It is not at all certain when baptism began to be extended to infants as well as older children and adults. The first undisputed reference to the custom occurs in North Africa at the beginning of the third century in the writings of Tertullian, who disapproves of it. However, some modern scholars, and notably Joachim Jeremias, have argued that infant baptism was not an innovation at this period but a traditional practice going back to the first century. Much depends upon how references to baptisms of a ‘household’ in the New Testament (Acts 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:16) should be understood: did that term include very young children or not?

The profession of faith

Whatever the answer to that question, we have seen in earlier chapters that a profession of faith by the candidates themselves was a central element in the baptismal process. When, therefore, infants were to be
baptised, this obviously created something of a difficulty. The problem was resolved by allowing someone else to speak on their behalf. Thus Apostolic Tradition 21 directs that ‘as for those who cannot speak for themselves, their parents or someone from their family shall speak for them’. But neither this nor any other of the earliest sources offers any real theological justification for this practice. For example, the closest that Cyprian came to it was to say that infants’ crying constituted their petition to be baptised. Thus it looks as though practice may have preceded doctrine here, perhaps simply as a result of an inchoate desire on the part of Christian parents to have their children share in whatever benefits they believed themselves to enjoy as a result of baptism. Fifth-century sources indicate that a similar action was also taken in the case of adult candidates who had signified their desire for baptism but were too ill to answer for themselves when the time came, and this may even have constituted the precedent for doing this for infants.

It was only later in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) that a theological justification for infant baptism first appeared that was eventually to become the standard explanation in traditional Catholic theology: belief was not a prerequisite for baptism as it was in an adult, but faith was bestowed on the child through the faith of others in the celebration of the rite itself:

when, on behalf of an infant as yet incapable of exercising faith, the answer is given that he believes, this answer means that he has faith because of the sacrament of faith…

Therefore an infant, although he is not yet a believer in the sense of having that faith which includes the consenting will of those who exercise it, nevertheless becomes a believer through the sacrament of that faith. For as it is answered that he believes, so also he is called a believer, not because he assents to the truth by an act of his own judgment, but because he receives the sacrament of that truth.¹

As this quotation implies, and as is confirmed from elsewhere in Augustine’s writings, a change was made in the wording of the profession of faith when infants were being baptised. Whereas, when the candidate was an adult or older child, this profession was in the form of a series of direct questions and answers (‘Do you believe…?’ ‘I believe⁴), at the baptism of an infant both the questions and the responses made on
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behalf of the candidate were instead cast in the third person: 'Does he/she believe...?' 'He/she believes.' This variation was enough to cause Augustine's theological opponent Pelagius to argue that if adults and infants were supposed to be receiving the same baptism, then exactly the same words ought to be used in the rite.

Although there are signs that this form of the profession of faith was also adopted in the case of infants in Spain and France as well as Africa, it did not apparently affect the practice at Rome, which was always particularly conservative in liturgical matters. Consequently, when the Roman rite eventually supplanted all other local rites in the West during the Middle Ages, the use of the adult formula for infants became universal. This effectively reduced the role of the godparent in the rite to that of a mere ventriloquist, supplying a voice for the silent child.

The trend towards infant baptism as the norm

What is also clear is that even after the practice of infant baptism was adopted, it did not quickly replace adult baptism as the norm everywhere. On the one hand, in North Africa it seems to have become firmly established at an early date. Thus Cyprian in the third century insisted that there was no need to wait until the eighth day after birth to baptise an infant, as some were claiming on the basis of the biblical prescription for circumcision: the mercy and grace of God ought not to be refused to anyone, since all are equal in the gift of grace (Epistulæ 64). On the other hand, we find Gregory Nazianzus in Cappadocia in 381 advising that children should normally be baptised at about the age of three years, when they are able to answer the baptismal questions themselves and can to some extent understand the Christian faith (Orationes 40:28). There are also plenty of examples of people from Christian families in the fourth century who were not baptised until they had become adults. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, there was a widespread tendency at that time to delay baptism as long as possible.

By the fifth century, however, the same beliefs that at first had caused people to delay baptism now began to lead them in the opposite direction: if baptism was necessary for salvation, was it not desirable therefore to baptise children as young as possible, lest they should happen to die and forfeit their opportunity for salvation? This tendency was given
strong impetus both by the high infant mortality rate in the ancient world and by the theological reflections of Augustine, who argued that because the church practised the baptism of infants, it must follow that babies were thus in need of the remission of sin that baptism brought. Since newborn children had not yet committed actual sins, he concluded that they must have inherited the 'original sin' of Adam: 'What need is there, therefore, for an infant to be conformed to the death of Christ through baptism, if he is not completely poisoned by the serpent's bite?' Augustine was not the first to reason in this way from practice to doctrine. Both Cyprian and Origen in the third century had already drawn similar conclusions from infant baptism, in contrast to earlier Christian theologians who had asserted the purity of newborn children. Augustine not only developed the idea more fully, but he added a powerful motivation for conferring baptism at the earliest possible age, since he argued that children dying unbaptised would inevitably be damned, although he believed that they would receive only 'the mildest condemnation'.

It was not long, therefore, before infant baptism became more or less universal throughout the Christian church, and people forgot that baptism had originally been connected with adult conversions. Indeed, some Western texts from the tenth century onwards offer an amusing illustration of the extent to which infant baptisms came to be considered normative. They direct that infants are to be held in the right arms of their sponsor and adult candidates are to place their foot upon the foot of their sponsor — the latter apparently an attempt to conform as closely as possible to what was done in the case of infants! It is also an indication of the extent to which the role of sponsor or godparent had changed: from being the person who presented an adult candidate for baptism and vouched for the genuineness of the conversion that had already taken place in his or her life, the godparent was now the one who held the baby at the ceremony and made the responses to the questions concerning faith on his or her behalf, and in later medieval rites was also charged with the future spiritual upbringing of the child.
The emergence of confirmation

In most cases infants were treated in the same way as adult candidates who were ill or in danger of death: the demands and rituals of the catechumenate were simply eliminated from the process and they proceeded immediately to the baptism itself. It is important to note, however, that in both cases it was the full initiation rite — apart from the catechumenal element — that was usually performed: all the pre- and post-baptismal ceremonies, such as anointing or the imposition of hands, were generally included, and the newly baptised received Holy Communion either at their baptism or soon afterwards, depending upon the urgency of their situation. The only modifications that might be made were that if the candidates were very ill or weak, rather than being immersed in the water, water could be sprinkled over them instead, and that the whole initiation rite was often performed by a local presbyter rather than waiting until the child could be taken to the bishop (who would normally have presided over it) and so risking the danger of death in the meantime.

The church in Rome, however, was an exception to this rule. Here it was customary for infants to go through the whole catechumenal process, unless they were in imminent danger of death. They would be brought to church at the beginning of Lent and enrolled in the catechumenate; they would be presented on subsequent Sundays during the Lenten season to receive exorcism and to have the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the opening verses of the four gospels read to them, even though they were incapable of comprehending what was said; and they would receive the full rite of initiation at Easter.13

Obviously, many infants were not healthy enough to wait until Easter each year to be baptised, and so in those cases a procedure similar to other places was adopted: the initiation rite was performed without delay, and frequently delegated to presbyters. But here, too, Rome constituted an exception to the rule. Rather than the complete rite being performed by a presbyter, as was the case elsewhere, the second post-baptismal anointing (which has no clear parallel in other parts of the world) was reserved exclusively to the bishop, as this extract from a letter written in 416 from Pope Innocent I to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio, shows:
Concerning the consignation of infants, it is clear that this should not be done by any but the bishop. For presbyters, although they are priests, have not attained the highest rank of the pontificate. The right of bishops alone to seal and deliver the Spirit the Paraclete is proved not only by the custom of the Church but also by that reading in the Acts of the Apostles which tells how Peter and John were directed to deliver the Holy Spirit to people who were already baptised. For it is permissible for presbyters, either in the absence of a bishop, or when they baptise in his presence, to anoint the baptised with chrism, but only with such as has been consecrated by the bishop; and even then they are not to sign the brow with that oil, for this is reserved to the bishops alone when they deliver the Spirit the Paraclete.  

