed by place.”

Clement of Alexandria 2.462, c. 200 AD: “The Word prohibiting all sacrifices and the building of temples, indicates that the Almighty is not contained in anything.”

Minucius Felix, *The Octavius* 32 (c. 210 AD): “But do you think that we conceal what we worship, if we have not temples and altars? ... What temple shall I build to Him, when this whole world fashioned by His work cannot receive Him? ... These are our sacrifices, these are our rites of God’s worship; thus, among us, he who is most just is he who is most religious.”

Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.64 (ca. AD 230): “[the Christians] they cannot allow in the worship of the Divine Being altars, or temples, or images ... they not only avoid temples, altars, and images, but are ready to suffer death when it is necessary, rather than debase by any such impiety the conception which they have of the Most High God.”

Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.20 (c. 230 AD): “They reproach us for not deeming it necessary to worship the Divine Being by raising lifeless temples. We object to building altars, statues, and temples, because...we have learned from Jesus Christ the true way of serving God.”

Arnobius, *Against the Heathen* 6.1, c. 300 AD: “We do not rear temples for the ceremonies of worship, do not set up statues and images of any god, do not build altars...”

II. Then, suddenly, Priests, Altars, Buildings, and Worship

The Agaba church in Jordan, built around 298 AD, is the world’s oldest known Christian church built exclusively for gatherings.

After Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 AD, the widespread construction of churches began almost immediately after Constantine’s victory over Licinius in 324 AD, when he became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. With Constantine’s patronage and access to the Roman treasury, grand basilicas and churches were built throughout the empire.

Eusebius, *Church History* 10.4, c. 320 AD: “Friends and priests of God, and ye who are clad in the sacred gown adorned with the celestial crown of glory...”

Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.48, c. 325 AD: “The emperor’s zeal in the building of churches surpassed even that of those who had preceded him in the faith. He directed that churches should be built in every place, and adorned them with splendid decorations, displaying his royal generosity in the service of the divine”.

Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.50, c. 325 AD: “Thus was the monument of his Savior’s resurrection [in Jerusalem] ...excelled all others in beauty. He [Constantine] lavished upon it an abundance of gold, silver, and precious materials, making it a fitting house for the King of kings.”

Eusebius, *Commentary on Psalms*, c. 330 AD: “We shall not think it sufficient to be purified by the washing of hands... but also with the bright and clear light of conduct and disposition. And thus, approaching the ‘altar’ ...we may partake of the divine and unblemished sacrifices.”

Eusebius, *Oration for Constantine* 17.4, c. 335 AD: “Our Savior...once more adorned the world with holy temples and consecrated houses of prayer in every city and village...ordaining the erection of churches and sacred buildings to the honor of the Supreme God and Lord of all...These hallowed edifices are called churches or houses of the Lord.”

Athanasius, *Festal Letters*, c. 367 AD: “Let us come before Him with purity of heart... and participate in the holy and divine mysteries, so that we may be counted worthy to approach His holy altar.”

Apostolic Constitutions 26, c. 380 AD: “The bishop is the mediator between God and you in the several parts of your divine worship...he is next after God, your earthly god.”

Conclusion: The seeds set in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Real Presence in the Eucharist (and not a supper), the Eucharist as a Sacrifice, and the consecration of the Eucharist on an altar done by priests, blossomed into full temple worship after Constantine in 313 AD when lustrous, opulent churches were built.

III. A Word about Constantine

Was Constantine really a Christian? Did he really see a miraculous symbol in the sky? Many think not. Instead, scholars think that Constantine’s main concern was gaining and maintaining imperial unity, which he saw could be accomplished using Christianity and its existing unity (compared to all the disparate Roman and pagan gods and temples). Serious, internal Christian disputes would threaten division within the empire. The big issue of the time was on the nature of Christ. A presbyter named Arius and Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, fought over this issue. Arius believed Christ was created by God and not co-eternal with the Father. Alexander believed Christ was fully divine, not created, and immortal. Constantine called the Council of Nicaea, inviting over 300 bishops from across the empire to decide the issue.

