

Contents

Introduction	vi
Abbreviations	x
1 Last Supper and Institution Narratives	1
2 The <i>Didache</i>	24
3 Other Early Christian Ritual Meals	43
4 Justin Martyr	61
5 Eucharistic Theology from Ignatius to Tertullian	78
6 The Eucharist in the Third Century	97
7 The Evolution of Eucharistic Prayers	116
8 The Transformation of the Eucharist in the Fourth Century	139
Index of References	159
Index of Modern Authors	163
Index of Subjects	165

Introduction

The fundamental thesis advanced by Gregory Dix in his classic work, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1945), was (a) that there was a very high degree of standardization in Christian practice everywhere from a very early date; (b) that the form of the eucharistic rite was at first modelled on what Dix described as the sevenfold shape of the Last Supper, which was then modified at a very early stage into a fourfold shape of taking, blessing, breaking the bread and sharing; (c) that the meal as such disappeared from the rite at this same stage to become a separate institution called the *agape*; and (d) that instead the Eucharist was appended to a morning service of the word inherited from the Jewish synagogue but transferred to Sunday. While Dix was not the first scholar to put forward some of these ideas, he was responsible for popularizing them through his writing, and the constant reiteration of his hypotheses by subsequent teachers of liturgy for more than half a century has – as with all such repetitions – led to them being regarded by many as established facts. So seductive has been the picture painted by Dix that it has tended to blind us to its shortcomings and thus mislead us all. I intend therefore to explore the basis on which his thesis is built, to expose its weaknesses and to suggest an alternative way of looking at the evidence that seems to have more credibility and leads to a very different vision of eucharistic origins.

For the truth is that there is no really firm evidence that primitive eucharistic practice ever did conform to the sevenfold shape of the Last Supper, whereas there are signs of the existence of early Christian ritual meals that do not seem to relate themselves to this event or to be patterned according to its model. Although some scholars have reacted to this problem by propounding the notion that two quite different types of Eucharist existed in primitive Christianity,¹ Dix and many other

1 On this, see further below, pp. 27–8.

scholars tended to deal with it largely by means of exclusion, either by ignoring altogether scraps of evidence that did not fit their theory or by relegating them to the sidelines, ascribing them to deviant and/or heretical groups which could not possibly tell us anything about 'mainstream' Christian practices. But a method that simply eliminates all possible contrary evidence from an argument is hardly likely to be sound. We need to start not from a conviction about how things must have been, and then assemble the evidence in such a way that it fits our thesis, but rather from the evidence itself and see where it leads.

What we will discover is that neither the theory of a single root to eucharistic practice nor the hypothesis of a twofold origin provides an adequate explanation for the diversity of the testimony to what early Christians did. On the contrary, their practice seems to have been shaped by three principal variables: (a) in its ritual pattern, whether bread precedes cup, or cup precedes bread, or both occur together, or even that there is no cup at all; (b) in the elements that are used, whether bread and wine, bread and water, or bread alone or with other food-stuffs; and (c) in the meanings assigned to the rite, particularly whether it is related to the sayings of Jesus about his body and blood or not. The possible combinations of these three variables result in some variety in early Christian ritual meals, which I shall try to outline.

Dix and others also assumed a high degree of continuity in very many aspects of 'mainstream' Christian thought and practice from the apostolic age down to the fourth century, an assumption driven at least as much by concerns for a traceable line of doctrinal orthodoxy as by the historical data itself. Scholars today, however, would tend to see a greater element of change and dislocation in that historical period. L. Michael White, for example, has criticized Dix for presenting a virtually seamless evolution from the physical arrangements for worship of the early house-church to those of the later basilica.² Hence, I will adopt a more critical approach to the ways in which eucharistic practices andologies did gradually begin to move towards a more 'mainstream' norm, through an examination first of the witnesses of the second century, with a special focus on Justin Martyr, and then of sources from the third century. We shall see just how few those sources are and how relatively little they can really tell us about the theology and practices of the period, compared with the bold pictures of that age that were often painted by earlier scholars, lumping the scattered pieces together to produce a composite whole and filling the gaps with material only

2 *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore, MD, 1990), pp. 15–17.

known to us for the first time from a century or more later. We shall also see signs that it appears to have been much later than most scholars have supposed that the Eucharist came to be celebrated outside the context of a meal, and also that the understanding of the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ sacrificed for believers came to predominate. In place of the latter, some at first focused instead on the image of feeding on the life-giving *flesh* and blood of Jesus, while others passed on the tradition of his sayings about body and blood, though independently of the paschal context and interpretation given to them in the New Testament writings. Finally, I will turn my attention to the emergence of the classic pattern of eucharistic prayers and the transformation of eucharistic theology and practice in the fourth century, where again the assumption of a clear line of continuity from the Jewish grace after meals, the *Birkat ha-mazon*, down to the eucharistic prayers of this much later age will have to be seriously questioned.

As indicated at the beginning of this Introduction, the Dixian hypothesis implicitly assumed a high degree of standardization and hence a very centralized model of ecclesiastical authority disseminating liturgical instructions to the churches scattered throughout the ancient world, a model perhaps having more in common with both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches from the sixteenth century onwards than it does with the situation in early or even medieval Christianity. Yet, it is not so surprising that earlier scholars did tend to think in this way about the early Church, because Jewish scholars too tended to view the history of their own liturgy in the same way, and if there was one thing that influenced Dix's approach it was that Christian liturgy was essentially built upon the foundations of Jewish liturgy. Recent decades, however, have seen very significant changes in Jewish scholarship, with the majority abandoning belief in a fixed and uniform – and hence centrally controlled – Jewish liturgy at the time of Jesus. Instead, most scholars would now see this situation emerging only very slowly over many centuries afterwards and in fact never fully achieved.³ Similarly, modern New Testament scholarship tends to view nascent Christianity as an essentially pluriform movement with diverse theologies and diverse practices. Against such a background, therefore, the expectation of variety in Christian liturgical custom would seem more probable than

3 See for example Richard S. Sarason, 'On the Use of Method in the Modern Study of Jewish Liturgy', in W. S. Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* (Missoula, MT, 1978), pp. 97–172 = Jacob Neusner (ed.), *The Study of Ancient Judaism I* (New York, 1981), pp. 107–79; Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (Cambridge, 1993).

that of uniformity, although it would be an equally erroneous methodological error dogmatically to rule out a priori in every case the possibility of the latter as it was to eliminate the former from consideration.

My work here obviously draws upon the foundational material presented in the second edition of my previous volume, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (London/New York, 2002), but in the early chapters it also builds to significant extent upon research already undertaken by Andrew McGowan, especially in his *Ascetic Eucharists* (Oxford, 1999), and I would like to acknowledge the considerable debt that I owe to him, as also to Maxwell Johnson, my colleague in the Theology Department at the University of Notre Dame, for reading this book in draft form and making helpful suggestions.

PAUL BRADSHAW