

## A Biblical Theology of Worship: Acts Terry Johnson

The picture of worship that emerges from the Book of Acts is encouraging for Reformed Protestants in ways that could not be for either ritualists on the one hand, or spiritualists on the other. Worship in Acts is simple, yet ordered. It is spiritual, yet structured. It consists of the ministry of the word, the ministry of the table, the ministry of praise, and the ministry of prayer. It is expressed in the context of the disciplines of daily prayer and the Lord's Day assembly of the church. It is devoid of ceremonial and ritual, as well as ornamentation and decoration. It is exercised through leadership particularly called to the ministry of the word and prayer. Reformed Protestants *own* the Book of Acts, one might say, only somewhat tongue in cheek. Ritualists and spiritualists must go elsewhere for ammunition. The narrative portraits of the early church at worship are very congenial to Reformed Protestantism and its claims for antiquity of its worship.

As we begin to examine the theology of worship in Acts, we do so cautiously, keeping two principles in mind.

1. *Not all narrative is normative.* We may cite as an example Acts 2. Nearly everyone agrees that the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit are normative for all kinds of Christians in all eras. Yet is universally recognized as well that the sound of the wind, the appearance of tongues of fire, and the gift of languages (the ability to speak in languages that one has never studied) are not. Some phenomena in Acts belong to the *historia salutes*, not the *ordo salutes*, the history of salvation, not the personal experience of salvation.

2. *Acts records a transitional period between Israel as God's people and the church as the new Israel, the new people of God.* The implications of Christ's atonement were not all worked out in an instant, but were only drawn out over time. One of those implications that Acts itself highlights is fellowship between Jews and Christians, particularly table fellowship. It was not until Acts 10 that the Holy Spirit impressed upon Peter, through a dream reinforced by a visit by Cornelius, that he understood that he "should not call any man unholy and unclean" based on Old Testament dietary restrictions (Acts 10:28; cf 10:34,35; 11:1-18; 15:8,9). It took time to learn this lesson, including periodic back-slidings (Galatians 2:11-5).

The student of liturgy sees Peter and James going to the Temple at the ninth hour, the hour of the afternoon sacrifice, which would have involved offering prayers in association with burnt offerings and incense, he is not to see anything normative about temple-worship or temple-sacrifices (Acts 3:1ff). Similarly, the student of liturgy is to see *transitional practices not normative patterns* when he sees the Apostle Paul involved in rites of purification, and then reads that he "went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrificed was offered for each one of them (Acts 21:26). F. F. Bruce says that this sacrifice would have been a blood sacrifice consisting of "one he-lamb, one ewe-lamb, one ram, and an accompanying meal and drink offerings, according to Numbers vi.14f."<sup>1</sup> What was the Apostle Paul, in light of the once-for-all finality and sufficiency of Christ's death, doing offering an animal sacrifice? We suggest as an answer that this

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1952), p. 394.

was a transitional period, and that the Early Church and the Apostle Paul had not yet worked through all the implications of Christ's atonement. Not all that we see in the narrative is normative. There were interesting parallels to this lag between theology and liturgical application at the time of the Reformation 1500 years later. Luther, Zwingli, and Bucer all believed that the language of sacrifice in the Mass was theologically incorrect, and even blasphemous, as early as 1520. Luther's *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* makes this point emphatically. Yet it was not until 1523, three years later, that Luther reformed the Mass, removing the language of sacrifice. Even then he retained the altar, priestly vestments, and Latin. Zwingli also reformed the worship in Zurich in 1523, and likewise retained vestments and Latin. Not until Bucer published *Grund und Ursach* in 1524 did Protestants begin to see everything associated with a sacrificial understanding of the Mass (the term "altar," the term "priest," the elevation of the elements, kneeling before the host, the vestments) had to be removed. A year later Zwingli carried out Bucer's suggested reforms. Luther never did. The point is that it often takes time to work through the practical implications of theological convictions. This was true of the early church as well as our own.

Keeping these principles in mind we have four questions to answer from the Apostolic church in the Book of Acts.

1. The "why" of worship
2. The "how" of worship
3. The "when" of worship
4. The "where of worship

### **Why God is to be worshiped**

Our main interest is with the *how* rather than the *why* question of worship. Consequently we will deal with the "why" question more briefly. The short answer to the question of "why" is "for all of the same reasons why God was to be worshiped in the Old Testament." There is but one God, He is the creator of all, the providential governor and provider for all, and the redeemer.