We may never know the heart of Constantine. What we can say is that empire-wide unity was brought to Christianity, and that many ornate churches were built, each containing an altar on which priests would consecrate the Eucharist during Sunday worship services.

Part 6: Were Early House Gatherings Just a Phase?

Review: We saw that with Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the legalization of Christianity, wealth and power appeared in the church for the first time. Christian assemblies, basically overnight, changed from small house gatherings to large assemblies in dedicated-use, ornate buildings. It is understandable that Christians, empire-wide, would celebrate and enjoy their newfound freedom from tyranny with public gatherings in public buildings; however, what we find is that the small changes in the house gatherings over the prior two centuries were amplified. It's impossible to know what the transition would have been had the Real Presence not developed and matured in the 2nd century. What would the 4th century post-Constantine church had looked like if the Real Presence, along with its religious accompaniments of altars, priests, clerical hierarchies (i.e. bishops, presbyters, priests, and deacons), and the communal suppers replaced with the Eucharist only had not arisen? Perhaps those accompaniments would have instantly appeared, but I highly doubt it. Therefore, my hypothesis is that the Real Presence and its accompaniments followed by the introduction of lavish buildings resulted in something analogous to Jewish Levitical priestly temple worship.

I. Did all of Christendom accept this?

- a. In short, no—but it seems those who didn't were persecuted by those who did, and their history was never recorded or intentionally lost. What history we do have is of those who accepted the new temple worship opposing those who didn't. Naturally, those who celebrated Constantine and the new imperial-backed Christianity would not have openly persecuted those who warned against it on the basis of their newfound wealth and power. Instead, they framed their opposition in terms of *doctrinal disputes*, schisms, and heresy to justify their actions.
- b. The Nicaea Creed and the Canons of the Council of Nicaea dealt with Arius
 - i. As noted in Part 5, the Arians taught that Jesus was created by God and not co-eternal with the Father.
 - ii. The council would communicate their decisions with "canons" and with a creed which members would recite in order to solidify and express their faith. "Canon" comes from the Greek *kanon* meaning, "any straight rod or bar; rule; standard of excellence". Relative to Jewish and Christian writings, "canon" recognized documents as original and authoritative.
 - iii. It was the Nicaea Creed that directly rejected Arianism, not the canons, with several statements about the nature of Christ being uncreated and immortal with the Father.
 - iv. Canons 1, 5, 6, and 19 indirectly relate to handling heretics, church authority, and those denying Christ's divinity. Therefore, these canons showed how the church punish those heretics through excommunication, and control how those who had been excommunicated could return to the church.

- v. 1-4 of the council indirectly shows the offices that had evolved in the church: bishop (called an episcopate), presbyter (an elder), and deacon. In the NT, bishop and presbyter are used interchangeably, but here we see them as distinct, with bishop being above presbyters. The canons designate that bishops and presbyters cannot be new converts (taken from 1Tim 3) and must be *abstinent* because they consecrated the Eucharist. It goes so far as to say their abstinence cannot be the result of self-castration and that they can't have any women besides close relatives living with them.
- vi. Canon 6 is important because it says that the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria enjoy a higher jurisdiction than other bishops in their regions.
- c. The Donatists. The Donatists lived in the region of Morrocco are the best example of a group which objected to the Constantine's version of the church.
 - i. They were officially condemned in the Councils of Arles (314 AD) and Carthage (411 AD) officially ruled against them. But why?
 - ii. The churches doctrinal disputes with the Donatists were the validity of sacraments administered by sinful clergy, and naturally, church unity and authority – could individual regions break away from the wider Church, or did bishops and councils have universal authority? Answer: regions could not break away and bishops and councils have all the authority.
 - iii. However, their main offense was rejecting the lavish churches and temple-like worship that emerged under Constantine and the ecumenical church. Their opposition was not just about architecture but was tied to their broader rejection of imperial Christianity and the wealth, politics, and power associated with it.
 - iv. So, how much of their condemnation was due to the doctrinal dispute around sacraments and how much to their rejection of temple-like worship? We'll never know because there are no remaining documents as they were all *burned*. As the saying goes, "History is written by the victors".
 - v. I should mention that Constantine, after years of resistance, realized that force would not eliminate the Donatists. He issued an edict of tolerance in 321 allowing the Donatists to worship freely. So maybe Constantine was a good guy??
 - vi. On February 27, 380 AD, Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which declared Nicene Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire and labeled other Christian doctrines as heretical. With this he outlawed Donatism and *used force* to suppress them.