Since churches in other parts of the world did not interpret Acts 8:14–17 to mean that only bishops could bestow the Holy Spirit on the newly baptised, it rather looks as though bishops in Rome were trying to find some justification for retaining the ancient custom of the bishop’s personal involvement in every act of Christian initiation, which had been abandoned by other churches in the case of emergency baptisms.

In the Roman situation, such a policy did not really mean the destruction of the unity of the baptismal rite. Presbyters would perform the rest of the rite, including the first communion of the newly baptised, and simply omit the second post-baptismal anointing; and then, provided that the child survived, he or she would be brought to a bishop as soon afterwards as possible in order to receive that missing element. Because dioceses in central Italy were small in area and travel between places relatively easy, the delay between the two parts would usually be very brief. It was only when the practice was extended in later centuries to other parts of the Western Church, as a result of the expansion of Roman influence, that it ceased to work nearly as well. For in northern Europe, dioceses were very large in size and travel often much more difficult, particularly in winter. As a result, the delay between baptism and what was now called ‘confirmation’ grew much longer, and the two came to be thought of as quite separate sacraments belonging to different points in a person’s life.
NOTES

1. De baptismo 18 (DBL, pp 8–9).
4. See above, pp 18–19.
5. See Augustine, Ep 98:7; Serm 294:12.
7. See J-Ch Didier, 'Une adaptation de la liturgie baptismale au baptême des enfants dans l'Église ancienne', *Mélanges de science religieuse* 22 (1965), pp 79–90.
9. Cyprian, Ep 64:5; Origen, Hom in Lev 8; Hom in Luc 14; Comm in Rom 5:9.
15. For more details of this development, see Fisher, *Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval West*, pp 120–140.

FOR FURTHER READING

Wright, D F. 'How controversial was the development of infant baptism in the early Church?' in James E Bradley & Richard A Muller (eds), *Church, word, and spirit: essays in honor of Geoffrey W Bromiley* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987), pp 45–63.
In this section we shall not follow the development of rites and their theology in the same chronological manner as we did in the case of Christian initiation, where we looked at different regional traditions and traced their gradual coming together. Instead we shall examine several strands of thought and practice that apparently existed alongside one another in nearly every early Christian tradition, and observe how those strands intertwined in the course of the first few centuries.
Tradtionaly, accounts of the origin of the eucharist in the New Testament have looked to the four descriptions of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples on the night before he died (Matthew 27:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). However, for a proper understanding of the roots of Christian eucharistic practice, the Last Supper needs to be set within a broader context, both of the overall tradition of religious meals within Judaism and of the accounts of other meals that Jesus shared with his disciples during his lifetime and after his resurrection.

There has also been considerable scholarly debate about whether or not the Last Supper was a Passover meal. While the three synoptic gospels state that it was, the Gospel of John places it on the day before the Passover, with Jesus’ death occurring on the day of the Passover. However, for our purposes, this question is not particularly crucial. For, even if the Last Supper were a Passover meal, no practices that were exclusive to that festive meal seem to have been retained in the
primitive Church's eucharistic celebrations, but only those that were common to all formal Jewish meals; and even if it were not a Passover meal, it still took place within a Passover atmosphere and context, and so it is not surprising to find images and ideas from that festival turning up in later Christian eucharistic theology.

Religious meals in Judaism

Sharing a meal together has always been one of the main ways in which human beings have expressed friendship and mutual acceptance. Consequently, sacred meals, expressive of the human relationship to the divine, form a part of the ritual practice of many religions. Among the different forms of cultic activities in which the ancient Israelites engaged, for example, were what are called communion-sacrifices. In other forms of Israelite sacrifice the animal or grain offering was handed over completely to God, but in this case part of what was offered was returned to those who had offered it, to be eaten by them. In effect, they shared a sacred meal with God as a sign of their acceptance by him through the sacrificial act.

The most important of these communion-sacrifices was the annual Passover celebration. Although in origin the Passover had been a nomadic spring ritual intended to secure fecundity for the flock, it had become for the Israelite people a remembrance of their deliverance by God from slavery in Egypt. Following the prescriptions in Exodus 12, on the day of the festival each family was supposed to take a lamb and offer it for sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem, and then consume it together in a ritual meal.

In later Judaism, however, sacred meals were not limited merely to practices connected with the Temple cult. Among the more pious, and particularly the Pharisees, every meal came to be thought of as a religious occasion, and included the blessing of God for the gift of the various things to be eaten or drunk. Such people were, moreover, very careful about not only what they ate (so as to observe the dietary laws prescribed in the Old Testament) but also with whom they shared a meal, since table-fellowship with those regarded as impure would compromise their own ritual purity. It was for this reason that Jesus' behaviour scandalised many of his contemporaries since, although
apparently claiming to be a pious Jew, he ate with the outcasts of society — tax-collectors and sinners (see for example Matthew 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32).

Furthermore, it was a regular part of Jewish eschatological imagery to portray the kingdom of God at the end of time in terms of a great banquet, at which all those who enjoyed God's favour would sit down together and feast in abundance. Jesus continued this tradition in his own teaching (see for example Matthew 8:11-12; and Luke 13:28-29), and it forms one of the strands in the accounts of the Last Supper: the three synoptic gospels all record in one form or another a saying of Jesus to the effect that 'I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mark 14:25; see also Matthew 26:29; Luke 22:15,18). Similarly, his feeding miracles and the other meals that he shared must also be viewed in this light, as symbolic anticipations of the future messianic banquet, so that those who eat with him now are assured that they will also feast with him in the age to come.

Thus, all the meals Jesus shared with his followers, and not merely the Last Supper, were seen by the early Christians as expressing not only human fellowship but also the divine acceptance of the participants in the present and the promise of their ultimate place in God's kingdom.

The ritual pattern

The accounts of the Last Supper, and also some of the references to meals elsewhere in the New Testament, reveal a pattern that adheres to the common custom followed at all Jewish formal meals. This pattern has been called by some scholars a 'sevenfold shape': at the beginning of the meal, the head of the household, acting on behalf of the gathering, (1) took bread into his hands, (2) said a short blessing, (3) broke the bread, and (4) shared it with all present; and at the end of the meal, he again (5) took a cup of wine into his hands, (6) said a longer form of blessing over it, and (7) shared it with all around the table.

This means, therefore, that the command, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:24, 25), was not intended to initiate some novel ritual practice that the early Christians would not otherwise have done, but was instead a direction that when they performed the
customary Jewish meal ritual, they were to do so in future with a new meaning — as a remembrance of Jesus. How 'remembrance' would have been understood in this context we shall pursue in the next chapter. Our primary concern here is to note that ritual meals like this were powerful expressions of the concept of the participants’ communion with one another and with God. Their presence at this meal was a sign of their reconciliation to God and their membership among the elect who would one day feast together in God’s kingdom, and the intimate fellowship with one another that they experienced around the table was a foretaste, an anticipation, of the union that they would enjoy forever with God. The whole meal event was thus both a prophetic symbol of the future and a means of entering into that future in the present.

