

Priestcraft  
and  
Magic

A  
Christian  
Perspective

John Everett

# Dedication

Dedicated to all the clergy  
(men and women) with whom  
I have had the privilege of  
friendship and fellowship.

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## Introduction

Be patient, please. I need to explain a lot before we get to the meat of this book, and it is all rather personal. This book is the result of a pretty long lifetime of thinking about what it means to be a Christian, and I even need to define what I mean by that term.

I was baptised as an infant some time after May 1938, and I cannot recall the event, obviously, but know where it took place: a Church of England cathedral in a pleasant market town. At the age of twelve I was confirmed, without it actually being a choice I made myself. It was simply that all the boys of my age at the school I was at got 'done' at this age. I still remember the name of the church (it is dedicated to St. Oswald) and could go to it again without needing a map or a post-code. An abiding memory is learning when and where to bow towards the altar: you had to imagine an invisible beam stretching from the cross in the middle of the altar down the centre of the church; if you crossed this beam you turned towards the altar and bowed. This is really the only thing I remember being taught as I was prepared for confirmation.

By the time I was fifteen I regarded myself as a confident atheist. Religion no longer had any place in my mind, though (and perhaps because) daily chapel and Sunday church was a compulsory part of my life. Next came National Service for two years, and then my time at St. John's College, Cambridge. I was reading Classics and the most important event

came in the second week of the second month of the calendar year of my second year there. I had met a young lady, and she had introduced me to a parson of the church next to my college. I had bragged that I thought Christianity a load of rubbish and would happily prove this in debate with anyone. The parson accepted my challenge, and suggested we agree on a topic to discuss. How could I refuse when he suggested I read the Gospel of John and then come back to discuss the book with him? It is important for me to state exactly what happened. I read the Gospel of John and entirely by surprise found myself now convinced that Jesus was real. The word 'real' is the only word I can use. There was no theology at all in my reaction, simply the concept that Jesus was a real person, who had done and said the things narrated in the gospel story I had read. When I met with the parson I admitted this, and at his invitation, using the imagery of the figure with the lamp knocking at the door (taken from the words addressed to an early church in the book of Revelation) I knelt in his room and invited Jesus to come into my life. His advice to me then was to take the first opportunity I had to tell any friend of mine what I had done. Within hours I had done this, and now the word went round that Everett had got religion.

Now my life's transformation had begun, and I joined the congregation at the parson's church every Sunday, and also the group who called themselves CICCUC ('kick you' - Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union). Very soon I felt the call to earn my living teaching Religious Education in schools, and so transferred from Classics to Theology for the final year of my degree. Today the theology of CICCUC

would probably be defined as fundamentalist. I was even warned against reading theology at the university as the modernism I would have to study would destroy my faith. My response was that if there were arguments against Christianity I needed to study them. As it happened a year of theology did not lessen my conviction of the reality of Jesus, and the many Christian friends in CICCU helped me enormously.

Now I do not intend this introduction to become too lengthy, but I must highlight the issues that became the focus of my life as a Christian. I was worried about infant baptism. I took the theological position that what it symbolised, dying and rising again, could only be real if it had been a choice made by someone old enough for that to be a genuine choice. So I asked an evangelical church to administer believer's baptism to me, by immersion of course. Then I found myself drawn to what was becoming very publicised at this time, the charismatic movement. I began to pray for the baptism of the spirit, and, yes, received the gift of tongues. As a teacher of religious education I found myself being invited to take services at some of the local independent (usually congregational) small churches that did not have any full-time preacher. Most of these small chapels I have preached in are now transformed into private houses. I hope there is no cause and effect in this.

There was a local Pentecostal (Assemblies of God) chapel where we attended now, and when there was a problem causing the pastor of this fellowship to leave, I undertook for a short while all the functions of the pastor there. You can see how I was struggling

to find in various directions how the Lord was wanting me to get involved in local church activity; rather a long way from my Anglican roots. The next step of what is bound to seem a very muddled journey was to become involved in the 'house church' movement. I was one of four trustees when we established a 'house church' locally. This soon grew in numbers and, as is often the case, we hired a local school hall on Sundays for our worship meetings. One key component typical of this group was called shepherding. The idea is that every member of the group looked to another, hopefully wiser and more experienced, member for guidance through all life's decisions. The idea is taken through to the leader(s) who looked to another person outside the group for his shepherding. Eventually I came to believe that this was not the structure that would make sense to me, and so parted company from the group.

Where to next? I finally came to the conclusion, which I still hold, that a Christian should join whatever group is local to him, regardless of any perceived faults. Living now in a small village with the usual medieval Anglican church building, I and my family began going there every Sunday. Over the years, again in a well-established pattern, we went from a single clergyman in charge, to combined benefices, to many combined into a team ministry. Just before moving to an urban setting for family reasons, the group had eleven village churches in a team ministry of four ordained clergy, one man and three women, one of the women being under training still. And now, adhering to my principle of joining in the local parish where I live, I find myself each Sunday present at a very high Anglo-Catholic

Eucharist. I believe its ritual is even more full of activities than some Roman Catholic churches use. To use the jargon: bells and smells.

The question that I feel now bound to research is how did this strain of Anglican praxis get here. The celebrant is called a priest, and he and most of the congregation believe that when the Eucharist prayer is offered by this priest the elements of bread and wine really do become the body and blood of the Lord. A very far distance from the praxis and beliefs I was used to nearly sixty years ago when I first gave my life to the Lord. The vicar then wore the same clothes as for other services, and the rite was called Holy Communion rather than Mass. He even stood, as required by the old Book of Common Prayer, on the north side of what was called, not the altar, but the communion table.

Having been inside several different church organisations, where leaders were called pastors or elders (or simply leaders), I now feel the need to enquire how Christian leaders became known as priests. How did the Eucharist develop into what could so easily be thought of as a sort of magic? If the right person, dressed in the right clothes, says the right words in the right place, an event of great significance is bound to take place.

I begin this research not knowing how it will end. Will I learn to share the beliefs of my Anglo-Catholic brothers and sisters? I do not write anything in order to change the minds of others, but in order to understand them better, if possible. That is why you needed to have the abbreviated record of my journey thus far: low Anglican, evangelical, pentecostal,



house church, high Anglican. Now that I am retired I have the leisure to do the research that I hope to record in the pages that follow.

## Priests

Any study of the religions of the world will find that priests figure very frequently in any religion in which a deity is worshipped. The priest in such a religion will be the offerer of sacrifices, the reciter of prayers, the doer of rituals, on behalf of ordinary people. The ordinary people are deemed to be laity, in contrast to the priesthood.

If one takes one's study historically it will be natural to look at ancient India. Although the caste system that was observed by Europeans when India became a colony is now less predominant, it has very ancient roots. The Sanskrit word *varna* denotes four classes of people: Brahmins (priests, scholars and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers, warriors and administrators), Vaishyas (farmers, artisans and merchants), Shudras (labourers and servants); and below these four were those with no caste, the untouchables. Priests were naturally from the class of Brahmins, certainly originally, and it was they who presided over all the rituals that took place in the temples and in the worship of the various Hindu deities. Priests were the highest caste.

In the polytheistic observances that we note in classical Greece and Rome, worship was often centred in temples. Gods could be local, or associated with particular activities. Or they might simply be part of the complex pantheon of Greek mythology which was largely absorbed into Roman thinking too. Artemis, a female goddess, was often served exclusively by priestesses. The temple of Artemis at Ephesus was a massive building accorded the title of one of the seven wonders of the world.

Priests were often seen as diviners, able to give inspired answers to questions. They were also often the teachers that people could look to for help. They relied for their livelihood on the gifts people left when they visited the temple. Monks in Buddhism perform much the same function as priests in other religions, again relying exclusively on the gifts of devotees. In ancient Greece and Rome, priests were often elected and, if so, were seen simply as part of the civic administration.

Ancient Judaism certainly had its priests. In the book of Genesis we read the first mention of priests when Abraham met Melchizedek. His name means "king of righteousness," and his title King of Salem also means "king of peace."

*Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High. He blessed him, and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth. Blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." Abram gave him a tenth of all. (Gen 14:18-20)*

There is this prophecy in the Psalms:

*The LORD says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool for your feet." . . . The LORD has sworn, and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." The Lord is at your right hand. He will crush kings in the day of his wrath. He will judge amongst the nations. He will heap up dead bodies. He will crush the ruler of the whole earth. (Ps. 110:1-6)*

We meet the name Melchizedek again in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, where the prophecy from the Psalm quoted is applied to Jesus.