II. Organic reasons for House churches

- a. Organic – Describing a system, process, or institution that develops naturally from within, without external coercion, central planning, or artificial enforcement. It evolves through voluntary interactions, cultural traditions, decentralized decision-making, and intrinsic order, rather than through imposed rules, fiat authority, or forced compliance.
- b. If the early church assembled in the homes of Christians for purely *organic* reasons, then there would be no reasons why anyone would return to them. In other words, the

lessons learned from the mistakes of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries could be remedied and Christians could continue to meet in their buildings. With this definition in mind, what are the organic reasons the early church assembled in small numbers in member's homes?

- i. **Lack of Dedicated Buildings** – Christianity began within Jewish and Greco-Roman society without a formal infrastructure. Synagogues were Jewish spaces, and pagan temples were idolatrous, so early Christians had no public places to meet. The most natural gathering place was private homes, just as extended families or philosophical groups would gather.
- ii. **Size and Intimacy of the Groups** – Early Christian communities were small, local groups rather than mass assemblies. A house setting naturally facilitated closer relationships, shared meals, and personal discipleship. Example: In Romans 16:3-5, Paul greets Priscilla and Aquila, who host a church in their house.
- iii. **Legal and Safety Concerns** – Public assemblies would attract authorities, making house gatherings the safest option. Religious gatherings outside state-approved temples were often seen as rebellious (*collegia illicita*). House churches avoided the suspicion of forming illegal religious assemblies. Example: The "secret meetings" accusation against Christians in Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan (c. 112 AD).
- iv. **Christianity as a Family-Oriented Faith** – The New Testament describes the church as a "household of faith" in Galatians 6:10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." The household structure fit organically with Christian family-like relationships. Another example is 1 Timothy 3:15, "...you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."
- v. **Financial and Economic Factors** – Without temple-like buildings, early Christians could direct resources toward charity rather than construction. An example of this is Paul's collections for the poor in Jerusalem in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Wealthy Christians often opened their homes to host Christian assemblies. For example, in Acts 16:14-15, Lydia in Philippi, was a wealthy woman who hosted a house church.
- vi. **Eucharist as a Communal Meal** – The Lord's Supper was originally a full meal, making homes the most natural place to hold it. For example, Acts 2:46-47, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

Conclusion: Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to meet in house churches. We know the organic reasons why the early Christians met in homes, and we know the events that caused to change to temple-like worship in lavish buildings. In the remaining two episodes of this series, we'll put this together to see what the good reasons are for Christians to meet in homes in our modern times.

Part 7: The Pros and Cons of Large Assembly Worship

Review: Thus far in this series we've talked about the reasons for the large change in Christian assemblies that occurred with Constantine in the early 4th century. Some subtle yet important changes in the 2nd and 3rd centuries set the stage for large sweeping changes in the early 4th century. All Christendom did not agree with the sweeping embrace of lavish buildings and temple-like worship services, but with the power and might of the Roman state, worldwide (aka catholic) uniformity was achieved by the end of the 4th century. We saw that there were a lot of organic reasons for 1st – 3rd century house gatherings. However, the change to lavish, liturgical worship was based on the church's newfound wealth and power and did not take into account any of the benefits or spiritual reasons for Christians originally gathered in the 1st century.

As discussed in *The Church* series, worship from the 4th century until the end of the 15th remained very fairly constant, continuing to the present in the Catholic and Orthodox churches. From the 16th century to mid-20th century, the Reformation Movement and the formation of many reformed denominations changed worship services in opposition to the priestly, liturgical Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Today, we'll discuss how the Evangelical Movement, from the mid-20th century to the present, responded to Reformed denominational church services. They did this by adopting informal buildings and services, contemporary music, and Bible-based sermons. Despite these changes, some aspects have remained constant since the time of Constantine and the early 4th century.