The vision of the eucharist as fellowship was an important one to St Paul, and he likened the meal to a communion-sacrifice in order to explain the source of the participants’ unity with one another: ‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). This explains why he was then so angry about the behaviour of the Christians at Corinth. For at their eucharistic meals, individuals were apparently failing to share the food that they had brought, so that the poor remained hungry while others over-indulged. What was happening was thus the exact opposite of the intimate unity that the meal was supposed to express, so that Paul concludes that ‘it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat’ (1 Corinthians 11:20).

Justin Martyr

An account written by Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century provides the earliest complete outline of a eucharistic celebration.

And on the day called Sunday an assembly is held in one place of all who live in town or country, and the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as time allows. Then, when the reader has finished, the president in a discourse admonishes and exhorts (us) to imitate these good things. Then we all stand up
together and send up prayers; and as we said before, when we have finished praying, bread and wine and water are brought up, and the president likewise sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the people assent, saying the Amen; and the (elements over which) thanks have been given are distributed, and everyone partakes; and they are sent through the deacons to those who are not present. And the wealthy who so desire give what they wish, as each chooses; and what is collected is deposited with the president. He helps orphans and widows, and those who through sickness or any other cause are in need, and those in prison, and strangers sojourning among us; in a word, he takes care of all those who are in need.¹

Justin’s brief reference to the eucharist at the conclusion of the process of Christian initiation adds several further details to this account, the most important of which is that the participants greeted each other with a kiss after the common prayers and before the eucharistic action itself began.²

The above description reveals that a number of very significant developments have taken place since New Testament times. First, the meal has entirely disappeared from the celebration, and all that is left are the ritual actions surrounding the bread and wine. It is not clear exactly when this major change took place, and indeed it may have happened at different times in different Christian communities. Some local churches may have retained the eucharistic meal long after others had abandoned it. In some places at least, the meal survived for another century or two in separation from the eucharist itself, as a periodic agape or fellowship meal. Nor is it clear why the meal eventually disappeared from the eucharist everywhere. It may have been as a result of abuses such as those observed by St Paul in Corinth; it may have been because sporadic local bans by the Roman authorities on the meetings of all clubs (which were often centres of political intrigue) prevented Christians from gathering in the evenings; or it may even have been connected with the practical difficulties involved in enabling a large number of people to sit down for a meal together in small houses.

But disappear it did, and as that happened, a profound change was brought about in the Christian experience of eucharistic worship. First, as Justin’s account shows, the absence of the meal had a major
effect upon the ritual pattern itself. The ‘sevenfold shape’ found in the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper has been modified in a way that became standard in all later eucharistic rites: the presiding minister now says a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread and wine together, and then shares them with the assembled company. Presumably there seemed no point in retaining distinct actions for the bread and the wine when the two were no longer separated from one another by a meal.

Second, the eucharistic action proper is now preceded by a service of reading, preaching, and intercessory prayer. Scholars have usually understood this to have been a Christian version of the Jewish synagogue liturgy, which included similar elements. They believe that Christians would originally have celebrated this liturgy every Sunday morning, quite separately from the evening eucharistic meal, but when the meal was eventually abandoned, there would have seemed less point in assembling twice, particularly as the ritual surrounding the bread and wine was so brief, and so the two were combined into a single morning service. This theory may well be correct, and we do know from other sources that this later rite was usually celebrated in the morning everywhere. However, we also need to remember that Jewish festive meals could likewise include an informal ministry of the word, with readings, songs, and discourse, and that there are signs in the New Testament of eucharistic celebrations that already had elements of this sort attached to them. There is, for example, the account of the appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, where he interprets the scriptures to them before breaking bread with them (Luke 24:13–35), which is often seen as reflecting the regular pattern of eucharistic worship known to the author. There is the assembly at Troas, where Paul preaches at length and then breaks bread with the company (Acts 20:7–12). And there is also the mention in 1 Corinthians 14:26 of ‘a hymn, a reading, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation’ contributed to common worship by the participants, which may refer to the same occasion as the meal described earlier in 1 Corinthians 11. So the later practice may be as much an expansion and formalisation of this earlier tradition as a fusion of a synagogue-style liturgy with the remnants of the meal ritual.

But even more important than the change in the structure of the rite is the effect that this would have had on what it was that the Christians
experienced. There is a world of difference between enjoying fellowship around a table at an evening meal and rising early in the morning in order to engage in a hasty ritual act before setting out for work. Yet even so, something of the close sense of community which had been engendered by the meal fellowship still managed to survive in this new form of the eucharist. We may note, for instance, how Justin stresses that there is a single assembly ‘in one place of all who live in town or country’, and how the common prayers of the people are concluded with the exchange of a kiss on the lips — an unusually intimate action for those who were unrelated to one another. Justin similarly attaches importance to the assent of the people in the ‘Amen’ at the end of the eucharistic prayer, and to the inclusion of the absent members in the act of communion. Furthermore, an understanding of the connection between eucharistic communion and the sharing of material possessions with the needy, emphasised earlier by St Paul, is also still apparent in the depositing of monetary gifts with the ‘president’.

Unfortunately, however, as we shall see in the later chapters, while the notion of the eucharist as a communion meal continued to find a place in later liturgical texts, the disappearance of the actual meal from eucharistic practice tended to encourage the primary understanding of the rite to shift in a different direction.

NOTES

1 I Apol 67:3–7 (PEER, pp 29–30).
2 See above, p 14.
3 On the choice of Sunday as the Christian day of worship, see below, pp 75ff.

FOR FURTHER READING

7

ANAMNESIS AND EPICLESI: THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

Although the precise wording of the Jewish meal prayers over the bread and the cup had probably not yet become firmly fixed during the first century, there was a long established tradition of such prayers of blessing within Judaism, reaching back to Old Testament times. According to this tradition, it would not have been the bread or the wine that was the object of the blessing, but God. In Jewish prayers God was blessed or thanked for what he had done, in rescuing the people from slavery in Egypt, in giving them the promised land and the law to direct their lives, in bringing forth food from the earth and creating the fruit of the vine, and so on. Thus the prayers involved the remembrance (or in Greek, anamnesis) of God's mighty works.

In the Jewish world, remembrance was not understood as a purely mental activity. For example, when the penitent thief asked Jesus to 'remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Luke 23:42), he did not expect Jesus merely to think about him, but to act, to do something about his situation. Thus, the worshippers' recalling in prayer of what
God had done was not simply nostalgia for the past but led naturally to their petition that God in turn would remember his people, that is, that he would continue to act in the present and the future in similar ways. Because God’s nature was constant and unchanging, the one who had liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt would surely also free them from their present sufferings. Hence Jewish prayers of remembrance frequently led into a second half that involved invocation (in Greek, *epiclesis*), calling upon God to continue his saving work among them.

This helps us to comprehend what might have been meant by the saying ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (1 Corinthians 11:24, 25). Although scholars have often disputed whether it should be understood as ‘do this in order that you may remember me’ or as ‘do this in order that God may remember me’, the two ideas are really closely connected in Jewish thought and prayer. The disciples’ act of remembering Jesus in their eucharistic meals would inevitably have included calling upon God also to remember and to act. We would expect, therefore, that Christianised forms of the Jewish table-prayers would include some recalling of what God had done in Jesus Christ, and some petition for God to bring to completion his saving purposes.