We see the Apostle Paul making this case twice. First, as the people of Lystra attempted to worship Paul and Silas following the healing of a man born lame, Paul said,

*"Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. And in the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."* (Acts 14:15-17)

The point of the Apostle Paul's short speech is that God alone is to be worshiped, not men. God is the creator of all (verse 15a), God is the governor of all (verses 16,17), and redeemer of all (verse 15b), and, therefore, He, not Paul and Silas, should be worshiped.

*And even saying these things, they with difficulty restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.* (Acts 14:18)

His point was to prevent false worship. A similar case is made in Acts 17 when the Apostle Paul attempts to persuade the Athenians to turn from idolatry to the true God. What they “worship in ignorance,” the Apostle Paul declares in truth. The God they ought to worship is the creator:

*The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; (Acts 17:24)*

He is the God of providence:

*neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, “For we also are His offspring.” (Acts 17:25-28)*

He is the God who calls to repentance and redeems:

*Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead. (Acts 17:29-31)*

The point throughout is that God is one to be worshiped because worship is owed to Him. This is what the creature owes to the Creator; what the governed owes to the Governor; what the provided for owes to the Provider; what the delivered one owes to the Deliverer.

### **How God is to be worshiped**

***First, the worship of the church is to be simple and spiritual.*** The early Christians continued to worship in both the Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 3:11; 5:12; 5:42; 6:42; 20:17) and the synagogue (6:9; 9:20; 13:5; 13:14; 14:1; 17:1ff; 17:10ff; 18:4; 18:19; 18:26; 19:8). Alongside of this they developed their own places to assemble, such as those of the Upper Room (Acts 1:13) and in other homes (Acts 2:45; 5:42; 6:42; 9:11; 9:36-43; 10:1-8, 24; 12:12). It seems that at times they attended morning prayer at the Temple or synagogue, and, at other times, according to circumstances, conducted services in their own places.

What influenced the shape that these prayer services took? Were they primarily shaped by the temple, the synagogue, or were they their own entity, discontinuous with what preceded them? It is not surprising to find that the gatherings of the early Christians most resemble the prayer services of the synagogue. Hughes Old suggests, on the basis of James 2:1, regarding one coming “into your

assembly” (*sunagōgēn*), that for 30-40 years after Pentecost “the Christians had their own synagogues and maintained liturgy much as other synagogues in the city.”<sup>2</sup>

Old summarizes:

“James’ little remark about Christian synagogues suggests that the Christians of Jerusalem started out by following the worship patterns of the Jewish synagogue, with its strong emphasis on preaching and teaching.”<sup>3</sup>

This view has considerable scholarly support among both New Testament scholars and liturgists. R. P. Martin, in *Worship in the Early Church*, points out that the early Christians were diligent at attending the “prayer assembly” (*tē proseuchē* – Acts 1:14), the term used being “a regular one for the Jewish synagogue fellowship” (Acts 16:13,16).<sup>4</sup> Martin notes “that some scholars have drawn the inference from this word that the disciples in Jerusalem formed themselves into a synagogue.”<sup>5</sup> These Christian synagogues continued to worship as they had, Christianizing the synagogue’s form: prayer in Jesus’ name, a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament, and the observance of the Lord’s Supper. “There would be no need to invent new forms of worship,” says Martin.

“Christianity entered into the inheritance of an already existing pattern of worship, provided by the Temple ritual and synagogue liturgy . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Martin quotes W. D. Maxwell’s *An Outline of Christian Worship* with approval: “Christian worship . . . arose from the fusion . . . of the synagogue and the Upper Room.”<sup>7</sup> Again, “The church . . . borrowed many of its forms of worship from the Temple and synagogue,” says Martin, and of these “the influence of the synagogue on Christian worship was more permanent and deep.”<sup>8</sup> Oscar Cullmann, writing in his important monogram, *Early Christian Worship*, concurs:

“The individual elements of the outward form arose from Judaism.”<sup>9</sup>

Among liturgists, Horton Davies says,

“. . . the worship of the early Christians is basically a modification of synagogue worship, with the special addition of the Lord’s Supper. For this reason it is important to understand the character of synagogue worship, itself a simplification of the worship of the Temple.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes O. Old, *The Reading & Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Vol. 1: The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 223. See also Horton Davies, *Christian Worship: Its Making & Meaning* (Wallington, Surrey, England: The Religious Education Press, Ltd., 1946, 1957), pp. 13-16.

