

# The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering

Origin, Development and Content  
of the Christian Gathering in the  
First to Third Centuries

*by*

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## INTRODUCTION

The periodical gathering of the Christian Church has a long and complex history. This present study endeavours to give a reconstruction of the earliest stages of this history. As a social and religious phenomenon, the early Christian gathering did not arise in a cultural vacuum. The Graeco-Roman world was saturated with cults and religious groups, movements, traditions, all with their own meetings and ceremonies. This vibrant and variegated religious environment was the context in which the early Christian gathering took shape. Any attempt to trace the history of the early Christian meeting has to take this historical setting into account. The origins and early development of the Christian gathering should be seen within the context of the social and religious culture of the Graeco-Roman world, of which Christians and Jews formed part. In particular, since the central event of the Christian gathering during the formative period was a meal, the beginnings of the gathering should be considered in the context of the traditions held by various groups in the matter of communal dining.

As a rule, whenever early Christians met as a community, they shared a meal. In this, they did not differ from other groups and associations in the world surrounding them. Practically all clubs, associations and societies in the Graeco-Roman world held periodical gatherings in which a common meal or banquet formed a crucial, if not the main constituent. Such group meals tended to take place according to a traditional, more or less established pattern and conform to certain customs and rules which were virtually the same for all association meals.

In the Graeco-Roman world, the banquet, the formal evening meal, was an important social institution. Formal meals in the Mediterranean culture of the Hellenistic and Roman periods adopted a set, by and large fixed, form. The customs observed at meals could differ in details according to region and group, however, the evidence suggests that formal meals like group suppers and banquets strongly resembled each other in terms of their content and in the main were understood and interpreted in much the same way across a broad spectrum of Graeco-Roman society.

This study is an attempt to collect, arrange and interpret the scattered information concerning the Christian gathering during the first centuries of its existence and to use this information for a reconstruction of the history of that gathering in the period mentioned. Various Christian, Jewish and pagan sources that attempt to clarify the origin, development and content of the Christian gathering on Sunday and other days of the week, will be discussed. With few exceptions, the period from which non-Christian documents will be used will be limited to the first two and a half centuries CE. This is the period in which the Christian gathering developed from its first beginnings to an established practice. Furthermore, our source material will include Christian writings from the early fifties of the first century until Cyprian († 258 CE), who is the last major source of information on the Christian gathering before the Peace of the Church in the beginning of the fourth century.

The aim of this study is essentially twofold. First, its objective is to trace the origins of the early Christian gathering within the context of the Mediterranean culture during the first century CE. In particular, an examination will be made of the relationship between the early Christian gathering and the assemblies of various associations, including meals taken. Secondly, this study intends to investigate the content of the Christian gathering during the second and third centuries and to describe how it developed during this period.

## 1. A NEW APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN GATHERING

The origins of the Christian gathering have been the object of intensive research ever since the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Recently, research on this topic has still been intensified. Numerous monographs and scholarly articles that have appeared

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey of research on the Eucharist from the late 18th century to the 20th centuries, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Herrenmahl und hellenistischer Kult* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1982), 8–28, and for a discussion of research on the origins of the Eucharist in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, see Gerard Rouwhorst, “Christlicher Gottesdienst und der Gottesdienst Israels. Forschungsgeschichte, historische Interaktionen, Theologie,” in *Gottesdienst der Kirche. Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft*, Part 2, vol. 2, *Gottesdienst im Leben der Christen. Christliche und jüdische Liturgie*, eds. M. Klöckener, A.A. Häußling, R. Messner (Regensburg: Pustet, 2008), 493–572.

over the last two decades are evidence of a renewed interest in the problem of the origin of the Christian gathering. Scholars, both in the field of New Testament studies and liturgiology, are ceaselessly searching for more satisfactory answers to this ever-intriguing question.