The Didache

The New Testament itself does not contain any complete prayer texts of this kind, although there are perhaps hints of them here and there. However, the ancient church order known as the Didache has preserved some Christian meal prayers that do what we would expect - recall and request.

About the thanksgiving: give thanks thus:

First, about the cup:

We give thanks to you, our Father for the holy vine of your child David, which you have made known to us through your child Jesus; glory to you for evermore.

And about the broken bread:

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us through your child Jesus; glory to you for evermore.
As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains and when brought together became one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours are the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for evermore.

But let no one eat or drink of your thanksgiving but those who have been baptised in the name of the Lord. For about this also the Lord has said, 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs.'

And after you have had your fill, give thanks thus:

We give thanks to you, holy Father, for your holy Name which you have enshrined in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have made known to us through your child Jesus; glory to you for evermore.

You, Almighty Master, created all things for the sake of your Name and gave food and drink to mankind for their enjoyment, that they might give you thanks; but to us you have granted spiritual food and drink and eternal life through your child Jesus. Above all we give you thanks because you are mighty; glory to you for evermore. Amen.

Remember, Lord, your Church, to deliver it from all evil and to perfect it in your love, and bring it together from the four winds, now sanctified, into your kingdom which you have prepared for it; for yours are the power and the glory for evermore. Amen.

May grace come and this world pass away.

Hosanna to the God of David.

If any be holy, let him come; if any be not, let him repent.

Marana tha. Amen.¹

Although there is some dispute among scholars as to whether these prayer texts belong to a eucharist or an agape, or perhaps both, they have many similarities with what eventually became the standard Jewish table prayers, and so suggest the sort of thing that early Jewish Christians might well have used at their eucharistic meals. We should note in particular the themes of communion and eschatological fulfilment underlying the emphasis in the epiclesis parts of the prayers on the Church being gathered together and brought into the kingdom.
The Strasbourg papyrus

We lack any other prayers that we can with certainty date to the first few centuries. This is probably not because Christians lost or destroyed the texts, but because they never existed in written form. Those responsible for leading eucharistic worship were usually given freedom to improvise their prayers within the limits of the accepted conventions of their local tradition, and it was only in the fourth century that written texts became more common. However, there are a few texts from this later period that may well embody a pattern of prayer used in earlier times, even if they have undergone some later expansion or modification.

One of these, written on papyrus and now preserved in Strasbourg, comes originally from Egypt. Although it only exists in a fragmentary form, it seems to be an early (perhaps even third-century) version of what later became the standard eucharistic prayer of the Coptic church:

\[
\text{to bless [you]... [night] and day...} \\
\text{[you who made] heaven [and] all that is in [it, the earth and what is on earth,] seas and rivers and [all that is] in [them]; [you] who made man [according to your] own image and likeness. You made everything through your wisdom, the light [of?] your true Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; giving thanks through him to you with him and the Holy Spirit, we offer the reasonable sacrifice and this bloodless service, which all the nations offer you, 'from sunrise to sunset,' from south to north, [for] your 'name is great among all the nations, and in every place incense is offered to your holy name and a pure sacrifice.'}
\]

Over this sacrifice and offering we pray and beseech you, remember your holy and only Catholic Church, all your peoples and all your flocks. Provide the peace which is from heaven in all our hearts, and grant us also the peace of this life. The... of the land peaceful things towards us, and towards your [holy] name, the prefect of the province, the army, the princes, councils...

(about one-third of a page is lacking here, and what survives is in places too fragmentary to be restored.)
[for seedtime and] harvest... preserve, for the poor of [your] people, for all of us who call upon [your] name, for all who hope in you. Give rest to the souls of those who have fallen asleep; remember those of whom we make mention today, both those whose names we say [and] whose we do not say... [Remember] our orthodox fathers and bishops everywhere; and grant us to have a part and lot with the fair... of your holy prophets, apostles, and martyrs. Receive[?] [through] their entreaties [these prayers]; grant them through our Lord, through whom be glory to you to the ages of ages.  

While this text looks much less like the Jewish forms than the Didache prayers were, it still preserves the basic twofold structure of anamnesis and epiclesis. New features here are the introduction of a reference to sacrifice, and the extension of the petitionary part of the prayer into a full range of intercessions for all sorts of people rather than simply focusing upon the communion of the participants and their admission to the heavenly banquet. These two developments appear to be related to one another, and we shall say more about them in the next chapter.

The Apostolic Tradition

Neither of the texts we have looked at so far concentrates on the saving effects of the death of Christ or contains an explicit reference to the Last Supper, as we might have expected. Instead, the Strasbourg papyrus seems primarily concerned with the theme of creation, and the Didache prayers with the revelation brought by Jesus. However, this was not true of all early eucharistic prayers. The prayer in the Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus centres much more on the theme of redemption, and makes only a passing reference to creation. Although we do not know with any certainty its place and date of origin, this emphasis fits better with Christian thought in the West, which tended to have a less positive view of creation than in the East.

Then the deacons shall present the offering to him [the bishop]; and he laying his hands on it with all the presbytery, shall say, giving thanks:

The Lord be with you.
And all shall say:
And with your spirit.
Up with your hearts.
We have [them] with the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord.
It is fitting and right.
And then he shall continue thus:

We render thanks to you, O God, through your beloved child Jesus Christ, whom in these last times you sent to us as a saviour and redeemer and angel of your will; who is your inseparable Word, through whom you made all things, and in whom you were well pleased. You sent him from heaven into a virgin’s womb; and conceived in the womb, he was made flesh and was manifested as your Son, being born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin. Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people, he stretched out his hands when he should suffer, that he might release from suffering those who have believed in you.

And when he was betrayed to voluntary suffering that he might destroy death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread down hell, and shine upon the righteous, and fix a term, and manifest the resurrection, he took bread and gave thanks to you, saying, 'Take, eat; this is my body, which shall be broken for you.' Likewise also the cup, saying, 'This is my blood, which is shed for you; when you do this, you make my remembrance.'

Remembering, therefore, his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you. And we ask that you would send your Holy Spirit upon the offering of your holy Church; that, gathering her into one, you would grant to all who receive the holy things (to receive) for the fullness of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of faith in truth; that we may praise and glorify you through your child Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and honour to you, to the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit, in your holy Church, both now and to the ages of ages.³

All our other evidence indicates that the account of the Last Supper (or narrative of institution, as it is called by liturgical scholars) gradually began to appear in eucharistic prayers from about the middle of the fourth century onwards. Hence, it seems likely that at least that part of
the above text, together with the section immediately after it, 'Remembering ... cup', was added to the prayer around that period, especially as it seems to interrupt the series of thanksgivings for redemption and the calling of the people of God. Some scholars have argued that the petition for the sending of the Holy Spirit is also a later addition, because its language is more consistent with fourth-century thought (as also is the trinitarian ascription at the end). Once again, we will consider both these matters further in a subsequent chapter.

What is thus left as the older nucleus of the prayer has the familiar twofold structure of anamnesis and epiclesis. While the first part has a stronger Christological emphasis than we saw in the other prayers, the second part retains the primitive focus on petition for the fruits of communion.