<sup>3</sup> Old, *Reading*, p. 224.

<sup>4</sup> R. P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 1974), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, *Worship*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Martin, *Worship*, pp. 40,66.

<sup>9</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1950, 1953), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Davies, p. 9.

So it was, he argues,

“the church did not inaugurate an entirely new type of worship . . . the temple and the synagogue and their liturgies formed the natural background of their worship.”<sup>11</sup>

This view does not go unchallenged. David Peterson is among those who seek to minimize the influence of the synagogue on the worship of the early Christians. He claims “only a very general correspondence between certain features of the synagogue and Christian gatherings may be discerned from the evidence in Acts.”<sup>12</sup> But as one reads through Acts and the Epistles the continuity seems considerable. One finds the essential elements of the synagogue in the church’s gatherings (e.g. Acts 2:42; 4:23ff). E. F. Harrison finds the early church,

“Modeling its own worship substantially after the Jewish pattern, having the same basic ingredients of prayer, confession of faith, reading of Scripture, an exposition or homily, and the blessing of the congregation. The word *synagogue* could even be used to refer to a Christian gathering (see James 2:2).”<sup>13</sup>

Why would the early church have found the forms and practices of the synagogue to be congenial for worship? Because the synagogue service was essentially a simplification, even a spiritualization of the temple service. It was temple worship without the sacrifices or anything connected with the sacrifices (e.g. priests, vestments, altars, washings, incense, etc.). As Davis wrote in the above-cited work, synagogue worship was “a simplification of the worship of the temple.” Early Christians, bringing with them the conviction that Christ was the Lamb of God (John 1:29), that Christ was the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), that Christ was the High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16), that Christ was the temple (John 2:19ff), would have found the de-sacerdotalized forms of the synagogue compatible with their own convictions about Christ. Philip “preached Jesus” from Isaiah 53, demonstrating that the church from the beginning understood that Christ’s death was an atoning sacrifice (Acts 8:30-38). Hughes Old argues Peter’s second sermon, Acts 3:11-26, built around the theme of God’s “servant Jesus,” is in fact also an exposition of Isaiah 52:13-53<sup>14</sup> (Acts 3:13). He is the suffering servant of God “announced beforehand” by the prophets (Acts 3:18), whom God has raised up and glorified (Acts 3:26; 3:13). These examples suffice to demonstrate they the early Christians understood that Christ fulfilled the sacrificial system and so Christian worship, like synagogue worship, would be devoid of sacerdotal elements.

In addition, they preached the necessity of the faith. Salvation comes “on the basis of faith” (Acts 3:16). Their answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” is “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31). Since “faith comes by hearing the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17), the central place given to the teaching and preaching of Scripture in the synagogue was compatible with the ministry needs of the New Testament church.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> David W. Peterson, “Worship in the New Testament” in D. A. Larson (ed) *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 77. See also David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (eds), *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 373-395; 473-497.

<sup>13</sup> Everett F. Harrison, *The Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> Old, *Preaching*; “it is in fact a very full exposition of the fifth-third chapter of Isaiah,” he says, citing support from Cullmann & George (pp. 171ff).

Given these two principles, the removal of the sacrifice and the central place given to the ministry of the word, one is not surprised to find the following in the narratives in Acts: Psalms sung, word read, word preached, prayers of intercession, and sacraments administered. One finds simple, spiritual worship.

A broader biblical theology of worship would see continuity from the Temple to the synagogue to the Christian church. The synagogue took shape in the exilic period in response to the prophetic critique of the formalism and ceremonial ostentation that surrounded temple worship (eg. Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 7:3; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Psalms 15, 24, 51). The worship of the synagogue was essentially the worship of the temple minus the apparatus of sacrifice: temple, priest, altar, victim, incense, and ritual. It was in this respect a spiritualizing of the temple service, the offering of a sacrifice, not of flesh, but of praise (see Psalm 51:16-17), a distillation of the essential elements and outlook of true worship. Dr. Old makes this point when discussing the use of processional Psalms by the synagogue and early church.

