

Know the History of Our Church Practice

Every Sunday, “Christians” gather the family together, go to a church, sing, pray, often participate in responsive readings, give an offering, listen to a sermon by the pastor and after an hour or so, go home, believing they have worshiped God in the Biblical way.

“Christian” psychologists counsel their patients to “find a good church” or “find a mentor in your church to hold you accountable” or “talk to your pastor.” Very rarely do they tell them. “Turn to God. Study your Bible and get down on your knees and pray and the LORD will lead you into truth. The LORD will be your Counselor directly.”

The implication is that God is unable to communicate with us directly, He always needs an intermediary. That’s exactly what the Israelites wanted at Mt. Sinai when God wanted to talk to them directly. They were afraid of God and did not want Him personally to talk to them. They pleaded for Moses to be their intermediary and God finally gave them their wish by setting up the whole sanctuary service with its priestly rituals. (Exodus, Chapters 25-30)

But when Jesus came to earth and died on the cross, the Temple curtain was ripped from top to bottom signifying that the ritual of human priestly mediation between God and man was OVER! From then on, we were to approach Jesus directly, one on one, without any human intermediary. In the Upper Room, God poured out His Spirit on those present to demonstrate his desire and ability to empower all who develop a close relationship with Him by Him coming to live within them.

By looking to the Lord Jesus within, we become changed. (2 Cor 3:18) By reading His Word, by being in constant communication with God and enjoying His love, by looking constantly at the life of the Lord Jesus in Scripture, by His power, we will become like Him and we will exhibit His Spirit and character.

Jesus said, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16)

“Let this mind be in you which is in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 2:5)

“I will put my Spirit in you.” (Ezekiel 36:27)

But instead of this, we “go to church.”

As startling as it may sound, most everything that is done in our modern churches has no basis in the Bible. As pastors roar from their pulpits about being ‘Biblical’ and following the ‘pure Word of God,’ their words betray them. Alarmingly, precious little that is observed today in modern Christianity demonstrates anything found in the first-century church.

Shockingly, most of what is done for ‘church’ was lifted directly out of pagan culture in the post-apostolic period. If you are a Christian in the institutional church who takes the New Testament seriously, what you are about to read will force you to have a crisis of conscience because you will be confronted by irresistible historical fact.

On the other hand, if you happen to be one of those rare breeds who gathers with other Christians outside of the organized churches, you will discover afresh that not only is Scripture on your side—but history stands with you as well.

The Order of Worship

Whether you are a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, Lutheran or even non-denominational, the Order of Worship, except for some minor superficial alterations, is pretty much the same:

- The Greeting
- Prayer or Scripture Reading
- The Song Service
- The Announcements
- The Offering
- The Sermon
- One or more of the following: altar call, more singing, the Lord's Supper, or another prayer
- Closing Announcements
- The Benediction

With some minor rearrangements, almost 350 million Christians around the world observe this liturgy week after week.

Where did the Protestant Order of Worship come from?

It has its basic roots in the Catholic Mass. (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Volume 3*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1910, p. 505). The Catholic Mass did not originate with the New Testament, but instead, grew out of ancient Judaism and paganism. (Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, p. 54)

Historian Will Durant points out that the Mass was deeply steeped in pagan magical thinking as well as Greek drama. (Will Durant, *The Age of Faith*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950, pp 521-524.)

“The Catholic Mass that developed out of the fourth through sixth centuries was essentially pagan. When Luther launched the Reformation in 1520, he railed against the Catholic Mass. To the medieval Catholic mind, the offering of the Eucharist was the re-sacrificing of Jesus Christ. As far back as Gregory the Great (540-604) the Catholic church taught that Jesus Christ is sacrificed anew through the Mass. . . More recently, Catholic theologians (for the past 70 years) have said that the Mass is a re-presentation of the one sacrifice rather than a new sacrifice as did the medieval Catholic Church.” (Ibid p 42)

The altar for the Mass and the Eucharist was the central focus of the Catholic service. But Luther gets the credit for making the sermon the climax of the Protestant service. Read his words:

“A Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God’s Word and prayer, no matter how briefly”. . . “The preaching and teaching of God’s Word is the most important part of Divine service.” (Concerning the Order of Public Worship, and “The German Mass” from Luther’s Works, LIII, pp. 11 and 68, respectively.)

The Christian church today agrees with Luther’s belief in the centrality of preaching, “yet it has no Biblical precedent whatsoever.” Luther’s liturgy varied little from the Catholic Mass, and in the end was nothing more than a truncated version of it. Under Luther’s influence, the Protestant pastor simply replaced the Catholic priest.

One further practice that the Reformers retained from the Mass was the practice of the clergy walking to their allotted seats at the beginning of the service while the people stood singing. This practice started in the fourth century when the bishops walked into their magnificent basilica churches. It was a practice copied straight from the pagan imperial court ceremony. When the Roman magistrates entered into the court room, the people would stand singing. This practice is still observed today in many Protestant churches. Yet no one ever questions it.”