I. Reformers react to Orthodox worship

- a. No: lavish churches, temple elements (altars, tabernacles, images, stain glass, priests, priestly garbs), and rote liturgical elements (repetitive prayers, repetitive creeds or professions of faith, missalettes), anti-celibacy/chastity.
- b. Yes: bland church buildings, Bibles in current language.

II. Evangelicals react to Reformers

- a. No: Semi-liturgical services, church-looking buildings, much less fire-and-brimstone, shaming, and fearmongering lessons, anti-progressive/cultural elements (e.g. no gay lesbian pastors, anti-trans/fluid sexual movement).
- b. Yes: Bands and contemporary music, call outs okay (amen!, preach!, etc.), informal/casual dress (no suits or collars; i.e. same as congregation), emphasis on personal connection and learning (quiet times, personal Bible study, reading spiritual books), scheduled yearly collections (separate from weekly collections, usually for local or hierarchical church, mission field, church expansion, the poor), outside-of-Sunday gatherings (Bible study groups, discipleship groups), demographic ministries (esp. campus but also singles, marrieds, etc.).

III. Modern reactions Evangelicals

- a. Anti-sophisticated music and church as entertainment.

IV. Most Importantly: What hasn't changed

- a. Large church assemblies
- b. Communion (i.e. still not a meal)
- c. Vertical worship (i.e. rows of chairs pointed to the speaker and no horizontal exchanges)
- d. Still some formality (i.e. intro, worship, communion, sermon, close)
- e. Weekly collections for church (either local or hierarchical or mission field but not for the poor or those outside the church)
- f. Primary connection to God on Sunday.

V. Pros and cons of large meetings in single-purpose buildings

- a. Pros: centralized regional services, uniformity, convenient for members (don't have to prepare or share anything, just be moved by worship and absorb teaching), sophisticated offerings like child care and preteen/teen classes, marriage counseling, organized community service, place to invite friends and guests, evangelism support like conversion study series and knowledgeable/experienced members, sophisticated teaching series and university-trained professional church leaders.
- b. Cons:
 - i. **MONEY.** Money spent on Christian church buildings and clergy/staff since the 4th century to the present in modern US Dollars is an estimate 50 to 80 trillion dollars. This amounts to 11% to 18% of total worldwide spending.

Period	Estimated Spending (Modern USD)
30 AD – 312 AD	< \$5 million
313 AD –15th Century	~\$10–\$20 trillion
16th–18th Century	~\$5–\$10 trillion
19th–20th Century	~\$20–\$30 trillion
21st Century (so far)	~\$12–\$20 trillion
Total 4th century–Present	\$50–\$80+ trillion

- ii. **Historic Abuse of Power.** The abuse of power of the ecumenical church is well known.
 1. Suppression of Opponents – It has used its own power and imperial power to silence rivals. For example, The Inquisition (12th–19th century) persecuted those labeled as heretics.
 2. Wars and plundering – Crusades & Holy Wars (11th–13th Century) – The church justified wars in God's name leading to mass violence. It also justified the plundering and devastation of South and Central American countries (16-18th centuries).
 3. Corruption & Financial Abuses – Stealing the treasury of the Templars (and torturing and killing many of them) (14th century). Sale of Indulgences (Middle Ages), which the church claimed could reduce time in purgatory.
 4. Clergy Exploiting Their Status – Many bishops and popes lived like kings and many thought themselves above the moral and civil law. From medieval monasteries to modern times, church leaders covered up their scandals.