Later developments

The late fourth century saw not only the gradual emergence in all eucharistic prayers of secondary elements of the sort that we can see in the prayer from the Apostolic Tradition and of extensive intercession similar to that in the Strasbourg papyrus, but also the widespread introduction of an expression of praise of the creator culminating in the angelic hymn, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts ... ', an adaptation of Isaiah 6:3 found in the Jewish synagogue liturgy. There are signs to suggest that this unit may have formed a part of some Egyptian eucharistic prayers from a much earlier date and spread from there to other regions of the world in the general process of assimilation and liturgical standardisation that is characteristic of orthodox Christianity after the Council of Nicea in 325. Because all these elements were not always inserted in exactly the same place in the various local prayer patterns, the process resulted in quite different structures of eucharistic prayer in the different regions of East and West, and these variations persisted in later centuries.

NOTES

1 Didache 9–10 (PEER, pp 23–24).
2 PEER, pp 53–54.
3 AT 4 (PEER, pp 34–35).
FOR FURTHER READING

Bouley, A. From freedom to formula: the evolution of the eucharistic prayer from oral improvisation to written texts (Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1981).

The notion of sacrifice as the normal means of human interaction with the divine was fundamental to all religions in the ancient world, and early Christianity was no exception to that rule. However, in the Christian tradition the material offering of animals was replaced by a more 'spiritualised' or 'bloodless' concept of sacrifice, which influenced early eucharistic worship in several different ways.

'Pure' sacrifice: the offering of life and of praise

The roots of this idea can already be seen within first-century Judaism. The writings of Philo of Alexandria, who was strongly influenced by Stoic and Platonic philosophy, reveal a vision of the only sacrifice worthy of God as being that of a pure mind and soul offering itself to God; and the sectarian Jewish community at Qumran similarly regarded the offering of a life of virtue and of words of divine praise, 'the fruit of the lips' (Hosea 14:2), as an acceptable temporary substitute...
for the Temple cult, from which they had separated themselves on the grounds that it had become corrupt.

Thus, in the New Testament we find, for example, St Paul exhorting his readers 'to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12:1). Similarly, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, while on the one hand insisting that Christ's own oblation of himself has put an end to the need for propitiatory sacrifice once and for all (Hebrews 10:10–18), can still call for Christians to offer to God both praise (citing Hosea) and a life of love for others: 'Through him [that is, Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God' (Hebrews 13:15–16).

It is not surprising, therefore, that in Christian writings of the second and third centuries all prayer, and not just the eucharist alone, was understood as constituting a sacrifice of praise offered to God. Nevertheless, it was inevitable that among all the acts of worship offered to God by Christians the eucharist should come to be viewed as the pre-eminent sacrifice of praise. Indeed, it was a standard part of their polemic against the Jews that Christians were the ones who truly fulfilled what they understood to be a prophecy in Malachi 1:11 ('from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering') because they offered the eucharist to praise and glorify God in every place, while the Jews had only offered their sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. An early example of this way of thinking occurs in the Didache, which instructs Christians to come together on Sunday, 'break bread, and give thanks, having first confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure'. Those who have quarrelled must also be reconciled to one another before joining in the celebration 'that your sacrifice may not be defiled'. Here the 'pure offering' is seen as requiring purity of life as well as words of praise and thanksgiving, a message that had been articulated by the Old Testament prophets and reiterated in the teaching of Jesus (see, for example, Mark 7:1–23).

It is this idea of the eucharist as the sacrifice of praise that we find articulated in the eucharistic prayer of the Strasbourg papyrus with its explicit quotation from Malachi, which we looked at in the previous
chapter,\textsuperscript{4} and it recurs in more subtly expressed forms in other liturgical texts.

Gift-sacrifice: the offering of bread and wine

The transition in the primary understanding of the eucharist from 'sacred meal' to 'holy food', which we shall examine more fully in the next chapter, also had an effect upon Christians' understanding of the sort of sacrifice they thought was offered in the eucharist. While the idea that it was the act of praise that they were offering to God persisted in both liturgical texts and theological writings in later times, there emerged alongside it the notion that the bread and wine constituted the Christian offering. We can see this concept already in Justin Martyr. While affirming that 'prayers and thanksgivings made by worthy men are the only sacrifices that are perfect and well-pleasing to God', at the same time Justin linked these with the offering of the 'bread of the thanksgiving and likewise the cup of the thanksgiving' as constituting the fulfilment of the material oblations of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{5} The fact that the worshippers themselves brought the bread and wine with them from their homes to be used in the eucharist (just as they had earlier contributed the food and drink for the full eucharistic meal) would obviously have further encouraged the idea that these elements formed the substance of the sacrifice.

This concept was given a unique twist by Irenaeus of Lyons in the late second century, who saw the eucharistic oblation of bread and wine as symbolic of the offering of the first-fruits of creation, which had been mandated in the Old Testament: 'The Lord gave directions to his disciples to offer first-fruits to God from God's own creatures, not as though God stood in need of them, but that they themselves may be neither unfruitful nor ungrateful.'\textsuperscript{6} It is clear that here the prime purpose of the offering is seen to be the spiritual benefit that the act brings to those who perform it.

The notion that the bread and wine were the material of the Christian oblation also found its way into liturgical texts. In the Apostolic Tradition, for example, they are described as 'the offering', and the eucharistic prayer explicitly states: 'we offer you the bread and the cup...',\textsuperscript{7} an expression that would often be copied in later liturgical texts.
Memorial-sacrifice: the remembrance of Christ’s self-offering

So far we have been considering themes that led to the understanding of the eucharist as being a sacrifice in its own right, as it were. Christians of course recognised that they had been constituted into a priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) and made worthy to offer sacrifice to God only through Jesus Christ, but the ways of thinking outlined above did not make any direct connection between the sacrificial nature of the eucharistic rite or its elements and the sacrificial character of Christ’s death.

Nevertheless, from the first the eucharist was understood as a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice. This is a fundamental strand in the New Testament tradition. Both Paul and the synoptic gospels associate the origin of the eucharist with the Last Supper, which they understand as a Passover meal with its inevitable sacrificial overtones, and although they differ as to the exact words of Jesus over the bread and cup, they all record them as pointing to a sacrificial interpretation of the act: ‘This is my body/my body which is for you . . ., “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many/new covenant in my blood . . .’ indeed, Paul goes on to identify the Christian rite explicitly as a memorial of Christ’s passion: ‘For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (1 Corinthians 11:26).

In the second century Justin Martyr made a connection between the oblation of the bread and the memorial of Christ’s passion: ‘The offering of fine flour . . . which was handed down to be offered by those who were cleansed from leprosy, was a type of the bread of the thanksgiving, which our Lord Jesus Christ handed down to us to do for the remembrance of the suffering which he suffered for those who are cleansed in their souls from all wickedness of men, so that we might give thanks to God . . .’ in the same way, the phrase about the offering of the bread and cup in the eucharistic prayer of the Apostolic Tradition quoted earlier in this chapter follows directly upon the narrative of the Last Supper and is linked with remembrance, here extended to include the resurrection as well: ‘Remembering, therefore, his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup . . .’

Once again, other eucharistic prayers would follow this lead. In all these instances, therefore, the idea of the remembrance of Christ’s
sacrificial death is being combined with the pre-existing notion of the eucharist itself as a sacrifice to create what we might perhaps describe as the concept of the rite as a memorial-sacrifice.