The Sermon

Without a Sermon, most people feel like they didn’t “go to church”. The “Sermon” is the bedrock of the “service”. But the sermon actually detracts from the very purpose for which God designed the church gathering. Here is the explanation:

The modern Christian sermon has the following features:

- It is a regular occurrence – delivered from the pulpit at least once a week
- It is delivered by the same person – typically the “pastor”
- It is delivered to a passive audience; it is essentially a monologue
- It is a cultivated form of speech, possessing a specific structure. It typically contains an introduction, three to five points, and a conclusion.

Whereas the kind of preaching and teaching mentioned in the Bible contained the following characteristics:

- Active participation and interruptions by the audience were common
- They spoke extemporaneously and out of a present burden, rather than from a set script.
- Preaching and teaching in the early Church was sporadic, fluid, and open for audience participation.”

Where did the “sermon” come from?

The Christian sermon was borrowed straight from the pagan pool of Greek culture. In the fifth century B.C. a group of wandering teachers called sophists invented rhetoric (the art of persuasive speaking). *“They recruited disciples and demanded payment for delivering their orations. The sophists were expert debaters. They were masters at using emotional appeals, physical appearance, and clever language to ‘sell’ their arguments”.*

Subsequently, many pagan orators became Christians and pagan philosophical ideas unwittingly infiltrated into the Christian community. *“Thus the pagan notion of a trained professional speaker who delivers orations for a fee moved straight into the Christian bloodstream.”* As organization of the church increased, there came a gradual restriction of the liberty of addressing the community, to the official class. Eventually, only those who were trained were allowed to address the assembly and the clergy-laity distinction began widening at breakneck speed.

One scholar has said, *“The greatness of the orator took the place of the astounding event of Jesus Christ. And the dialogue between speaker and listener faded into a monologue.”* (Wayne E. Oates, Protestant Pastoral Counseling (Philadelphia: Westminster Press).

In a short: The Greco-Roman sermon replaced prophesying, open sharing, and Spirit-inspired teaching. As early as the third century, Christians called their sermons by the same name that Greek orators called their discourses. They called them homilies. Today, one can take a seminary course called homiletics to learn how to preach. The influence of Greek Ideas, p. 109 Yngve Brilioth, A Brief History of Preaching, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965).



Sermonizing harms the church because it is a one-way affair. The preacher is separated from the congregation by space and usually height. His pulpit is elevated above the passive people in the pews. No one can ask questions. It is inconvenient, out of place and considered a rude interruption. Instead of the congregation being actively involved, it sits passively and motionless, thus stagnating spiritual growth. In addition, the sermon makes the preacher the religious specialist and confirms the unbiblical role of the “clergy”.

How can a Christian passively sit in a pew and affirm the priesthood of all believers when he is passively sitting in a pew? How can a Protestant Christian claim sola Scriptura (‘by the Scripture only’) and still support the pulpit Sermon?

The Church Building

Nowhere in the Bible does God make provision for His followers to come together in a building built solely for worship “services”, to hear a “sermon” preached. The word “church” translated is *ecclesia* literally means the “called ones”. To the ears of a first-century Christian, calling a building an *ecclesia* (church) would be likening a person to a stone. Clement of Alexandria (150-215) is the first person to use the phrase ‘*go to church*’—which was a foreign thought to the first century believers. You cannot go to something you are!

Since Christ has risen, we believers have become the temple of God. *“When Christianity was born, it was the only religion on earth that had no sacred objects, no sacred persons, and no sacred spaces. Although surrounded by Jewish synagogues and pagan temples, the early Christians were the only religious people on earth that did not erect sacred buildings for their worship. The Christian faith was born in homes, out in courtyards, along roadsides, and in living rooms. In the first three centuries, the church had no buildings. . .”* Ante Pacem, p. 166. John A. T. Robinson (The New Reformation, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1965),

As one scholar put it, *“The Christianity that conquered the Roman Empire was essentially a home-centered movement. It was a conscious choice on their part.”* Robert Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), and (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Volume 2*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1910, p 62.)

Church buildings began with Constantine. In A.D. 312, Constantine became Caesar of the Western Empire. By 324, he became Emperor of the entire Roman Empire. Shortly afterward, he began ordering the construction of church buildings. He did so to promote the popularity and acceptance of Christianity. The thought was that if Christians had their own sacred buildings—as did the Jews and the pagans—their faith would be regarded as legitimate.

The church building brought significant changes to Christian worship. Because the Emperor was the number one ‘lay-person’ in the church, a simple ceremony was not sufficient. In order to honor him, the pomp and ritual of the imperial court was adopted into the Christian liturgy.



Fourth century Christianity was being profoundly shaped by Greek paganism and Roman Imperialism. The upshot of it all was that there was an immediate loss of intimacy and open participation. The professional clergy performed the acts of worship while the laity looked on as spectators.

The liturgy, the sermon, the hierarchical leadership structure, and the church building were all pagan customs absorbed into the Christian faith. Rather than being from the Old Testament, as they are often attributed, these practices came by way of the mysteries (the pagan cults) and were justified by (incorrect) references to the Old Testament. (Either would be inappropriate.)

Will you continue in what you know is not of God or will you stop and allow God to lead you by His word into His way for you?

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