*So also Christ didn't glorify himself to be made a high priest, but it was he who said to him, "You are my Son. Today I have become your father." As he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." (Heb. 5:5-6)*

After the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) had escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they were given a very well established regime of priesthood. One of the twelve tribes was set apart for this role (Levi), and the brother of Moses, Aaron, and his descendants were to be high priests. Israelite worship was centred on a portable temple, the tabernacle, until a permanent temple was built by King Solomon in Jerusalem. Here were offered the many different kinds of sacrifices. All the rituals to be performed were prescribed in great detail, and only priests, or on some occasions the high priest, could offer them.

We meet priests and the current high priest in the gospels, and Jesus interacted with them quite often in the narratives we find there. Jesus predicted that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed, and this catastrophe had a huge impact on Judaism, as priestly sacrifices could only be offered there. It took place 40 years after this prophecy.

This is a very short summary of the Jewish

priesthood, no more than an introduction to the topic. The Christian perspective on priesthood is being saved for later analysis. It does, however, rely on the Jewish idea that a priest is an intermediary between the deity and the people. The Latin words for priest, *sacerdos* and *pontifex*, emphasise this concept: the former means 'giver of the sacred' and the latter 'builder of a bridge'. One of Julius Caesar's power bases was that he was appointed *pontifex maximus* for life.

# Magic

The core idea behind magic is that of power. The power that is being exercised is beyond what is purely natural. The further thought of magic is that the power has a direct cause and effect: if this, then automatically, that.

How the power is exercised can vary.

A secret form of words may be the method, and we would obviously call this a spell. The same idea that words hold a power within themselves occurs with oaths, blessings and curses. An oath is the means by which, using a special form of words, some kind of additional strength is added. A good example of a special kind of blessing comes in the story in Genesis of how Jacob, the younger of two brothers, duped his father into giving him the elder's special blessing. "Yes, and he shall be blessed," said Isaac, even after discovering the trickery. The words spoken could not be undone. A curse is equally obvious as a way of calling harm against someone by using a special form of words.

Or the power may exist in natural objects, with the knowledge of this power being limited only to those who know it. The picture of witches toiling over a cauldron and putting exactly the right ingredients into the mix, whether of herbs, or roots, or bits of an animal, easily comes to mind.

Or a particular person may hold this kind of power within himself or herself. Such a person is usually called a shaman, and often the practice is for the shaman to enter into a trance-like state in order

to achieve the required outcome, whether it be to alter physical conditions or to declare special messages by divination.

Finally there is a power that is deemed to come from an external spiritual entity: a god, a demon, a genie, or the spirit of a dead person. In Christian communities this kind of power is usually presumed to be satanic.

In this last case the connection with priesthood is very obvious. It is the priest who can call down this magical power, because he has an association with the spiritual entity that others have not.

In medieval times witches were also accused of calling on Satan for their power to do good or evil, and it was this aspect that made them so feared and so liable for punishment or execution. In English law there have been several Witchcraft Acts. The earlier ones of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries condemned witchcraft on the assumption that the power was real. The Witchcraft Act of 1735, by contrast, presumed that their power was not real, and made it illegal to falsely claim that they had successfully communicated with a spirit of a dead person; in other words they were guilty of deception. It was not repealed until 1951, when it replaced by the Fraudulent Mediums Act. This too has been repealed (2008), and the area is covered now by the general protection of consumers.

Belief in magic is only really possible in unscientific communities, where it is so easy to fail to understand that cattle diseases, human diseases, and natural disasters like droughts or flooding are

not caused by gods being angry or witches casting spells. But even now in our supposedly scientific age we find people touching wood to ward off a disaster, or finding fictional schools for magicians immensely attractive.

How truly scientific are we?



## Christian

These early chapters are intended to define the meaning of the words in the title. So far we have had 'priest' and 'magic' so now we come to 'Christian'.

The word is derived from the Greek *christos* which may be translated as 'the anointed one', which for the Jewish folk who used it meant originally 'king' and then later 'Messiah', the longed-for kingly saviour who would rescue them from the oppressive rule of pagans.

All the first Christians were Jews, and what distinguished them from other Jews was their belief that Jesus, the crucified and resurrected Jesus, was their Messiah. Their belief centred on the concept of a covenant. The creator god of the whole universe, the one and only god, whom they called YHWH (the LORD in English translations), had established a covenant with Abraham. This covenant followed the line of one of Abraham's sons, Isaac, and one of his sons, Jacob, who was also called Israel. The history of events between the time of Abraham and the time of Jesus, and thus the beginning of Christianity, is complex and not appropriate to detail here.

The sign of being part of the Abrahamic covenant, for males, was circumcision, and for all Jews the obeying of the very detailed regulations about dress, diet, and observance of the sabbath. These regulations were called the Torah, the Law.

The record of early Christian activity is written by Luke in what we now call the Acts of the Apostles. Luke records how difficult it was, even for a leader

like Simon Peter, to accept that YHWH was now going to include Gentiles (non-Jews) into the covenant family. There was a group among the early Christians who wanted any convert to their Messiah flock to accept the full Torah, including — for males — circumcision. Luke's record describes how the most active preacher of the new religion, Paul, would usually first attend a local gathering of Jews, at their synagogue, and proclaim the good news that YHWH had sent them their Messiah. The typical pattern was that some would accept the message, but that others would reject it. Paul's opponents then usually drove him out of the town, with varying degrees of violence.

The issue of whether Gentile converts be required to accept circumcision was eventually settled by their being required only to abstain from meat offered to idols, from eating blood, and from any kind of immorality.

Many of the early Christian communities were thus a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Some Jewish Christians would find no difficulty in attending their local synagogue on the Sabbath, as well a separate meeting on the next day of exclusively Christian brothers and sisters. It was only a century or two later that Jewish Christians were forbidden from attending Jewish synagogues.

Luke records how even decades after the beginning of the new Messiah-group was established Paul went into the still-standing temple in Jerusalem. In the first period Peter, John, and all the original apostles, while staying in Jerusalem, would frequent the temple daily.

The first Christians believed that YHWH had, through Jesus, established a New Covenant, as had been promised by one of their prophets, Jeremiah. The word Testament means Covenant, and that is how our English bibles are divided. The writings we find in what we call the New Testament are those that early Christians recognised as authoritative, having the authorship or stamp of approval of the original apostles. Again there is a lot of detail in understanding how this 'canon' of authoritative scripture was agreed upon.

All this is by way of summary, of definition, with more detail to follow in due course. Christianity in its first years was simply a sub-group of Jewish belief, namely that Jesus was the promised Messiah. How it grew to differentiate itself totally from Judaism and become the official religion of the Roman Empire, we will look at also. It is clear that the meaning of the word 'Christian' was evolving in the years covered by the New Testament, and then in the history of the Roman Empire up to the reign of Constantine as Emperor. It has evolved also from then till now, of course.

The obvious question is: has this evolution been true to its origins, even has it been simply true?

## Covenants

We have shown how Christianity is essentially a development of the covenant relationship YHWH had with his people, Israel. With the coming of the Messiah there came a new covenant, one not based on ethnic terms (descendants from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) but rather on acceptance of the Messiah. Those who believed in Jesus the Messiah were now the members of the covenant community, regardless of race. So how do we define this New covenant? The prophecy of Jeremiah is key here.

*“Behold, the days come,” says the LORD, “that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which covenant of mine they broke, although I was a husband to them,” says the LORD. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the LORD: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer each teach his neighbour, and every man teach his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD;’ for they will all know me, from their least to their greatest,” says the LORD: “for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34)*

There are three components to the new covenant: no longer a written set of rules for behaviour, but instead an inward disposition in a person's inward parts, their spirit, their heart. This surely is an echo of the promise that Jesus made to his followers, that

they would receive his holy spirit. Second, there will be no longer any need for intermediaries: for all members of the new covenant will know their god directly. Finally, no longer any need for priests to offer sacrifices for sin, as the problem of sin will have been taken care of, and members receive needed forgiveness directly.

It is clear that Jesus was openly accepting that his coming was initiating the New Covenant. At the solemn farewell meal with his followers he referred to the bread and wine of that meal as follows:

*As they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it, and broke it. He gave to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave to them, saying, "All of you drink it, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the remission of sins. (Matt 26:26-28)*

The terms of the New Covenant are made explicit by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, where the whole of the Jeremiah prophecy noted above is quoted. (Heb. 8:6-13)

It is clear that the role of priests in the Old Covenant has been superseded. It was always the case that YHWH intended the nation of Israel to be an intermediary to the whole human race: a light to lighten the nations. Now Jesus has that role, and has appointed his followers to do the same. Peter refers to all Christians as a royal priesthood.

*You also, as living stones, are built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up*

*spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.* (1 Peter 2:5-9)

There are also three passages in the book of Revelation that refer to Christians as kings and priests. (1:6; 5:10; 20:6) As for Jesus, here is a passage worth noting:

*Having then a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let's hold tightly to our confession. For we don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin.* (Heb. 4:14-15)

And this more detailed passage makes the point about the high priest of the new covenant very clearly.