The writings of Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage, may possibly mark a further significant change in this idea:

For if Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, is himself the chief priest of God the Father, and has first offered himself a sacrifice to the Father, and has commanded this to be done in commemoration of himself, certainly that priest truly discharges the office of Christ, who imitates that which Christ did; and he then offers a true and full sacrifice in the Church to God the father, when he proceeds to offer it according to what he sees Christ himself to have offered.9

Some scholars would interpret Cyprian as saying that in the eucharist the priest (by whom he means the bishop) offers the same sacrifice that Christ offered on the cross, that is, that the bishop 'offers Christ'. While this is certainly the first place where the bishop is said to 'discharge the office of Christ', other scholars do not think that the image should be taken quite so literally, that it means no more than something like: 'just as Christ offered himself as a sacrifice, so too does the bishop offer the Church's sacrifice in memory of him'.

Whatever Cyprian may have meant, however, some later Christian writers unquestionably use language that does identify the Church's sacrificial act very closely indeed with the sacrifice of Christ. Thus, for example, Cyril of Jerusalem states, 'We offer Christ who has been slain for our sins';10 and Gregory Nazianzus says that 'you sacrifice the Master's body and blood with bloodless knife'.11 John Chrysostom, however, in one of his homilies struggled between this way of talking and the conviction that there was only one sacrifice of Christ, even though there were many celebrations of the eucharist:

Do we not offer every day? We offer indeed, but making a remembrance of his death, and this [remembrance] is one and not many. How is it one and not many? In as much as that [sacrifice] was once for all offered, [and] carried into the holy of holies. This is a figure of that [sacrifice] and this remembrance of that. For we always offer the same, not one sheep now and tomorrow another, but always the same thing, so that the sacrifice is one. And yet by this reasoning,
since the offering is made in many places, are there many Christs? But Christ is one everywhere, being complete here and complete there also, one body. As then while offered in many places, he is one body and not many bodies, so also [he is] one sacrifice. He is our high priest, who offered the sacrifice that cleanses us. That we offer now also, which was then offered, which cannot be exhausted. This is done is remembrance of what was then done. For (saith he) 'do this in remembrance of me.' It is not another sacrifice, as the high priest, but we offer always the same, or rather we perform a remembrance of a sacrifice.'12

Ancient liturgical texts themselves, on the other hand, were much more conservative in their language, and spoke rather in terms of celebrating the memorial of Christ's sacrifice. While a very close relationship was seen between Christ's sacrifice and the Church's offering, some distinction between the two was also maintained.

Propitiatory sacrifice

We saw earlier that a petitionary element seems to have been integral to the basic structure of the earliest eucharistic prayers, and that it appears to have focused on praying for the gathering together of the communicants into one body in readiness for the coming of God's kingdom. Once the theme of sacrifice had made its way into eucharistic prayers, it would have been natural for some connection to be made between the act of offering and these petitions. Christians would have been reminded of other kinds of Old Testament sacrifices in which offerings were made in the hope of propitiating God's justifiable anger against sinful human conduct and averting divine punishment, or with the intention of securing other benefits from God. Hence, it is not surprising to find that the scope of these petitions begins to be enlarged.

The ancient East Syrian prayer of Addai and Mari, for example, prays for 'remission of debts, forgiveness of sins' as well as for 'the great hope of resurrection from the dead, and new life in the kingdom of heaven, with all who have been pleasing in your sight'.13 The Strasbourg papyrus, as we saw in the previous chapter, included a very wide range of objects of intercession which it explicitly connected with the Church's offering:
'Over this sacrifice and offering we pray and beseech you, remember your holy and only Catholic Church, all your peoples and all your flocks...'

Similarly, in describing the pattern of eucharistic prayer with which he was familiar, Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century said:

Then, when the spiritual sacrifice — this worship without blood — has been completed, we beg God over the sacrifice of propitiation for general peace among the churches, for the right order of the world, for the kings, for soldiers and allies, for the sick and the afflicted, and in short we all make entreaty and offer this sacrifice for all who need help. Next we recall those who have gone to rest before us, and first of all the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs, so that God may listen to our appeal through their prayers and representations. After that, we pray on behalf of the holy fathers and bishops and in general for all amongst us already gone to their rest, for we believe that these souls will obtain the greatest help if we make our prayers for them while the holy and most awesome sacrifice is being offered.

This idea led both to greatly expanded intercession in eucharistic prayers everywhere and, in Western Christianity, to the emergence of special celebrations of the eucharist on weekdays with the intention of securing some particular benefit. One of the earliest forms of this was a celebration on the anniversary of a person's death so as to intercede for the repose of their soul.

NOTES

1 See below, pp 71–72.
2 See for example Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 41 (PEER, p 27).
3 Didache 14 (PEER, p 24).
4 See above, p 47.
5 Dialogue with Trypho 41:3; 117:2 (PEER, pp 27–28).
7 See above, pp 48–49.
8 Dialogue with Trypho 41:1; see also 117:3 (PEER, pp 27–28).
FOR FURTHER READING


Hanson, R. P. C. *Eucharistic offering in the Early Church* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1979).


There is another strand of thought present in the New Testament which would be strongly developed in later centuries, and that focuses not on the meal as event, but on the bread and wine themselves as spiritual food. We can perhaps even see this emerging in the difference between the remembered words of Jesus over the cup of wine in Paul and in Mark. Paul recalls the words as being 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Corinthians 11:25), suggesting a vision of the eucharist as effective action, the shared meal sealing a covenant between God and those partaking of it which had been made by the shedding of the blood of Jesus, just as in the Old Testament covenants were sealed in sacrificial blood. Mark's version, on the other hand, speaks more directly of the wine as 'This is my blood of the covenant' (14:24), which seems to imply that the presence of the Lord was attached more to the food than to the meal event. This way of thinking is even more clearly revealed in the 'I am the bread of life' discourse of John 6.

Alongside their continued understanding of the eucharist as a communal action, therefore, the writings of the second and third centu-
ries also develop this way of thinking. Thus, for example, one of the prayers in the Didache speaks of the gift of 'spiritual food and drink'; and Justin Martyr says:

*We call this food 'thanksgiving' ... For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but just as our Saviour Jesus Christ, being incarnate through the word of God, took flesh and blood for our salvation, so too we have been taught that the food over which thanks have been given by a word of prayer which is from him, the food from which our flesh and blood are fed by transformation, is both the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.*

Moreover, although we have suggested in an earlier chapter that the primary reason for the practice described by Justin of carrying some of the bread and wine to those unable to be present was to draw them into the celebration, yet the abstraction of the elements from the eucharistic action as a whole would inevitably encourage people to think of them as somehow special in themselves. This understanding can clearly be seen in the custom known to us from various sources from the third century onwards of people taking home a little of the bread from the eucharist (and perhaps the wine also, though difficulties in storing that safely made it less common) to consume at home on weekdays.

It is of course possible to think of this practice, too, like the communion of the absent, as being simply an extension of the Sunday celebration. Indeed, Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century says that the person receiving communion in this way must believe that he duly takes and receives it from the hand that first gave it. Nevertheless, the language used by the early Christians unquestionably reveals that special significance was seen in the elements themselves. Like Justin, for example, Irenaeus in the late second century says that 'the bread ... when it receives the invocation of God is no longer common bread, but the eucharist, consisting of two realities, the earthly and the heavenly ...'.