“It is doubtful if the New Testament Church ever used these psalms as processional psalms any more than the synagogue did. This kind of Temple ritual the synagogue showed little interest in trying to reproduce. Processions, entrance rites, as incense, vestments, musical instruments and the whole elaborate sacrificial system, were never received into the liturgical usage of the synagogue. In this, the church followed the lead of the synagogue.”<sup>15</sup>

The simplicity and spirituality of the synagogue worship may be seen as providential preparation for Christian worship. The early church looked to the synagogue and not to the temple for the pattern for its own worship. As Hughes Old points out,

“the first Christians did not take over the rich and sumptuous ceremonial of the Temple, but rather the simpler synagogue service, with its Scripture reading, its sermon, its prayers, and its psalmody.”<sup>16</sup>

Like the synagogue, the Christian church would “continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Hebrews 13:15). This makes sense of the glimpses of the church in worship that we see in Acts and the epistles (eg. Acts 2:42;4:23ff), which are clearly synagogue-like rather than temple-like.

The commentators also point out that the “spiritual worship” to which Paul refers (Romans 12:1,2) had a long post-exilic history and broad currency in the early church, as Old points out.

“At least part of what was meant by “spiritual worship” was the worship that the Jews of the Exile had developed to replace the worship of the Jerusalem Temple. This they were forced to develop because the Law forbade much of the worship of the Temple from being offered anywhere other than in Jerusalem. This was particularly the case with the sacrifices. As a replacement for this, the prophets had shown the Jews of the

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<sup>15</sup> Old, “The Psalms as Christian Prayer, a Preface to the Liturgical Use of the Psalter” unpublished paper, 1978), p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Hughes Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), p. 43.

Exile an inner, more personal dimension of that worship which could be offered anywhere. The liturgical aspect of this “spiritual worship” consisted in the prayers, the psalms, and the study of Scripture.”<sup>17</sup>

H. H. Rowley makes the same point in his *Worship in Ancient Israel*. In emphasizing the significance of the synagogue, he speaks of its worship as “wholly spiritual.” The synagogue was “the organ of spiritual worship, the united outpouring of the Spirit before God in prayer, the united attention to the word of God, and the united acceptance of the claims of faith.”<sup>18</sup> He too affirms that “the church continued to use the same type of worship as had been found in the synagogue . . . the church continued to use the same pattern of worship, including prayer, the reading of Scripture, and exposition.”<sup>19</sup>

This is what lies behind the simplicity and spirituality of New Testament settings for worship. A Christian synagogue service would have looked something like this:

Scripture Reading (Law & Prophets, adding “apostles teaching”)  
Sermon based on reading  
Psalms sung  
Shema recited (the memorial of the law from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, with perhaps the Ten Commandments)  
Prayer of petition and intercessions with 18 benedictions

The Christian assemblies would have added to it:

Lord Supper observed

Simplicity, and its concomitant, spirituality, are essential qualities of Christian worship in Acts. The worship of the early Christian was devoid of elaborate ritual and ceremony. External ordinances were shunned in favor of those which directly addressed the heart: the ministries of the word, prayer, praise and table.

***Second, the worship of the church is to consist of essential biblical elements.*** We can identify these as we work our way through the various passages in Acts.

Acts 2:42 may serve as our basic text:

*And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

I. Howard Marshall says that “a case can be made” that the four elements listed in verse 42 “are in fact the four elements which characterized a Christian gathering in the early church,” and even finds this view “preferable” to that which finds them to be descriptive of church life generally.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hughes O. Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 96, 97.

<sup>18</sup> H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1967), p. 239, 240.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, p. 83.

Among more recent works, Dennis Johnson in *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* joins David Peterson, taking the opposite view, in applying Acts 2:42 in a generalized way.<sup>21</sup> But Marshall is supported by Oscar Cullmann and others. Everett Harrison refers to the four elements as “aspects of worship.”<sup>22</sup>

Cullmann, citing Acts 2:42,46 and 20:7, notes the elements of instruction, preaching, prayer, and breaking of bread, and argues that they are “mentioned in such a way as clearly to show that these elements were, from the beginning, the foundation of all the worship life of the Christian community.”<sup>23</sup>

Let us look at these four elements.