*Now indeed even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and an earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared. In the first part were the lamp stand, the table, and the show bread; which is called the Holy Place. After the second veil was the tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which was a golden pot holding the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat, of which things we can't speak now in detail. Now these things having*

*been thus prepared, the priests go in continually into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the services, but into the second the high priest alone, once in the year, not without blood, which he offers for himself, and for the errors of the people. The Holy Spirit is indicating this, that the way into the Holy Place wasn't yet revealed while the first tabernacle was still standing. This is a symbol of the present age, where gifts and sacrifices are offered that are incapable, concerning the conscience, of making the worshipper perfect, being only (with meats and drinks and various washings) fleshly ordinances, imposed until a time of reformation. But Christ having come as a high priest of the coming good things, through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation, nor yet through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, entered in once for all into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify to the cleanness of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without defect to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, since a death has occurred for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant, that those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (Heb. 9:1-15)*

The above passages define what is the Christian view of priesthood under the New Covenant. The Christian community are all mediators to the rest of the world, with the duty and privilege of proclaiming

the good news, and the High Priest is Jesus himself, and the once-and-for-all sacrifice for sins has been made by him, of himself.



## Leadership

Keeping with the idea of stating definitions, we move on to the way the Christian church is organised. Paul describes the Christian church thus:

*So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God, being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom the whole building, fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.*  
(Ephesians 2:19-22)

The metaphor of a household, or family, is a compelling one, while the word church can mean either a building, or a local congregation, or the whole body of all Christians. Later in the same letter Paul goes on to expand on the various ministries there are in this family of God.

*He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, shepherds and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, to the work of serving, to the building up of the body of Christ.*  
(Eph. 4:11-12)

By saints, of course, he means simply all Christians, those who have been sanctified by their faith in Jesus. A special category of 'saint' came much later in time. In another letter he places apostles and prophets in a longer list of the gifts God has given to his people.

*Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. God has set some in the assembly: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracle workers, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, and various kinds of languages. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all miracle workers? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with various languages? Do all interpret? (1 Corinthians 12:27-30)*

Apostles are by definition 'those who are sent'. In the beginning there were the Twelve, a number significantly echoing the twelve tribes of Israel, whom Jesus appointed to be with him as disciples and then commissioned to proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth. After the ascension of Jesus and before the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it seemed right to the early followers to replace the departed Judas. They chose a man who had also followed Jesus from the beginning to restore the number to twelve. (Acts 1:15-24) Paul counted himself an apostle from having been directly appointed by Jesus when he was given a vision of the risen Jesus as he journeyed to Damascus. Paul seems to regard these two aspects as essential to his status: having seen the risen Jesus and having been given the commission to proclaim the good news. But as we read further through the books of the New Testament we can see that apostles can simply mean 'someone sent', and there are even warnings about being careful to avoid being taken in by those falsely claiming to be apostles.

A prophet is one who 'speaks forth', whether about the future, or simply to declare God's word about a particular situation. There are many

examples of the activity of prophets in Luke's account of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles.

In addition to what we may call special ministries – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors (often used instead of shepherds) and teachers – there are three other terms in the New Testament. These are overseers, elders, and stewards, and we need to look at each carefully. Even the three words I have chosen to define them may seem contentious, because I have given simply their obvious translation from the original Greek words into English. Each will have a chapter to itself.

## Overseers

Beginning as always with a definition, I cite this extract from the Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com>) where the word searched for was 'bishop':

*. . . from Late Latin episcopus, from Greek episkopos "watcher, overseer," a title for various government officials, later taken over in a Church sense, from epi- "over" (see **epi-**) + skopos "one that watches, one that looks after; a guardian, protector" (see **scope** (n.1)). Given a specific sense in the Church, but the word also was used in the New Testament as a descriptive title for elders, and continues as such in some non-hierarchical Christian sects.*

How the Greek and Latin came to be rendered 'bishop' is also covered in the same source:

*A curious example of word-change, as effected by the genius of different tongues, is furnished by the English **bishop** and the French **évêque**. Both are from the same root, furnishing, perhaps the only example of two words from a common stem so modifying themselves in historical times as not to have a letter in common. . . . The English strikes off the initial and terminal syllables, leaving only piscop, which the Saxon preference for the softer labial and hissing sounds modified into bishop.*

The root occurs as episcopate (Greek *episkope*), where the apostles before Pentecost decide to replace Judas to restore their number to twelve. 'Let another take his episcopate' is the direct translation

of the original of Acts 1:20. Here the English translation is more usually rendered as 'office'. But N. T. Wright in his New Testament for Everyone has the much more literal 'overseeing task'.

The second occurrence of *episkope* (along with *episkopos*) comes in Paul's first letter to Timothy. The word used in most English translations is 'bishop' for both the office and the person. However the World English Bible, which I am using for all quotations unless stated otherwise has:

*This is a faithful saying: someone who seeks to be an overseer desires a good work. The overseer therefore must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, modest, hospitable, good at teaching; not a drinker, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having children in subjection with all reverence; (but how could someone who doesn't know how to rule one's own house take care of God's assembly?) not a new convert, lest being puffed up he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have good testimony from those who are outside, to avoid falling into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1-7)*

In writing to Titus Paul says very much the same:

*I left you in Crete for this reason, that you would set in order the things that were lacking and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you, if anyone is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, who are not accused of loose or unruly behaviour. For the overseer must be blameless, as*

*God's steward, not self-pleasing, not easily angered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain; but given to hospitality, a lover of good, sober minded, fair, holy, self-controlled, holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict those who contradict him. (Titus 1:5-9)*

It seems as though Paul is using elders and overseers interchangeably, and once again in most English translations 'overseer' comes out as 'bishop'.

A further passage should be noted from Paul's letters. Here is how he starts one letter.

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ; To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and servants: (Philippians 1:1)*

In most older translations the key words are rendered as 'bishops' and 'deacons'. N. T. Wright has 'overseers' and 'ministers'. Before moving on it is worth noting that we have overseers in the plural here, and another category of leader, which, along with elder, will have a chapter to itself.

A final use of *episkopos* comes in Peter's First Letter and here it is used to refer to Jesus.

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds. For you were going astray like sheep; but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:24-25)*

## Elders

Elder is the natural translation of the Greek *presbyteros*, and is the comparative of the Greek word that simply means 'old'. It also is sometimes simply transliterated into the English presbyter.

In Judaism it is used to designate an official, either of the Temple in Jerusalem or in any local synagogue. The phrase 'chief priests and elders' is used repeatedly in the passion narratives to identify the accusers of Jesus, both in their own court and in the Roman court. The same phrase also identifies those who tried to prevent the early apostles from proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Then, as we progress through the Acts of the Apostles we find elders linked with the apostles as the leaders of the early church. Thus, when Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem with an issue to resolve regarding the admission of Gentiles into the church, we read:

*When they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the assembly and the apostles and the elders, and they reported everything that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." The apostles and the elders were gathered together to see about this matter. (Acts 15:4-6)*

Who were these elders and how had they been appointed? The probable answer comes in an earlier passage:

*Now in those days, when the number of the*

*disciples was multiplying, a complaint arose from the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily service. The twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not appropriate for us to forsake the word of God and serve tables. Therefore select from amongst you, brothers, seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the word." These words pleased the whole multitude. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch; whom they set before the apostles. When they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6)*

As Paul, with various helpers, initially Barnabas and then others, went preaching from town to town, it was natural for him to leave behind in each new community of believers leaders in the model of the Jewish synagogue structure, namely elders. This passage describes his typical practice:

*On the next day he went out with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the Good News to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many afflictions we must enter into God's Kingdom. When they had appointed elders for them in every assembly, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed. (Acts 14:20-23)*



Further references to elders occur in Paul's travels.

*From Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called to himself the elders of the assembly. (Acts 20:17)*

The question that remains is to what extent overseers were differentiated from elders, or were the words effectively interchangeable. This we will come to in due course.

## Stewards

We saw that when Paul wrote to the Philippians he addressed his letter to the overseers there, and another kind of leader: the Greek word used for this second class of leader is *diakonos*. My preferred translation is 'steward' while the translation quoted earlier from the World English Bible has 'servant'.

Many versions follow the pattern of not using a translation of the word but rather a transliteration, simply putting in English letters for the Greek ones. This gives the addressees as 'bishops and deacons.'

We have also noted that when the apostles in Jerusalem had a problem about the distribution of the charity money that had been donated for the needy, they asked for seven men to be appointed for this administrative responsibility. Whether the title deacon was used, or elder (as we suggested in our comments), is a matter for debate.