Sometimes Christians expressed the nature of the eucharistic elements by the use of words such as 'figure', 'sign', 'symbol', or 'type'. Cyril of Jerusalem, for instance, states that Christ's 'body has been bestowed on you in the form (typos) of bread, and his blood in the form (typos) of wine', and that communicants 'taste not bread and wine but the sign (antitypon) of Christ's body and blood'. Similarly, Ambrose of Milan testifies that the eucharistic prayer of his church spoke of the elements
as being 'the figure (figura) of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ'. On the other hand, they sometimes used strongly 'realistic' language, affirming that the bread and wine were truly the body and blood of Christ, as we saw above in the quotation from Justin. We should not make too much of these differences in language, however. In the ancient world a sign or symbol was not thought of as being something quite different from the reality which it represented, but on the contrary was understood as participating in some way in that reality itself. Moreover, the same writers who use 'symbolic' language also usually have no hesitation in using more 'realistic' language on occasion. Thus Cyril can state quite unequivocally: 'Do not, then, regard the bread and wine as nothing but bread and wine, for they are the body and blood of Christ as the master himself has proclaimed.'

Strangely enough, the use of 'realistic' language among Christians appears to be older than the more careful 'symbolic' language, and to have arisen in order to counteract heretical claims that Christ was not truly human and did not really suffer and die on the cross. Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century, for example, says that some 'abstain from eucharist and prayer because they do not acknowledge the eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father raised by his goodness'. Thus eucharistic realism arose out of Christological realism, and no contradiction was seen between saying that the bread and wine were the body and blood of Christ 'spiritually', 'symbolically', or 'really'. This whole development of eucharistic thought would also have been encouraged, of course, by the removal of the full meal from the eucharistic celebration, which would have caused more emphasis to fall on the bread and wine when they were no longer part of a larger whole.

Consecration

The identification of the bread and wine as in some sense the body and blood of Christ inevitably raised the theological question as to how these ordinary things became this holy food. Justin Martyr's answer to this question, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, appears to say that it was the result of thanks having been given over the food 'by a word of prayer which is from him'. However, the original Greek here is ambiguous, and so it would be equally possible to translate the phrase as 'by
a prayer of the word that is from him' or as 'by the prayer of the Word (Logos, ie Christ) who is from him', and what Justin means to say has been variously explained by scholars. Does the 'him' refer to God or to Christ? Is it saying that the actual form of words used comes from Christ or God, or that the prayer includes an invocation of the Logos on the bread and wine, or just that the prayer has its origin in God's word? The last seems the most likely, especially as there is a similar statement in 1 Timothy 4:4-5, that 'nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer'.

It was inevitable that the idea that the bread and wine were the body and blood of Christ would in time affect the language of the second half of eucharistic prayers, the part that we earlier termed the epiclesis. As we have seen, at first this petitionary element tended to focus on the communicants themselves. Eventually, however, petitions began to appear which requested God to act in relation to the bread and wine as well as, or in some cases instead of, the congregation. Sometimes God was asked to send the second person of the Trinity — the Logos — and sometimes it was the Holy Spirit who was called down. This was because Christians at first did not distinguish as sharply between the two as they did after the fourth-century trinitarian debates. They often thought of the Holy Spirit as being the spirit of the risen Christ, and so tended to use the two terms somewhat interchangeably.

Thus, in the eucharistic prayer attributed to Sarapion, the mid-fourth-century bishop of Thmuis in Egypt, God is asked: 'Let your holy Word come on this bread, O God of truth, that the bread may become body of the Word; and on this cup, that the cup may become blood of the Truth; and make all who partake...'. On the other hand, the petition in the eucharistic prayer of the Apostolic Tradition asks God to 'send your Holy Spirit upon the offering of your holy Church...'. While some scholars judge this to be a fourth-century addition to the text, others believe that 'the offering' here refers to the action, the eucharistic sacrifice of praise, rather than more narrowly to the elements alone. Whatever the truth of that particular case, it was only after the fourth-century debates that orthodox churches of the East began to attach great importance to the inclusion of an explicit epiclesis of the Holy Spirit on the eucharistic elements.
We can also see a gradual development in what the Spirit is expected to do in connection with the bread and wine. At first, imprecise verbs like 'bless' and 'sanctify' are found, as in the ancient East Syrian eucharistic prayer of Addai and Mari: 'May your Holy Spirit, Lord, come and rest on this offering of your servants, and bless and sanctify it...'. The fourth-century prayer of St Basil, however, adds the Greek verb anadeiknumi ('show forth'): 'And we, sinners and unworthy and wretched, pray you, our God, in adoration that in the good pleasure of your goodness your Holy Spirit may descend upon us and upon these gifts that have been set before you, and may sanctify them and show them forth as holy of holies'. Similarly, Theodore of Mopsuestia explains that the bishop entreats God 'that the Holy Spirit may come and that grace may descend from on high on to the bread and wine that have been offered, so showing us that the memorial of immortality is truly the body and blood of our Lord'. This reflects a shift towards what might be called an 'epiphany' understanding of consecration, in which the Spirit is invoked on the community and on the gifts in order that the presence of Christ may be revealed in them.

On the other hand, a number of other fourth-century sources use language about eucharistic consecration that suggests instead the idea of a change or conversion in the elements of bread and wine rather than a revealing of what was hidden. Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, implies that the eucharistic prayer known to him asked God to send the holy Spirit to 'make' the elements the body and blood of Christ, and we have already seen the verb 'become' used in this way in the eucharistic prayer of Sarapion. Even stronger language is found in the eucharistic prayer which is attributed to John Chrysostom, although first known to us from an eighth-century manuscript:

We pray and beseech and entreat you, send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts set forth; and make this bread the precious body of your Christ, changing it by your Holy Spirit, Amen; and that which is in this cup the precious blood of your Christ, changing it by your holy Spirit, Amen...

In the writings of Ambrose in the West in the fourth century we find similar language about a change in the eucharistic elements. In contrast to the Eastern sources, however, Ambrose understands this to be effected not by an invocation of the Holy Spirit which seems to have
been absent from eucharistic prayers in the West) but by the recitation of the words of Christ in the narrative of institution, which was already a part of the eucharistic prayer in Milan where he was bishop:

How can something which is bread be the body of Christ? Well, by what words is the consecration effected, and whose words are they? The words of the Lord Jesus. All that is said before are the words of the priest: praise is offered to God, the prayer is offered up, petitions are made for the people, for kings, for all others. But when the moment comes for bringing the most holy sacrament into being, the priest does not use his own words any longer: he uses the words of Christ. Therefore, it is Christ’s word that brings this sacrament into being.18

The belief that eucharistic consecration was effected by the recitation of the narrative of institution subsequently became universal in Western Christian doctrine, and distinguished it from Eastern Christian theology, which continued to attach consecratory significance to the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit.

NOTES

2 See above, p 46.
3 1 Apol. 66:1–2 (PEER, p 29).
4 See p 43.
5 Ep 93.
7 Mystagogical Catechesis 4:3; 5:20 (AIR, pp 85, 93).
8 De sacramentis 4.21 (AIR, p 136).
9 Mystagogical Catechesis 4:6 (AIR, p 85).
10 To the Smyrneans 7:1.
11 PEER, pp 77–78.
12 See above, p 49.
13 PEER, p 43.
14 PEER, p 71; but the translation ‘make them holy of holies’ has been amended here in order to make its true meaning clearer.
15 Baptismal Homily 5:12 (AIR, p 246).
16 Mystagogical Catechesis 5:7 (AIR, p 91).
FOR FURTHER READING


The second half of the fourth century witnessed a further change in eucharistic practice that was nearly as profound as the change brought about by the disappearance of the meal at the end of the New Testament period. This was the emergence of an attitude of great awe and fear directed towards the eucharistic elements, together with a decline in the frequency of the reception of communion.