5. Restricting Access to the Bible (Middle Ages) – The church forbade laypeople from reading the Bible in their own languages. Even in modern times, there are many churches that hold the King James Version in the same regard. The church likes to keep the Bible in the prior generation’s language or dialect.
 6. Persecuting Scientists – The church opposed scientific discoveries that challenged its teachings. For example, Galileo (17th century) was put on trial for supporting heliocentrism. Some scientists escaped torture and death by hiding their writings or inventing new languages or writing backwards.
- iii. **Modern Abuse of Power.**
1. Financial Corruption & Prosperity Gospel – Through exploitative tithing, some pastors and televangelists pressured congregants to give until they were poor or from what they would pass down to their children while living in extreme wealth.
 2. Prosperity Gospel – Church leaders made claims that giving money to the church will make you wealthy, turning faith into a business transaction.
 3. Lack of Financial Accountability – Nearly all churches have closed books or present highly abstracted numbers to their congregations.
 4. Manipulative Church Culture – Shunning and excommunication is employed by some churches, while others use social pressure to silence dissenters.
- c. Perhaps the greatest and most difficult to measure change is the Christian’s reliance and surrender to the Holy Spirit.
- i. There is high doubt among church leadership that ordinary Christians can have a thriving, consistent relationship with God on their own.
 - ii. Although Evangelical leaders would say their members need to know their Bibles and know why they believe what they believe, they do not trust the Spirit to guide their members with their own thoughts and convictions, nor do they seek their input in the day-to-day operations of the church.
 - iii. In general, it implicitly behooves churches to keep their membership dependent on the church, which is counter to the role of the Holy Spirit.

Next week: Perhaps house churches weren't just a phase to early Christianity. While there were many organic reasons for the early church to meet in homes, perhaps there were solid, spiritual reasons which were unknowingly lost to time. For instance, was the Lord’s Supper meant to be a communal meal for a serious spiritual reason? Did the “horizontal” house church groups fulfill a spiritual need that “vertical” church assemblies do not fill? For example, the host of “one another” passages.

Part 8: The Pros and Cons of Small House Church Assemblies

Review: Whew, this has been quite the series! We've seen how:

- The first Christian assemblies met in small numbers in member's houses, and that they ate a meal together featuring a loaf and a cup of wine that was a symbolic remembrance of the Last Supper of Christ. These small house gatherings continued until the beginning of the 4th century.
- In the 2nd to 3rd centuries, the supper turned into a religious ritual with only the loaf and cup of wine with the participants believing that the actual flesh and blood entered the Eucharist upon its blessing, and that Christ was sacrificing himself again at each instance. We also saw some early Christian writers, aka Ante Nicene Fathers, call the table upon which the loaf and cup were blessed an "altar", and the person performing the blessing a "priest". This was later called the "Real Presence", a term that originated in the 9th century.
- In the early 4th century, with the conversion of Constantine and his wife, and the legalization of Christianity, money and political power entered the church. Large lavish, sacred, temple-like buildings were constructed with altars, images, and ornately garbed priests who performed the services culminating with the Eucharist.
- Temple-like services in large lavish buildings with altars and priests continue to the present time. But during the Reformation, sacred buildings, elaborate rituals, and opulent worship were rejected. Reformers like Martin Luther argued that the elevated status of priest, bishops, and ultimately the pope, could only lead to moral failure and abuses like the practice of indulgences. Money, instead, should go to the poor and power should return to God. Reformers also rejected icons, images, relics, decorative elements, and sacred architecture of churches, and their churches were stripped of all these.
- However, nearly all Reformers saw value in dedicated church buildings with large assemblies. The only exception were the more radical reformists, the Anabaptist. They believed worship should be simple, community-based, and participatory. Early Puritan, Separatist, English Baptists, and Quakers movements adopted the Anabaptist model in the 16 through 18th centuries.
- At the present time, there are many underground house churches in China, Iran, and Muslim-dominated countries, but this is because persecution. There are a dozen or so listed house church movements (by choice), who claim to have numbers of over 100 million; although, understandably, it is difficult to count them. The largest number of these comes from India, 80 million, where the Hindu Church of Christ (Hindu culturally and socially, but Christian in spiritual beliefs) and the Christukula Ashram church (which form SCCs (Small Christian Communities) and BECs – Basic Ecclesial Communities).