What is clear is that the early church gatherings had the need both for pastoral leaders, who would teach and lead in worship, and for others who would take responsibility for practical things. When Paul writes to Timothy about how to settle matters in the Christian community in Ephesus, he not only gives guidance about the qualities of overseers (which we have noted) but also stewards (replacing 'servants' with 'stewards' in this passage).

*Stewards, in the same way, must be reverent, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. Let them also first be tested;*

*then let them serve if they are blameless. Their wives in the same way must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, and faithful in all things. Let stewards be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well gain for themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 3:8-13)*

I have preferred 'steward' as nowadays 'servant' seems to have a very subordinate status, while 'steward' implies a greater level of responsibility. It is even possible to use the word 'manager' for *diakonos* if we wish to get a better equivalent in modern terms.

I am also quite deliberately avoiding the option of transliterating the original Greek words, which, with the contractions applied, gives us 'bishops, priests, and deacons' for *episkopos*, *presbyteros*, and *diakonos*. My reasoning is that we have such a strong visual image for bishops, priests, and deacons, as dressed in ornate clerical vestments. But in the early church there would have been no different dress code for those who were appointed to these roles. He would wear his best clothing, of course, when officiating, but it would be no different from anyone else's best clothing.

Our next topic will be the kind of worship that early Christians had when they met.

## Early Christian Worship

The evidence from the New Testament is quite surprisingly sparse as to how the early Christians met together. Much has to be surmised bearing in mind that some assemblies would be either entirely or predominantly Jewish. They would have almost certainly simply made appropriate changes to the usual practice of a Jewish synagogue services. So there would have been readings from the scriptures (all of course from what we call the Old Testament), preaching, unaccompanied singing, and formal and informal prayers. They might have had the leading of a cantor (singer) and in one letter Paul refers to the wearing of head-covering, which was standard for Jewish worship.

The earliest reference in the Acts of the Apostles is as follows:

*They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and prayer. (Acts 2:42)*

Reference to the 'breaking of bread' can be taken as a reference to what would be distinctively new for any Jew. If it were not for the fact that Paul had to correct the unruly activities of the assembly at Corinth, we might never have discovered what the 'breaking of bread' amounted to. Having first insisted that at their assembly a woman should have her hair covered, he goes on to say:

*But in giving you this command, I don't praise you, that you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come*

*together in the assembly, I hear that divisions exist amongst you, and I partly believe it. For there also must be factions amongst you, that those who are approved may be revealed amongst you. When therefore you assemble yourselves together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in your eating each one takes his own supper first. One is hungry, and another is drunken. What, don't you have houses to eat and to drink in? Or do you despise God's assembly and put them to shame who don't have enough? What shall I tell you? Shall I praise you? In this I don't praise you. For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread. When he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in memory of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the Lord's cup in a way unworthy of the Lord will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy way eats and drinks judgement to himself if he doesn't discern the Lord's body. (1 Cor. 11:17-29)*

The commemorating of the Last Supper which Jesus had with his followers is clearly the totally distinctive element. It focuses on Jesus as the bringer of the new covenant, and therefore the Messiah. The narrative of this last supper is given in detail in all the gospels, although John's account has

no reference to the bread and the wine, giving instead lots of detail about what Jesus said to them on this occasion. Paul's account here is very close to that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Given that it is very probable that none of the gospels had yet been written when Paul wrote this letter to the Christians at Corinth, we can be sure that the words he uses are very much part of what was being handed down to each newly established Christian community.

This celebration of the Lord's Supper came to be called the Eucharist, or thanksgiving. In many Christian denominations today it is still the central act of worship. Much of the controversy that was part of what historians call the Reformation had to do with the actual meaning of the Eucharist, which the Roman church referred to as the Mass. We will need to return to this topic later.

## Early Christian Writings

So far we have looked at the New Testament sources for our understanding of original Christian leadership and worship. Now we must turn to the writings that were not included in the canon, and see what we find there.

We come up against the problem that surrounds all historical analysis of original Christian writings: questions of authorship, integrity and date. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have seen so much scepticism in studies that are usually categorised as liberal and modernist that it has taken more recent scholars like N. T. Wright to establish that we really can use these texts as reliable sources of information about early Christianity.

The first text we will look at is called the Didache, from its Greek title 'the Teaching' to which is appended 'of the Twelve Apostles'. One possible date for this is around the time when the assembly in Jerusalem determined the question of how much of Jewish Law Gentile converts to Christianity had to observe. This would have been 50 A.D. as most timescales would place it. I am going to assume that it is a very early document, based on its internal content. The full Greek text of the Didache was discovered in 1883, although small extracts were known in various translations much earlier.

The work takes the form of a manual for the instruction of converts. It consists of a "Two Ways" section (chaps. 1-6), a liturgical manual (7-10), instructions on the reception of visiting prophets (11-15), and a brief apocalyptic warning about the

impending End of the Age and Final Judgment (16). One useful way to read the document is to note as much what it does not say as what it does say. The opening chapter says that there are two ways: the way of Life and the way of Death. Describing the way of life we find many references to the teachings of Jesus; almost a summary of the Sermon on the Mount to be found in Matthew's Gospel. Alongside these quotations are a repetition of the Ten Commandments and a list of other evil things to avoid doing.

After these first six chapters we come to the section giving precise instructions about baptism, the Eucharist, and preachers. These are worth citing directly, using the translation of Kirsopp Lake (1912).

*Concerning baptism, baptise thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, "baptise, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," in running water; but if thou hast no running water, baptise in other water, and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour water three times on the head "in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And before the baptism let the baptiser and him who is to be baptised fast, and any others who are able. And thou shalt bid him who is to be baptised to fast one or two days before. (Ch. 7)*

The instructions regarding the Eucharist are very revealing:

*And concerning the Eucharist, hold Eucharist thus: First concerning the Cup, "We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the Holy Vine of David thy child,*



*which, thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy child; to thee be glory for ever."*

*And concerning the broken Bread: "We give thee thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy Child. To thee be glory for ever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy Kingdom, for thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever." But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs." (Ch. 9)*

We are here a long way from the Eucharist as a reflection of the Last Supper. It is thanksgiving, but of a very much more general nature, with no hint of a reference to the body and blood of Jesus.

When the Didache turns to the topic of visiting teachers we begin to get a very interesting insight into how local Christian communities operated.

*Whosoever then comes and teaches you all these things aforesaid, receive him. But if the teacher himself be perverted and teach another doctrine to destroy these things, do not listen to him, but if his teaching be for the increase of righteousness and knowledge of the Lord, receive him as the Lord. And concerning the Apostles and Prophets, act thus according to the ordinance of the Gospel. Let every Apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord, but let him not stay more than one day, or if need be a second as well; but if he stay three days, he is a*

*false prophet. And when an Apostle goes forth let him accept nothing but bread till he reach his night's lodging; but if he ask for money, he is a false prophet. Do not test or examine any prophet who is speaking in a spirit, "for every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven." But not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet, except he have the behaviour of the Lord. From his behaviour, then, the false prophet and the true prophet shall be known. And no prophet who orders a meal in a spirit shall eat of it: otherwise he is a false prophet. And every prophet who teaches the truth, if he do not what he teaches, is a false prophet. But no prophet who has been tried and is genuine, though he enact a worldly mystery of the Church, if he teach not others to do what he does himself, shall be judged by you: for he has his judgment with God, for so also did the prophets of old. But whosoever shall say in a spirit 'Give me money, or something else,' you shall not listen to him; but if he tell you to give on behalf of others in want, let none judge him. (Ch. 11)*

After a short instruction about meeting on the Lord's Day (Sunday) we find another interesting insight into church leadership.

*Appoint therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, meek men, and not lovers of money, and truthful and approved, for they also minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. Therefore do not despise them, for they are your honourable men together with the prophets and teachers. (Ch. 15)*

The Greek for bishop and deacon here is the usual *episkopos* and *diakonos* that we have become used

to, and one notes that just two classes of leader are defined, which seems to confirm that the very early church used overseer and elder interchangeably.

If the Didache really is a very early document it shows the church in a not yet institutionalised form: church leaders were to be chosen by the local community, with their qualifications very similar to those Paul prescribed in his instructions to Timothy and Titus. The Eucharist seems to be a very general form of thanksgiving. There were apparently many travelling teachers, using the title apostle or prophet in a way that shows no link to direct appointment from the risen Jesus.