**1. The ministry of the word.** They were committed to the Apostle’s teaching. In the synagogue it was customary to read the Scripture, and then explain or exhort from what was read. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul provide us with examples of this (e.g. Luke 4:16-27; Acts 13:14ff).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, James said at the Council of Jerusalem,

*“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”* (Acts 15:21)

It was typical of the synagogue service that “Moses” was both read and preached. It is likely that the Christian assemblies took over this practice, adding to it the reading of the apostolic teaching as it became available, as well as preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Consider these verses:

*And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.* (Acts 5:42)

Note that Christian assemblies, like their Jewish counterparts, gathered in the Temple precinct as well as in houses.

*And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”* (Acts 6:2,4)

The “ministry of the word” was a top priority of apostolic ministry.

In Thessalonica, we find that for three “Sabbaths” the Apostle Paul joined with a “synagogue of the Jews.” No doubt he prayed with them, praised God with them, but then also “reasoned with them from Scriptures.” He was “explaining” and “giving evidence” of the Christ. Some were “persuaded” (17:2-4). At Berea the Apostle Paul seemed to gather with the Jews at the synagogue for daily prayer. Bereans are commended as “noble minded” because

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<sup>21</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), p. 72. He finds that 2:42ff, along with 4:32-35 and 5:12-16, record the “customary pattern of behavior in the Christian community,” and 2:42 specifically, a “portrait of the church’s life.”

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, p. 132.

<sup>23</sup> Cullmann, *Early*, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, p. 66.

. . . they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

At Athens he was “reasoning in the synagogue” as well as the marketplace (17:17). At Corinth, . . . he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. (Acts 18:4)

At Cenchrea, he “entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews” (18:19).

At Ephesus,

. . . he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. (Acts 19:8)

These passages give us an idea of the central role that the reading and exposition of Scripture played in the synagogue, as well as in early Christian assemblies. Hughes Old, in his magisterial *Reading and Preaching of Scripture in the Worship of the Christian Church* (7 volumes planned), argues that the primary method of reading was *lectio continua*, or consecutive readings of Old Testament texts (giving way to *lectio selecta* for feast days).<sup>25</sup> This is likely to have been the practice of the early Christian assemblies as well. Moreover, Peter’s sermons in Acts 2 (an exposition of Joel 2) and Acts 3 (an exposition of Isaiah 53), gives us an idea of their dedication to expository, Christological, biblical preaching.<sup>26</sup>

2. **The ministry of the table.** They were “continually devoting themselves to . . . the breaking of bread” (2:42). Though there is some debate about the nature of this “meal,” in the context of what Longenecker calls “two such religiously loaded terms as ‘fellowship’ and ‘prayer,’” the phrase “the breaking of bread” is not likely to refer to an ordinary meal.<sup>27</sup> Harrison finds it “probable” that it refers to the Lord’s Supper.<sup>28</sup> Bruce and Marshall are stronger. It indicates, says F. F. Bruce, “the regular observance of the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>29</sup> “This,” says Marshall, “is Luke’s term for what Paul calls the Lord’s Supper,” and not just an ordinary meal.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, we read in Acts 20:7 that the church gathered on “the first day of the week” (notice—it was already observing Sunday worship), “to break bread” which, according to Longenecker, “must surely mean to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34).”<sup>31</sup> “The breaking of the bread,” with the definite article, according to Dennis Johnson in *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*, refers “not to the meals that believers often shared together, but to the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Old, *Reading*, p. 99ff. “The older approach was to read a passage of appropriate length each Sabbath, beginning with Genesis, continuing each Sabbath where one left off the Sabbath before until one reached the end of Deuteronomy.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 164ff.

<sup>27</sup> Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 290.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison, p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 509.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, p. 75.

The phrasing implies that this is what they did each week. When they met they observed the Lord's Supper. It was a regular part of their worship, or at least we can say that it very quickly became such in the early church.

3. **The ministry of prayer** (*proskunē*). "Prayer" is literally a plural noun preceded by a definite article—"the prayers." This suggests "formal prayers," says Longenecker, "probably both Jewish and Christian."<sup>33</sup> Citing the support of Dugmore,<sup>34</sup> R. P. Martin argues, "the prayers" "suggests a continued adherence to the Jewish Temple liturgy."<sup>35</sup> William Neil says the term "covers attendance at the public prayers in the Temple and synagogues, as well as family worship in their own homes."<sup>36</sup> Bruce sees the term as indicating "appointed seasons for united prayer in the new community."<sup>37</sup> "These prayers," says Cullmann, would have been "partly free, adapted to the circumstances," as well as including more formal, liturgical prayers.<sup>38</sup> Hughes Old argues that "the prayers" would have included a number of prayers as well as the main intercessory prayer, the *Amidah*, with its eighteen benedictions. "Luke understands that Christians maintained the regular hours of prayer which were so important and a part of Jewish devotion."<sup>39</sup>

4. **Fellowship** (*koinonia*). Scholars from Martin Bucher, in his influential *Grund und Ursach*, to Jeremias have argued that this referred to alms-giving as an element of the worship of the early church. Indeed, it does have a range of meaning from "sharing" to "participation" to "fellowship." It indicates, at least, their devotion to one another and to the Christian assembly.