The introduction of the numinous

When looking at the development of Christian initiation, we saw that a major change took place in the way in which the rituals were performed after the Peace of Constantine in the fourth century. The lack of a genuine conversion experience, or even of a full understanding of the significance of becoming a Christian, led to a strong dramatising of the baptismal ceremonies in order to produce a profound emotional effect upon the candidates. Something similar also occurred in connection with the eucharist. The members of the Church were no longer an elite
group of highly committed believers, but a much larger mass of nominal converts, many of whom lacked a deep understanding of the Christian faith and an awareness of the conduct that was appropriate at its liturgical assemblies. According to John Chrysostom, for example, they pushed and pulled one another in an unruly manner during the services; they gossiped with one another; young people engaged in various kinds of mischief; and pickpockets preyed upon the crowd.

In order to impress upon worshippers the solemnity of what was happening in the eucharistic rite and of the reverent behaviour appropriate for such an occasion, therefore, the style of eucharistic celebrations underwent a significant alteration. They became much more formal and elaborate; they used such things as ceremonial actions, vesture, processions, and music in order to make an impression upon the congregation; and in word and action they stressed the majesty and transcendence of God and the divinity of Christ present in the eucharistic mystery. This last development was probably also influenced in part by the need to combat the Arian heresy, which relegated Christ to a subordinate position, and its beginnings can be seen in the opening address of the eucharistic prayer of St Basil:

It is fitting and right, fitting and right, truly it is fitting and right, I AM, truly Lord God, existing before the ages, reigning until the ages; you dwell on high and regard what is low; you made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them. Father of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, through whom you made all things visible and invisible, you sit on the throne of your glory; you are adored by every holy power…

As we saw in the previous chapter, the prayer also goes on to describe the worshippers as 'sinners and unworthy and wretched'.

Later prayers would develop this sort of language much further still, but at this stage it was in preaching and teaching about the eucharist rather than in the liturgical texts themselves that the twin notes of the majesty of God and awe at Christ's presence in the sacrament were most strongly struck. This can be seen in Cyril of Jerusalem, in Theodore of Mopsuestia, and most strongly in John Chrysostom, who repeatedly speaks of the 'dreadful sacrifice', of the 'fearful moment' when the mysteries as accomplished, and of the 'terrible and awful table' that should only be approached with fear and trembling. Cyril of Jerusalem
also gives practical advice to the newly baptised on the reverent manner in which to receive communion:

So when you come forward, do not come with arm extended or fingers parted. Make your left hand a throne for your right, since your right hand is about to welcome a king. Cup your palm and receive in it Christ's body, saying in response Amen. Then carefully bless your eyes with a touch of the holy body, and consume it, being careful to drop not a particle of it. For to lose any of it is clearly like losing part of your own body... After partaking of Christ's body, go to the chalice of his blood. Do not stretch out your hands for it. Bow your head and say Amen to show your homage and reverence, and sanctify yourself by partaking also of Christ's blood. While your lips are still moist with his blood, touch it with your hands and bless your eyes, forehead, and other organs of sense.

We can see here that not only are the eucharistic elements to be treated with great reverence when they are consumed but they are also regarded as objects of power which can be used to confer blessing on a person's body and protect it against evil and sickness.

In short, the attitudes instilled in eucharistic worshippers at this time are well summed up in the Cherubic Hymn from the ancient Liturgy of St James, an English paraphrase of which by Gerard Moultrie is found in a number of modern hymnbooks:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
and with fear and trembling stand;  
ponder nothing earthly minded,  
for with blessing in his hand  
Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
our full homage to demand...

Non-communicating attendance

Fourth-century preachers were concerned not only about the conduct of Christians during the eucharistic rite itself but also about their whole way of life. They were disturbed that many worshippers seemed unaware of the high standards of ethical behaviour demanded by Christianity, and so they stressed the essential connection between liturgy
and life, warning the congregation against coming to communion while leading unworthy lives. John Chrysostom was particularly vigilant in this regard, frequently emphasising the sincerity and purity of soul necessary to approach the supper of the Lord: 'With this, approach at all times; without it, never!' He advised those who were guilty of sin to leave the service before the eucharistic action itself began. The aim of preaching such as this was not to discourage the reception of communion, but rather to encourage higher standards of Christian living.

Unfortunately, as so often happens, the results were exactly the opposite of the intentions of the preachers. Many people preferred to give up the reception of communion rather than amend their lives. Thus began the practice of non-communicating attendance at the eucharist. Contrary to Chrysostom's advice, they apparently stayed until the time for communion and then left the church. The ecclesiastical authorities were eventually forced to accept this practice, and they began to make provision in the rites at the time of the communion for a formal dismissal of non-communicants in order to encourage a more orderly departure.

This development had a significant effect upon people's understanding of the eucharist, since it severed the act of communion from the rest of the eucharistic action. It made it possible for people to think of the eucharist as complete and effective without the need for them to participate in the reception of the bread and wine, and thus prepared the way for the idea that liturgy was something that the clergy did on their behalf, which ultimately did not even require their presence. We can see the beginnings of this notion in John Chrysostom. His very assertion that there are some times when there is no difference at all between the roles of priest and people is a tacit admission that there are other times when there most definitely is a difference:

But there are occasions when there is no difference at all between the priest and those under him; for instance, when we are to partake of the awful mysteries

... And in the prayers also, one may observe the people contributing much

... Again, in the most awful mysteries themselves, the priest prays for the people and the people also pray for the priest; for the words 'with
The offering of thanksgiving again is common: for neither doth he give thanks alone, but also for all the people...

Eucharist as drama

For those who now began to receive communion only infrequently in the year and for the rest of the time attended without communicating, the eucharist not only ceased to be a communal action, but was not even viewed as food to be eaten. Instead, it became principally an object of devotion, to be gazed on from afar. It is not surprising, therefore, that ancient liturgical commentators began to interpret the rite in terms of a drama that unfolded before the eyes of the spectators.

We can see this happening in the preaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia. He envisages the whole eucharistic liturgy, from the presentation of the bread and wine to the reception of communion, as a ritual allegory re-enacting the events of Jesus’s passion, death, burial, and resurrection. This leads him to reinterpret various liturgical actions as representing elements and moments in that story. So, for example, the bringing up of the bread and wine is no longer seen as symbolising their offering by the people but as Christ being led to his passion; and the deacons spreading cloths on the altar ‘remind us of winding-sheets’. For Theodore, the climax of the rite is at the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit during the eucharistic prayer, since ‘this is moment appointed for Christ our Lord to rise from the dead and pour out his grace upon us all’. The bread and wine which have until now symbolised the dead body of Jesus become his risen body. Finally, the breaking of the bread that follows the prayer symbolises Christ’s sharing of himself in his various resurrection appearances so that everyone was able to come to him, just as the communicants are now able to do.

NOTES

1 PEER, p 70.
2 See above, p 62.
3 Mystagogical Catechesis 5:21–22 (AIR, pp 94–95).
4 Hom in Eph 3:4.
6 Baptismal Homily 4:25 (AIR, pp 227–228).
7 Baptismal Homily 5:11-12 (AIR, pp 245–246).
8 Baptismal Homily 5:17-18 (AIR, p 249).

FOR FURTHER READING

Mitchell, N. *Cult and controversy*, chapter 2.
Liturgical Time

In this final section we will look at the ways that the early Christians used the various cyclical patterns of time with which they were familiar — the day, the week, and the year — in order to give expression to different aspects of their beliefs.