\* \* \*

Another potentially early Christian writing is the letter attributed to Barnabas, who was a fellow worker with Paul, and is mentioned several times in the Acts of the Apostle. One early version of the New Testament actually adds the Epistle of Barnabas after the Revelation, as if this letter was also part of the canonical books of the New Testament. The work itself is anonymous, and there is no certainty that it was actually written by Barnabas. It is usually dated after 70 A.D., because it refers to the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, and before the Bar Kochba Revolt of A.D. 132, since it omits any reference to it which would have been natural as an endorsement of the general argument made about Jewish activity. The book is useful in its polemical teaching about how Christians should understand the Old Testament. It does not, however, deal in any way with the Eucharist or Christian leadership.

\* \* \*

There are two letters that are described as letters from Clement to the church at Corinth. The one given the title of the second is commonly thought not to be authentic, and so I will not regard it here as useful for our research. The first one does not actually have Clement's name in it, but tradition has identified Clement as its author. Clement was an early overseer in the church at Rome, and may also have been the Clement mentioned in Paul's letter to the Philippians as one of his co-workers (4:3).

The occasion of the letter which opens as being 'from the church dwelling in Rome' to the 'church dwelling in Corinth', was that some Corinthians had deposed some of their presbyters without good cause. Clement reminds them that Paul had written to them previously about their internal disputes, and urged them to correct their error by reinstating the deposed elders. He urged them, at considerable length, to return to the path of love and harmony.

By reference to the persecutions that had taken place in Rome there is good cause for dating the letter as 95/6 A.D., and there is good evidence that the letter was held in high regard and read both in Corinth and in other churches regularly. It was considered as a possible inclusion in the canon, but this did not in fact take place.

There has been a lot of discussion about the letter. Does it give rise to assigning to Clement the title of monarchical Bishop of Rome? Or was he simply one of several overseers/presbyters there, and given the task of writing on behalf of them all?

Does the fact that a letter came from Rome to Corinth imply that Rome was recognised as having some sort of authority over other local churches? The letter itself makes no such claim

There is nothing from the letter to suggest that the early churches had yet moved to a position of an *episkopos* having a greater authority than a *presbyteros*. The terms seem perfectly interchangeable in the text of the letter, 'bishops and deacons' being always in the plural, and *presbyter* being used to describe those who had been deposed.

There is also nothing in the letter that helps us develop an understanding of what actually took place at the Eucharist. One theory that I find very compelling is that when a *presbyteros* led the worship he would be described as an *episkopos*. This seems to me an attractive way of allowing one person to be described with two titles. We know that there would be in any large city, such as Rome or Corinth, many separate groups of Christians meeting in various homes. Paul, writing to the Romans referred to fellow workers Prisca and Aquila and to the church that meets in their house. In the same chapter (Romans 16) he names many others and links them to the 'saints' who are 'with them'. Each perhaps of those named were leaders of a house based group. Every time they met it would be quite natural for there to be a leader (an overseer) of their acts of worship, someone who today would be referred to as the 'celebrant' when there are several clergy taking part in a communion service. It will be helpful if we carry this idea forward as we look at the next early church writer.

\* \* \*

The next set of early Christian letters to study were written by Ignatius of Antioch. He was an overseer there, and tradition has it that he was taught by the Apostle John. He had been arrested and was being sent to Rome for execution and martyrdom. The church historian Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, gives the date of his death in the Colosseum as the eleventh year of the reign of Trajan, which would be A.D. 108 in our dating convention. On his way to Rome he wrote seven letters: one to a fellow overseer, Polycarp, and one each to the churches at Smyrna, Philadelphia, Rome, Tralles, Magnesia, and Ephesus. There are other letters ascribed to Ignatius, but modern scholars are clear that these were much later and not authentic. In fact some scholars are not sure if even these seven are in their original form, given the status awarded to overseers as having superior authority over presbyters. They wonder if the passages are interpolations added for polemical reasons to give support to what may have been contentious views.

Let us examine what the letters say on the subject of overseers. Here are extracts from his letter to the Ephesians, retaining 'bishop' as the translation of *episkopos*:

*It is fitting that you should run together in accordance with the will of your bishop, and this you do. Your renowned presbytery is fitted to the bishop as strings are to a harp. . . . Obviously, anyone whom the Master of the household puts in charge of His domestic affairs, ought to be received by us as He*

*who has charged him with this duty. Plainly, then, we should look upon the bishop even as we would upon the Lord Himself. (Eph. 4 ... 6)*

In the letter to the Magnesians we have:

*I exhort you to do all things with a divine harmony, the bishop is to preside in the place of God, while the presbyters are to function as the council of the Apostles, and the deacons are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ. . . . Just as the Lord, therefore, being one with the Father, did nothing without Him, either by Himself, or through the Apostles, so neither must you undertake anything without the bishop and the presbyters; nor must you attempt to convince yourselves that anything you do apart is acceptable. (Mag. 6/7)*

To the Trallians he writes:

*Surely, when you submit to the bishop as representing Jesus Christ, it is clear to me that you are not living the life of men, but that of Jesus Christ, who died for us, that through faith in His death you yourselves might escape dying. It is therefore necessary, as you indeed do, that you do nothing without your bishop and be subject also to the presbytery as representing the Apostles of Jesus Christ. It is further necessary that the deacons, the dispensers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, should win the approval of all in every way; for they are not dispensers of food and drink, but ministers of the Church of God. (Trall. 2)*

To the Philippians:

*I cried out while in your midst: "Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons". Now, some suspected me of having spoken this because I had previous knowledge of the division caused by some. But He is my witness, I did not learn this from any human source. No, it was the Spirit who kept preaching these words: "Apart from the bishop do nothing, preserve yourselves as shrines of God; cherish unity, shun divisions, do as Jesus Christ did, for He too, did as the Father did." (Phil. 7)*

To Polycarp:

*Give heed to the bishop, that God also may give heed to you. I am devoted to those who are subject to the bishop, the presbyters, the deacons. (Pol. 6)*

To the Smyrnaeans:

*Let no man do anything connected with the church without the bishop. The celebration of the Eucharist is valid only if it is administered by the bishop or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Where the bishop is, there let the people also be; just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church. It is not permitted to baptize or to celebrate a love feast (agape) without authorization from the bishop. (Smyrn. 8)*

The above is particularly interesting in that we have the first use of 'catholic' to describe the church, a word which simply means world-wide. Ignatius is clearly using the standard of a universal practice as a call to unity with all Christians, wherever they are.



To sum up what we learn from these letters, it is clear that we have the apparently first instance where there is an advocate for a hierarchy of Christian leaders, with the bishop seen as having a higher level of authority over the other presbyters, and both of them higher than deacons. There is also the hint that oversight of the Eucharist was very important, even the concept of a valid one, so suggesting there might be invalid ones. The trouble with all this is that there are scholars who question whether these letters are genuine, counting them rather as later forgeries. Part of the problem is that they exist in both shorter and longer versions, which makes it obvious that they have been worked on after the originals were written.

Regardless of whether the letters of Ignatius we have cited are genuine, what is clear is that the early church was evolving towards a single (monarchical) local leader, who would be called a bishop in English, with other leaders (elders/presbyters) and officers with an organisational role regarding the local finances and charitable distributions (deacons). A still later development was that a bishop might extend his authority beyond the local to the regional, so that his authority was applied to any local presbyter, who would act as his delegate. This is essentially where the episcopal denominations are today: a local 'priest' gives obedience to his diocesan bishop.

It is obviously possible to take the view that the development of a stronger episcopate gave churches a greater sense of unity, with a centralized focus of authority, and so carried the church successfully through the perilous period of heresies.

## Heresy

The Apostle Paul had warned that heresy would manifest itself as an opponent of the Christian truth. Urging Timothy to preach constantly he says:

*For the time will come when they will not listen to the sound doctrine, but having itching ears, will heap up for themselves teachers after their own lusts, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn away to fables. (2 Tim. 4:3-4)*

The heresies that the early church had to deal were largely centred on two themes: the divinity of Jesus, and the way of salvation. Regarding the latter we can note that Gnosticism was a common approach in the Roman empire. There were many gnostic pagan sects, whose main offering was that salvation came through possessing secret knowledge (*gnosis* is the Greek for knowledge). This usually involved joining a secret society which offered, through initiation and revelation, to give special privileges. Often such sects held that matter was evil and that the only good was spiritual. This kind of outlook could easily creep into Christian communities, offering secret knowledge through focusing on the teachings of Jesus. The visible evidence for this can be found in the multiplicity of spurious 'gospels', which tended simply to list Jesus' sayings. A good example of this is the recently discovered 'Gospel of Thomas'. It soon became obvious that the church would have to define those gospels which were reliable and those which were spurious. Towards the end of the third century gatherings of bishops (councils) in Rome and Carthage agreed the canon, as it currently stands

now. Thus were excluded the 'gospels' of Thomas, Truth, Judas, Peter, Mary, Philip, and the Egyptians, all being dated as written in the second century.