Acts 2:42 provides a glimpse of the simplicity and spirituality of the worship of the early church. Its central elements were:

The ministry of the word (read and preached)  
The ministry of the table  
The ministry of the prayer

### **When God was worshiped**

Having uncovered the principles of simplicity and spirituality in the worship of the early church, and having further uncovered the elements of the word read, the word preached, the administration of the Lord's Supper, and prayer, we will now examine the question of *when* the early church worshiped.

**First, the early church practiced daily prayer.** Hughes Old finds in Acts 4:23-31,

"One of the places we most clearly see the first Christians maintaining the discipline of daily prayer" which they would have inherited from synagogue."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 290.

<sup>34</sup> C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office*, 1944.

<sup>35</sup> R. P. Martin, "Worship & Liturgy" in R. P. Martin & Peter H. Davids (eds) *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: Illinois: Leicester England: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 1228.

<sup>36</sup> Neil, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, p. 80.

<sup>38</sup> Cullmann, *Early*, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Hughes O. Old, "The Service of Daily Prayer in the Primitive Christian Church: A Study of Acts 4:23-31," Unpublished paper, 1979, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Old, *Worship*, p. 144.

He argues that when Peter and John were released by the authorities they were able to go “to their own” because they knew where they gathered each morning for prayer (Acts 2:46; 6:42; 12:12; 17:11).

“The contents of that prayer meeting follow amazingly closely the pattern of daily prayer as it was practiced by the synagogue.”<sup>41</sup>

As noted earlier, sometimes they met for daily prayer in the temple (3:1ff), sometimes at the synagogue (17:11), and sometimes homes (4:23ff; 12:12). “Daily prayer was one of the most important features of the worship of the earliest Christians,” Old maintains.<sup>42</sup> He finds considerable support for this claim in the epistles with their references to praying “night and day” (1 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:5), praying “always” (Romans 1:10; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 1:4; 4:4-6; Colossians 13; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 3:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:3,11; 2:13; Philemon 4) and “without ceasing” (Romans 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2:13; 5:17), all of which he associates with the “continual” (Hebrew *tamid*) sacrifice of the Old Testament. The “continual sacrifice” was a morning sacrifice followed by an evening sacrifice each day (Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:3-8; 1 Chronicles 16:39,40; Ezra 3:3-5; Daniel 8:11-14). David established that the “continual” sacrifice be accompanied by “continual” praise, that is, morning and evening praise and thanksgiving (1 Chronicles 16:6-7, 37). Even the Psalms used on that inaugural event of Jerusalem’s worship refer to praising God “continually” (Hebrew *tamid*) and “day by day” (1 Chronicles 16:8-33; cf Psalms 105:4, 96:2).

Old argues that with the Exile daily services of prayer increased in importance since the temple sacrifices could no longer be offered. These services “became the substitute for the daily morning and evening sacrifices,” even “the new *tamid* . . . the daily ‘spiritual sacrifice,’ ‘the continual offering of prayer and praise,’ ‘the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name’ (cf. Psalm 50; Romans 12:1-12; 1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15).”<sup>43</sup> Christians pray “without ceasing” by maintaining the discipline of morning and evening prayers.

We find as we read through Acts 4:23-31 the following elements in the Early Church’s practice of daily prayer.

1. **The ministry of praise.** Specifically, we find the church singing Psalms. “Psalmody was a part of the synagogue service that naturally passed over into the life of the church,” says E. F. Harrison.<sup>44</sup> Morning prayers at the synagogue normally began with the chanting of Psalms 145-150. Not surprisingly, we find the early Christians lifting their voices “with one accord” (verse 24), likely indicating singing or reciting the Psalms in unison. These were not spontaneous free prayers. Luke supplies us with the text of Psalm 146:6, no doubt indicating that they sang the whole Psalm, if not a series of Psalms.