I. House Churches and the Bible

- a. There's little doubt first century Christians met in the houses of members for what we would call in modern times church.
- b. List of verses from the New Testament
 - i. Acts 2:46: *"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."* Yes, they did meet at the Temple, but this was not a change from their prior Jewish culture. They broke bread, which likely means they had meals and celebrated communion.
 - ii. Acts 8:3: *"But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, ..."* I used to think he meant he went to all the houses dragging out any Christians inside, but this would be impossible. Instead, it seems he knew the houses in which Christians assembled for church.
 - iii. Romans 16:3–5: *"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus... Greet also the church that meets at their house."*
 - iv. 1 Corinthians 16:19: *"The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house."*
 - v. Colossians 4:15: *"Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house."*
 - vi. Philemon 1:2: *"Also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home."*
- c. I believe we have freedom in the New Covenant to build our personal relationship with God and His Indwelling Spirit, but is the house church a better medium for this?
 - i. Most of the activities described in the NT are "one another", where the activity is directed at the whole assembly. Singing hymns and praying are the only activities directed towards God, but even those have a communal benefit (e.g. hearing other's prayers and singing). This does not happen in church services. The church I used to attend implemented the "one other" passages via discipling partners, but if you re-examine these "one another" verses you'll see they are targeted at the Body of Christ assembling together in houses.
 - ii. 1 Corinthians contains the most instructions to Christian assemblies in the NT by far, however, we tend to stay away from them because of the use of "tongues" and other spiritual gifts. It's a shame because, even for those who don't believe in the modern existence of these, the points Paul makes are how to act in the assembly of believers (i.e. not how to pray in tongues). For example, 1Cor 14:26: *"What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. **Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.**"* Look at the stark contrast between these verses and what is done in church services today: *everyone* has something to give, and *everything* is to build each other up.
 - iii. In modern church services, few give and many receive—and often those who give from service to service are the same people. Thus, few people mature spiritually, and

those who give don't grow in their own relationship with God, while those who receive don't either because they never connect with God but with people.

- iv. Re-reading all of Paul's epistles with house assemblies in mind instead of large church services changes many things. For example, 1Tim 3 and Titus 1 describe in detail the characteristics of elders. Through the lens of a large church, this defines a unique, important role to be primarily exercised outside of church; but through the eyes of house churches, Paul is simply describing the ideal leaders of a house church: they're married (else they would not have owned a house back then), stable, good examples to the rest of the house church, able to teach, and not new converts—otherwise they may become conceited because they'll gain virtue from the use of their house—not to mention, how would they be able to teach and “refute those opposed” to good doctrine.
- v. It's the same for other roles: Deacons: people who serve the disciple at house assemblies and throughout the week. Evangelist: one who preaches the word outside of house churches to call new people. Teacher: one who goes from house church to house church with deeper teaching about the Gospel.

II. The Pros and Cons of House Gatherings

Factor/Element	Pro	Con
Finances/Money	Ultra-low overhead, funds can go to charity and missions	Limited capacity for projects
Leadership	Shared and decentralized	Little to no theological training or leadership skills
Teaching and Doctrine	Bible-focused and relational	No formal theological training
Format	Participatory and informal	Lack of musical variety, professionalism, and inspiration
Mission and Outreach	Grassroots and organic	Limited in community; no large-scale outreach
Discipleship	Close accountability, spiritual growth, and reliance on the Spirit	Hard to provide specialized ministries
Community	Strong personalized relationships; ability to help individuals	Conflict is difficult to resolve; difficulty with differences in beliefs

III. Is the future House Churches?

- a. For me it is. 😊 I've seen too many problems that are direct results of large churches. Too many hurts, too many abuses, too many people who have left, too many people dependent on the church for their relationship with God, many not even knowing what an independent relationship with God is and that they're missing it.

- b. It is highly unlikely any church would convert to house churches. It's simply too steep a hill to climb and there are too many headwinds. Would Evangelist and other paid staff be on board? What would happen to all the buildings? How would the church control the house churches?
- c. I can envision problems starting a house church, though. What doctrine are you going to teach? What beliefs must people have in common? How do people transition from a pew-sitting receiver to a participating, caring, giver? Once you get a house full of people, what do you do for worship, sing old a Capela songs? There's certainly no room or need for a band!

I have much more to say about Christian house church assemblies. Much has to do with what one does in church and lives outside of church. Therefore, people join me in the next series, "How to Worship God".