What we now call the doctrine of the Trinity is the other area of theological difficulty. Christians believe that there is but one god, and they also believe that the one true god has manifested himself as the creator father, the incarnate son, Jesus, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Trinity is a threefold unity. Questions arose about Jesus: how could he be both human and divine? Was he first and foremost human but then adopted as the 'Son of God'? Was he not really human but only seemed to be human? Or even was Jesus not divine at all? Many different versions of Christianity began to appear as these questions were given different answers by various persuasive leaders.

Part of the problem the church had until 313 A.D. was that Christianity was not really tolerated by the Roman Empire. Persecution was not continuous, but rather sporadic. It was however very difficult for opposition to heretical views to be anything other than local, until it was possible for there to be a gathering of all the Christian leaders into a council to provide absolute definitions. These came eventually at the council of Nicea (A.D. 325), and a later creed (that of Athanasius, in 415) amplified the trinitarian definitions of the three persons of the godhead.

In this brief and inevitably superficial outline of the problems of heresy that the early church faced we have referred to persecution. We will go there next.

## Persecution

Speaking of the polytheism of the Roman world in the first century Edward Gibbon memorably said that the various modes of worship were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. To begin with there was a natural tendency towards tolerance, and Christianity was treated as a sect within Judaism, which was a *religio licita* (a permissible religion).

The Acts of the Apostles refers to a time when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. We do not know exactly when this took place; a date of around A.D. 50 may be about right. The historian Suetonius writing some time later recorded that since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome. The reference to Chrestus is taken by most to be a misspelling of Christus, and hence refers to Jewish/Christian conflict.

The emperor Nero had been deemed the direct cause of a massive fire that destroyed a lot of Rome in A.D. 64. To divert this attention Nero accused the Christians of doing this and ordered their arrest and execution. The historian Tacitus gives us this account:

*Therefore, to stop the rumour [that he had set Rome on fire], he [Emperor Nero] falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were [generally] hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death*

*as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius, but the pernicious superstition - repressed for a time, broke out yet again, not only through Judea, - where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly first those were arrested who confessed they were Christians; next on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of "hating the human race." (Annals 15)*

Their execution was made a spectacle, with some eaten by wild animals, some crucified, and some burned at the stake.

The main cause of persecution seems to have focused on the refusal of Christians to take part in the polytheistic activities that were deemed a normal part of social behaviour. Christians were often called atheists as a result. Since Christians met privately for their worship it was easy for outsiders to believe all sorts of rumours, such as cannibalism being a Christian practice.

The hatred of Christians became even more easy to justify as the habit grew within the Roman Empire of the emperor himself being deemed a god. Thus refusal to worship the emperor was seen as an act of treason. Jesus was worshipped as Lord, and this was a title the emperor claimed. Persecution of Christians was not continuous, and usually only local. Any person accused of being a Christian could save himself by affirming that he was not, and offering a simple pagan sacrifice. This is how those

who were executed became known as martyrs, a word which means witness. They gave witness to their faith by refusing to conform, even knowing this would result in their death, sometimes by various means of torture.

Within the Christian community these martyrs were held in high esteem. Their remains were buried and revered by later generations. There is not space to go into any great detail here. Over time the natural respect and veneration for martyrs led them to be allotted particular dates of the year to be remembered on, giving rise to what became saints' days in the church's calendar. By the early middle ages this was a major aspect of liturgical activity. In current times the Roman Catholic church still canonises people after their death, giving the status of sainthood as a special degree of respect. In the New Testament the word saint is applied to every Christian believer.

Veneration for these martyrs took on a new focus in time. Parts of their bodies would be treated as special relics, and would become the destination for pilgrims to go to the church or abbey where they were kept, believing that the relic would achieve some needed cure of an illness. Other objects too became treated as powerful relics: for example, pieces of the cross on which Jesus had been crucified, or the shroud in which Jesus had been wrapped for burial. At the shrine in Walsingham, Norfolk, pilgrims were encouraged to believe there was stored a phial with the Virgin Mary's milk. As Jesus had ascended after his resurrection there was no possibility of any physical remains that could become a relic. Or was there? In the middle ages

there were several churches claiming to possess his foreskin, which would have been removed on the eighth day in Jewish circumcision.

At what point in time does a natural admiration for the courage of a martyr turn into a veneration of a body part believed to have magical powers? How can a religion so lose its focus on the one they have been called to worship that there develops a roaring trade in the buying and selling of relics to increase the desirability of a place of worship?

## The Eucharist

The question I am now going to address in more detail is how the 'breaking of bread', to give it its early name, became a set liturgy called the Eucharist. What did this liturgy consist of?

For at least the first two centuries it is highly likely that there would be no formally set liturgy. It is very probable that there would be local variations within a constant pattern. The earliest detailed account of the Eucharist is contained in a long letter addressed to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius by a Christian called Justin Martyr. Internal evidence will put the date at around 156 A.D.. The letter is a defence of Christianity, and is therefore called by the Latin for defence, his Apology. The letter is very long and discursive, and the two sections that are relevant to our topic are quite late in the letter. I am citing the translation made by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson of the sections numbered 65 and 66:

*But we, after we have thus washed him who has been convinced and has assented to our teaching, bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled, in order that we may offer hearty prayers in common for ourselves and for the baptized [illuminated] person, and for all others in every place, that we may be counted worthy, now that we have learned the truth, by our works also to be found good citizens and keepers of the commandments, so that we may be saved with an everlasting salvation. 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 Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. This word Amen answers in the Hebrew language to  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$  [so be it]. 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 over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.*

*And this food is called among us  $\text{Εὐχαριστία}$  [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. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, 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. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body;" and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and*

*given thanks, He said, "This is My blood;" and gave it to them alone. Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.*

We can also add a somewhat later description from Hippolytus, who was a presbyter in Rome at the beginning of the third century. In a work called usually 'The Apostolic Tradition' Hippolytus records the manner in which bishops, elders, and deacons are to be appointed, how baptisms are to be carried out, how oil is to be blessed, and many other local administrative functions. Regarding the eucharist, we find two examples: one following the ordination of a bishop, and one following a baptism. Here is a translation of the former made by Kevin P. Edgecomb, preserving his line breaks:

*When he has been made bishop, everyone shall give him the kiss of peace, and salute him respectfully, for he has been made worthy of this. Then the deacons shall present the oblation to him, and he shall lay his hand upon it, and give thanks, with the entire council of elders, saying:*

*The Lord be with you.*

*And all reply:*

*And with your spirit.*

*The bishop says:*

*Lift up your hearts.*

*The people respond:*

*We have them with the Lord.*

*The bishop says:*

*Let us give thanks to the Lord.*

*The people respond:*

*It is proper and just.*

*The bishop then continues:*

*We give thanks to you God,  
through your beloved son Jesus Christ,  
whom you sent to us in former times  
as Savior, Redeemer, and Messenger of your Will,  
who is your inseparable Word,  
through whom you made all,  
and in whom you were well-pleased, whom you sent  
from heaven into the womb of a virgin,  
who, being conceived within her, was made flesh,  
and appeared as your Son,  
born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin.*

*It is he who, fulfilling your will  
and acquiring for you a holy people,  
extended his hands in suffering,  
in order to liberate from sufferings  
those who believe in you. Who, when he was  
delivered to voluntary suffering,  
in order to dissolve death,  
and break the chains of the devil,  
and tread down hell,  
and bring the just to the light,  
and set the limit,  
and manifest the resurrection,  
taking the bread, and giving thanks to you, said,  
"Take, eat, for this is my body which is broken for  
you."*

*Likewise the chalice, saying,*

*This is my blood which is shed for you.*

*Whenever you do this, do this (in) memory of me.*

*Therefore, remembering his death and resurrection,  
we offer to you the bread and the chalice,  
giving thanks to you, who has made us worthy  
to stand before you and to serve as your priests. And*

*we pray that you would send your Holy Spirit  
to the oblation of your Holy Church.  
In their gathering together,  
give to all those who partake of your holy mysteries  
the fullness of the Holy Spirit,  
toward the strengthening of the faith in truth,  
that we may praise you and glorify you,  
through your son Jesus Christ,  
through whom to you be glory and honor,  
Father and Son,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in your Holy Church,  
now and throughout the ages of the ages.  
Amen.*

From these early examples we can begin to see the pattern which would eventually develop into a formal liturgy. Three main centres of Christian development (called patriarchates) were at Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Each of these formulated their own precise liturgy. It was much later in time that a single formal liturgy was used by what was now being called the Roman Catholic Church.