*And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said,  
“O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that  
is in them . . .”* (Acts 4:24)

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> Old, “Service,” p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Old, “Service,” p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Harrison, p. 134.

2. **The ministry of the word.** A second Psalm is sung or read (Psalm 2:1-2). The phrasing “who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David, Thy servant, didst say,” may indicate a different mode of communication (i.e. reading) than was indicated for the previous Psalm.

*“who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Thy servant, didst say, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ.’”* (Acts 4:25-26)

This Psalm was then followed by a meditation on the meaning of the Psalm in light of their current situation:

*“For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.”* (Acts 4:27-28)

We do not know exactly how this meditation took place, whether by sermon, prayer or discussion. But “taken simply,” says Old, what the text “seems to indicate is that an exposition of Scripture is taking place in prayer.”<sup>45</sup> The word was sung, read, and preached in this service of daily prayer.

3. **The ministry of prayer.** This is followed by prayers of intercession:

*“And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken . . .”* (Acts 29-31a)

They pray for protection, for help, for boldness, for spiritual power in Jesus’ name. All in all, Old reckons this is “a rather thorough description of a daily prayer service.”<sup>46</sup> Again he says, “This prayer service held by the Apostles, like the prayer service of the synagogue, was made up of three elements, the chanting of psalms, a passage of Scripture, and prayers of supplication and intercession.”<sup>47</sup>

**Second, the early church worshiped on the Lord’s Day.** We read of the church assembly at Troas,

*And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.* (Acts 20:7)

“Here the text does seem to imply,” says Hughes Old, “that it was the regular procedure to meet on the first day of the week and break bread.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Old, “Service,” p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Old, *Themes*, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Old, *Worship*, p. 145.

<sup>48</sup> Old, *Worship*, p. 33.

This view would be supported by the account of the collections at Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:2). We also see at Corinth:

1. ***The ministry of the table.*** They gathered to “break bread,” a phrase which, as we have seen, indicates the observing of the Lord’s Supper.

2. ***The ministry of the word.*** We find at Troas a considerable commitment to the ministry of the word. The Apostle Paul “prolonged his message until midnight” (20:7). He “kept on talking” into the night (20:9).

From Acts 4:23-31 and 20:7-11 we have identified the early church practicing the disciplines of daily prayer and Lord’s Day prayer. We have also discovered that in addition to the elements found in Acts 2:42 (the word, sacraments, and prayer) that the early church sang Psalms. An expanded list of elements would be as follows:

Word (read and preached)  
Prayer  
Psalms sung  
Lord’s Supper observed

### **Where God is to be worshiped**

Having looked at the “why,” “how,” and “when” of worship, we now look at the “where.” There is a great deal that can be learned about the “where” or environment of worship on the basis of Acts 17:22-31. Two particularly come to mind.

First, God may be worshiped anywhere. There are no holy places.

*The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; (Acts 17:24)*

God is not more present one place than another.

*neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; (Acts 17:25)*

Instead we are to know that “He is not far from each one of us” (17:27);

*for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said,  
“For we also are His offspring.” (Acts 17:28)*

Since God does not dwell in temples, and since He is everywhere, the presence of God cannot be localized. There is no central shrine for the Christian community. There are no holy buildings, holy places, or holy lands. Worship places are auditoriums, not sanctuaries, or sacred places (cf Acts 15:16ff).

***Second, the place of worship is aesthetically simple.*** Visual art is rejected as an element of worship or a means of grace. This would seem to be the implication of verse 29:

*Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.*

Again, let me cite Hughes Old:

“When Paul preached to the Athenians before the backdrop of the Acropolis, the citadel of the greatest artistic creations of ancient Greece, he told them, ‘Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man’ (Acts 17:29). It is clear from this passage, just as it is clear from the Old Testament prophets, that gold, silver, and stone cannot reflect the nature of God; only human beings, God’s offspring, can do that. The idols are misleading because they come from human imagination rather than divine revelation but even more importantly because God is revealed to the world not by art but by righteousness . . . let us simply note that this crucial text is telling us that art is not a form of revelation. Luke understands as well as the other New Testament writers the prophetic theology of worship. He presents Paul as making the same criticism of idolatry that the prophets had made before him.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Old, *Themes*, pp. 97-98.