## Historical Milestone

As the years went on the Christian communities all over the Roman Empire grew in number and in strength. There was something different about Christians compared with pagans, and the difference was noted. Christians did not steal from you, they could be trusted in commerce, they did not abuse their servants. As one pagan writer noted: 'they not only look after their own poor, they look after our poor too.' Many local leaders, for good reason, often failed to carry out the sporadic persecution of Christians even when ordered by an emperor to do so.

The turning point came after the Emperor Diocletian abdicated in AD 305, leading to emperors and deputy emperors of the West and of the East contending for power. Among them was Flavius Valerius Constantinus, known to history as Constantine the Great. Acclaimed as emperor by his troops in York in A.D. 306, he was appointed Caesar or deputy emperor of the West by Diocletian's successor, Galerius. Constantine was in charge of Britain and Gaul, but his brother-in-law Maxentius waged war against Galerius and seized Italy and Rome itself. Galerius died in A.D. 311 and early the next year Constantine invaded Italy, won battles at Turin and Verona and marched on Rome. Maxentius came out to fight and was destroyed at the Milvian Bridge, which carried the Via Flaminia over the Tiber into the city. The battle was one of a succession of victories that in AD 324 made Constantine master of the entire Roman Empire, but it is most famous for its link with his conversion to Christianity, which would prove to be one of the most important events

in world history. The story is told by Eusebius, who wrote the first biography of Constantine soon after the emperor's death. He knew Constantine well and said he had the story from the emperor himself. Constantine was a pagan monotheist, a devotee of the sun god Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun. However before the Milvian Bridge battle he and his army saw a cross of light in the sky above the sun with words in Greek that are generally translated into Latin as *In hoc signo vinces* ('In this sign conquer'). That night Constantine had a dream in which Christ told him he should use the sign of the cross against his enemies. He was so impressed that he had the Christian symbol marked on his soldiers' shields and when the Milvian Bridge battle gave him an overwhelming victory he attributed it to the god of the Christians.

Constantine, now in control of the west, met with the emperor who controlled the east, Licinius, and they agreed at their meeting in Milan in 313 A.D. that from now on all people, including Christians, could worship the god of their choice. Now there was to be no more persecution of Christians, and it was ordered that property confiscated from Christians should be restored.

The effect was immense. Christians could now own buildings dedicated to Christian worship, and their bishops were often appointed to civic offices.

From this point on there could be open meetings which all bishops could formally attend. These meetings could establish decisions about doctrines and which books were to be accepted as fully authoritative. It was Constantine himself, now sole

emperor and a believer but not yet baptized, who called and chaired the very important gathering of all bishops in Nicea (on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea) in A.D. 325. From this we have the creed which is commonly recited in the service of the Eucharist. Its main purpose was to settle all the disputes as to how precisely to define the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These plenary gatherings of bishops were very important, and are called ecumenical councils. Christianity now had the means to become organised and structured in a way that applied to all Christians; this is exactly what 'catholic' means: it applies to all.

A final postscript of this history section: Theodosius came to power just 42 years after Constantine's death. By that stage Christianity had become the most popular religion in the Empire and paganism was clearly dying out. In 380 A.D. Theodosius passed the Edict of Thessalonica, which declared that Christianity, as defined by the Nicene Creed, was the official religion in the Roman Empire.

Even after this there were still many who would try to impose their own ideas on what was truly Christian doctrine. The battle against heresies was an ongoing one. But the ecumenical councils could meet to define doctrines in even more detail than had been done so at Nicea. It is, however, beyond the scope of this book to go into more detail here.

## Eucharistic Theology

In this chapter I am going to look at the question: what did the Early Church believe happened during the Eucharist?

Writing to the Christians of Smyrna, in about A.D. 106, Ignatius warned them to "*stand aloof from such heretics*", because, among other reasons, "*they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sins, and whom the Father, of His goodness, raised up again.*" (Ch. 7)

A little later, around 150 A.D. we find that Justin Martyr wrote an 'Apology' (a defence) in which we find these words about the Eucharist:

*Not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, 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. (ch. 66)*

There are further references to the nature of the bread and wine in various writings after this, though none of them as telling as this extract from Ambrose of Milan's work 'On the Mysteries':

*Perhaps you will say, "I see something else, how is it that you assert that I receive the Body of Christ?" . . . Let us prove that this is not what nature made, but what the blessing consecrated, and the power of*



*blessing is greater than that of nature, because by blessing nature itself is changed. . . . For that sacrament which you receive is made what it is by the word of Christ. . . . Why do you seek the order of nature in the Body of Christ, seeing that the Lord Jesus Himself was born of a Virgin, not according to nature? It is the true Flesh of Christ which was crucified and buried, this is then truly the Sacrament of His Body. The Lord Jesus Himself proclaims: "This Is My Body." Before the blessing of the heavenly words another nature is spoken of, after the consecration the Body is signified. He Himself speaks of His Blood. Before the consecration it has another name, after it is called Blood. And you say, Amen, that is, It is true. Let the heart within confess what the mouth utters, let the soul feel what the voice speaks. (Ch. 50-54, date c. 380 A.D.)*

The change that is believed to be taking place during the prayer of consecration was given a number of names by the church at this time, such as 'transformation', but eventually an official term was coined: '*transsubstantiatio*' in Latin, or for the Eastern Orthodox Christians the Greek word '*metousiosis*'. This is where the current English word 'transubstantiation' comes from. It took a long time for this definition to become an official one, and this took place at the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 A.D., after the doctrine had been challenged by a monk called Berengar of Tours. Another way of expressing the doctrine is to assert the 'Real Presence' of the Lord.

The Protestant Reformation largely rejected this doctrine, as we know, but I have wanted to focus on the early beliefs, believing this to be more likely to

bring us to the best understanding of what is true. I also cannot fail to notice the misuse of the doctrine, whereby it was taught that the Eucharist could achieve a number of things *per se*, such as the relief of so much time in purgatory, itself a much disputed doctrine. It is in this territory that one is merging towards magic, alas.

## Magic in the Bible

Magic is a word that is not actually used very often, if at all, in English translations of the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible. Magicians, however, do occur, but the usage seems to refer to them as a type of trickster. In Exodus we read of the magicians of Egypt, whose tricks turned out to be inferior to those of Moses (see Exodus ch. 7-9). The word the Bible often uses is sorcery, and here we find the practice totally forbidden.

*When you have come into the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found with you anyone who makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who tells fortunes, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or someone who consults with a familiar spirit, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. Because of these abominations, the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless with the LORD your God. For these nations that you shall dispossess listen to those who practise sorcery and to diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you so to do. (Deuteronomy 18:9-14)*

This passage is one of many in the Old Testament on the topic, all with the same absolute prohibitions. They mean that for Christians all these types of activities must be avoided. That obviously includes fortune-telling, ouija boards, seances, palm-reading, and the like.

We find references to sorcery in the Acts of the Apostles. Consider this event.

*But there was a certain man, Simon by name, who used to practise sorcery in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, making himself out to be some great one, to whom they all listened, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is that great power of God." They listened to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching good news concerning God's Kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. Simon himself also believed. Being baptised, he continued with Philip. Seeing signs and great miracles occurring, he was amazed.*

*Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for as yet he had fallen on none of them. They had only been baptised in the name of Christ Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power, that whomever I lay my hands on may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart isn't right before God. Repent therefore of this, your wickedness, and ask God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the poison of bitterness and in the bondage of*

*iniquity.”*

*Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that none of the things which you have spoken happen to me.” (Acts 8:9-24)*

It was a power that Simon wanted, even though what he sought was not an evil thing. The desire for power is at the heart of all magic. Peter's response is worth noting too: you cannot buy God's gifts.

Paul encountered sorcery too, in Crete.

*When they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of understanding. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul, and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fastened his eyes on him, and said, “You son of the devil, full of all deceit and all cunning, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is on you, and you will be blind, not seeing the sun for a season!” Immediately a mist and darkness fell on him. He went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord. (Acts 13:6-12)*

And here is Paul again, this time at Philippi.

*As we were going to prayer, a certain girl having*

*a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much gain by fortune telling. Following Paul and us, she cried out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us a way of salvation!" She was doing this for many days. But Paul, becoming greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" It came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that the hope of their gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas, and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. (Acts 16:16-19)*

It is perfectly clear what the Bible condemns, and also, which is perhaps more problematic for some modern people, does not deny the possibility of there being real powers that may be used.

## Idolatry

We are very familiar with the opening three of the Ten Commandments:

*God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. "You shall have no other gods before me.*

*"You shall not make for yourselves an idol, nor any image of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: you shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and on the fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing loving kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who misuses his name. (Exodus 20:1-7)*

The prohibition of any form of idolatry is an essential part of the covenant relationship between YHWH and his people. It is therefore right for us to think deeply about what idolatry amounts to. The obvious meaning is the making and worshipping of any image. But the prohibition is against treating anything as an object of worship: the sun and the moon, even particular stars, were often worshipped by ancient people; our ancestors believed in sacred trees, or hills, or rivers. Some religions worship ancient heroes, and the Roman Empire required its citizens to offer worship to their Emperor until the time of Constantine.

It is not enough simply to be worshipping the right god either. It is how we worship that matters.

*When the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me." All the people took off the golden rings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He received what they handed him, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it a moulded calf. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation, and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." They rose up early on the next day, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. The LORD spoke to Moses, "Go, get down; for your people, who you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves! They have turned away quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a moulded calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt." (Exodus 32:1-8)*

The perfect antidote for a desire to have something physical as a focus for worship are these



words from Jesus, responding to a question about the right place for worship. The principle about form of worship is covered perfectly here.

*The hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to be his worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”* (John 4:23-24)

What is the attraction of idolatry? I believe that it is a quest for power, to gain a selfish benefit from an external source. If I appease the right god in the right way I will reap all sorts of gains. This is what the priests of any idolatrous religion offer. This is where priestcraft and magic combine: the hope of control by paranormal means of paranormal powers. This is what Mephistopheles offered Faust, but, as the story makes clear, there is a price to pay.

Is there a danger of idolatry in having statues and stained glass images in our churches? There was a time when the Puritans were determined to remove them all, and many were defaced in the first half of the seventeenth century. From a point of view of art and architecture this is something many now regret. In a preliterate age they were seen as the next best thing to books, telling the Bible story in images rather than words for people who had no books to read. My own view is simple: I love the beauty of the church I attend on Sunday, and a lot of that beauty comes from the decorations. I certainly have no temptation to bow down and worship any of the statues, and I doubt very much if any of the usual congregation has either.

A far greater danger of idolatry in modern times is the placing of an inappropriate value on material objects. Worship means giving worth to something. As a Christian I must give exclusive 'worth-ship' to God alone. I need money just to keep alive, but I must not worship it. I need clothes to keep warm, but I must not have too much regard for what I look like in them. One can say the same about so many of the 'things' in our lives: cars, houses, gardens, you name it. There is a balance to keep. Each of us needs to be sure we are holding this balance well.

## Worship

Worship is not an easy concept. What is the right way to worship your god? Many different societies offer varying answers. Even in the Bible there are rather puzzling indications of what is right. The heart of worship, of course, is offering something of value to one's god. Pouring a little wine on the floor as a libation is one way of doing it. But the most obvious way is to build an altar and offer life there in some form. Some societies have felt that the only really satisfying offering their god wanted was human life, but most have settled for animal life. This story is not an easy one to understand.

*Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. As time passed, Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the ground. Abel also brought some of the firstborn of his flock and of its fat. The LORD respected Abel and his offering, but he didn't respect Cain and his offering. Cain was very angry, and the expression on his face fell. (Genesis 4:2-5)*

When YHWH had led Israel from Egypt he gave very detailed instructions about worship. There was to be a sacred building, within it a sacred sign of YHWH's presence, a sacred altar, a sacred tribe to be permanent priests, a sacred family to be high priests, and a variety of offerings for various occasions, such as harvest thanksgiving, thanksgiving for the birth of a baby, and offerings to achieve forgiveness when that was needed. But if they were offered with the wrong spirit there would be rejection.

*“What are the multitude of your sacrifices to me?”,  
says the LORD.*

*“I have had enough of the burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed animals.*

*I don’t delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of  
male goats.*

*When you come to appear before me, who has  
required this at your hand, to trample my courts?  
Bring no more vain offerings.*

*Incense is an abomination to me.*

*New moons, Sabbaths, and convocations:*

*I can’t stand evil assemblies.*

*My soul hates your New Moons and your appointed  
feasts.*

*They are a burden to me.*

*I am weary of bearing them.*

*When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes  
from you.*

*Yes, when you make many prayers, I will not hear.*

*Your hands are full of blood.*

*Wash yourselves. Make yourself clean.*

*Put away the evil of your doings from before my  
eyes.*

*Cease to do evil.*

*Learn to do well.*

*Seek justice.*

*Relieve the oppressed.*

*Defend the fatherless.*

*Plead for the widow.”*

*(Isaiah 1:11-17)*

So how should we Christians worship God? The psalmist helps us with part of the answer.

*Sing to the LORD a new song!*

*Sing to the LORD, all the earth.*

*Sing to the LORD!  
Bless his name!  
Proclaim his salvation from day to day!  
Declare his glory amongst the nations,  
his marvellous works amongst all the peoples.  
(Psalm 96:1-3)*

I grew up to appreciate the beauty of cathedral choirs, and believe that choral worship and verbal proclamation are at the heart of how we best can present our praise to God.

We hear the word of God read to us and explained through a teaching ministry.

And, central to all this is the memorial of the great act of salvation achieved on the cross, the thanksgiving for which we use the Greek word Eucharist.

## Conclusions

This has been a very personal project, prompted by moving house and finding myself in a parish with a different liturgical practice compared with what I previously had been used to. The resident leadership of the church here have opposed the ordination of women, and therefore of female bishops too. The main service on Sunday is the Eucharist, which in the church notices is referred to as Mass. I think anyone used to a Roman Catholic order of service would find what takes place here virtually indistinguishable from their usual services: vestments, church furniture, all the visible things; the words used in all the prayers, and the actual order of service.

My natural inclination has always been for a minimum of ritual, personally finding it can tend to be distracting, but understanding how others value it immensely. On the other side of things subjective, I appreciate the beauty of music, and delight in a well-trained choir leading the choral music. I also appreciate that the church as a building is beautiful too, and this kind of art helps focus on the place as a place of prayer, which has been looked after over many generations, at no small cost.

The fundamental question in my mind focused on the danger of Christian worship being dominated by demanding a priestly presence and a formulaic approach to wording. Having experienced many different kinds of alternative ways of celebrating the Lord's Supper, I could not help asking this question. How much does the status (gender even) of the person leading the service matter? How much does

what is worn matter? How far has what we do today moved from what the first generations of Christians did? The title of this small work was deliberately provocative, implying that the dangers I have just outlined may be very real.

The method I determined was to focus on what we can learn from the writings of the apostles, and then from church leaders in the next few generations. For me it is axiomatic that the nearer we get to the origins of our faith the more likely we are to avoid error. Without going too deeply into the scholarship that has researched all these texts, I have preferred simply to take them as found.

It is interesting that the books of the New Testament have very little to say about how the first generation of Christians actually worshipped. Where would we be if the Christians at Corinth had been a bit better behaved? I ask because this passage is the only one from the New Testament that gives us insight into what Paul taught about the Eucharist. To remind you I will cite it again:

*For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread. When he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in memory of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the Lord's cup in a way unworthy of the Lord will be*

*guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy way eats and drinks judgement to himself if he doesn't discern the Lord's body. (1 Corinthians 11:23-29)*

It is worth noting that Paul says he received all this directly from the Lord; in other words not from Peter or any other of the original Twelve. Secondly I am willing to believe that Paul identifies the elements (the bread and the wine) with the body and the blood of the Lord Jesus. He urges them to rightly discern what these elements now are. This aspect of Paul's teaching is decisive for me.

In much the same way the writings of the early church are as bare of reference to the details of the Eucharist as the New Testament is. I read through all those books I have cited, and it is only a very small percentage of the texts that actually touches on this subject. The Didache hardly covers it at all. It is not until we get to several generations on that we get any detailed instructions on the words to use when the Eucharist is celebrated. It is also clear that it was centuries before a formal authorised liturgy was deemed to apply to all churches; before then there were obviously local variations.

The history of the church from these early times up to the Reformation shows a progression towards the sort of priestcraft that worries me. Even taking the word *presbyter* of early times into 'priest', as a sacerdotal term, is something I question the validity of. Requiring ordained ministers not to marry, when Paul required them to be the 'husband of one wife',



created all sorts of problems. The idea that the recitation of the Eucharist so as to provide a benefit which could be bought with money is something the reformers rejected, rightly in my view.

So did the reformers of the sixteenth century go too far, or not far enough? Each of us can think through that question, and come up with our own answer.

I greatly value the dedication of those men and women whom I have got to know well, who have taken upon themselves the responsibilities of Christian leadership. The title they take matters little to me; their ministry matters a great deal, especially their teaching ministry. If they wear what the local congregation wants them to wear to help identify their level of responsibility, I can live with whatever that is. While I find the sounding of bells and the use of incense a little distracting still (perhaps I will get used to it), it does not deter me, knowing there are those for whom it is important.

So, to sum up, I am glad the Lord has taken me to this place, and I hope to play my part in the fellowship of the congregation I have been placed in.