During the past ten years, the study of the periodical gatherings of the early Christians has undergone a substantial shift. A predominantly literary approach gave way to a more sociological approach.<sup>2</sup> For a long time, research into the origins and early development of the Christian assembly had mainly been the literary-critical and traditio-historical study of texts concerning the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. Since the nineties of the twentieth century, research on the early Christian gathering enlarged its scope to take into consideration the form and dynamics of Hellenistic group suppers as well as the material culture relating to meals in antiquity.

The change began with the publication of *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft* by Matthias Klinghardt (1996)<sup>3</sup> and was continued in studies by Henk Jan de Jonge (2001, 2006, 2007)<sup>4</sup> and Dennis Smith (2003).<sup>5</sup> Several authors, who formerly used to pursue the study of the Eucharist as a mainly textual and literary discipline, such as Paul Bradshaw (2002, 2004)<sup>6</sup> and Gerard Rouwhorst (2006, 2007, 2008),<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This more sociological approach to early Christianity was initiated from about 1975 by such scholars as Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983) and Gerd Theissen, *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung* (München: Kaiser, 1977); *Studien zur Soziologie des Urchristentums* (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1979).

<sup>3</sup> M. Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft. Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> H.J. de Jonge, "The Early History of the Lord's Supper," in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition*, eds. J.W. van Henten and A. Houtepen (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), 209–237; *Zondag en sabbat. Over het ontstaan van de christelijke zondag* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2006); *Avondmaal en symposium. Oorsprong en eerste ontwikkeling van de vroegchristelijke samenkomst* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). In 2002, Dennis Smith and Matthias Klinghardt began an ongoing seminar within the Society of Biblical Literature to explore the Graeco-Roman meals as a pivotal factor in the formation of early Christian groups and their meal practices.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Eucharistic Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Gerard Rouwhorst, "In blijdschap en in een geest van eenvoud," *Eredienstvaardig* 5 (October 2006), 4–7; "The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?" in *Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship. New Insights into Its History and Interaction*, eds. Albert Gerhards and Clemens Leonhard (Leiden:



now gradually tend to accept, at least to a certain extent, a more sociological approach.

The essence of this new approach can be formulated as follows: the local early Christian community, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, functioned as a voluntary religious association just like many other associations in the Graeco-Roman world of the first century CE. There is firm evidence from the first two centuries CE to support this view.<sup>8</sup> The main activity of both the Graeco-Roman associations and Christian communities was a communal banquet that comprised a supper and a contiguous symposium. Numerous passages in works by Christian authors show that until the middle of the third century Christian communities, too, had a communal meal and convivial gathering on Sunday evening as their main assembly.<sup>9</sup> The origins of the Christian gathering should be studied, therefore, in the context of the banquet practices of religious associations in the Graeco-Roman world in general.

As a result of the new approach to the early Christian gathering, the question of the origins of the Christian assembly assumed a different orientation. For a long time it had been customary to trace back the origins of the Christian ceremony to a combination of Jewish customs: the synagogue meeting on the Sabbath and one or other of the various types of Jewish ritual meals. This policy was based on a view of the Mediterranean world in the Graeco-Roman period which divided that world into two rival or opposite cultures: Hellenistic and Jewish. Since the first Christians were of Jewish origin, the beginnings of the Christians' gathering and their group meal were readily traced back to certain Jewish customs and traditions. Since the view has gained

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Brill, 2007), 295–308; “Christlicher Gottesdienst und der Gottesdienst Israels. Forschungsgeschichte, historische Interaktionen, Theologie,” 493–572.

<sup>8</sup> In 55 CE, for instance, Paul compares the local Christian community meal with the pagan religious association meal in Corinth (1 Cor. 10:16–21). In 112 CE, Pliny in his correspondence with the Roman Emperor Trajan (Plin., *Ep.* 10.96) equates Christian communities with associations. In the second century CE, Lucian refers to the leaders of Christian communities as *thiasarchai*, that is, leaders of cult associations (Luc., *Peregr.* 11). About 200 CE, Tertullian compares the Christian community meal with the meal consumed by various pagan religious associations, such as the *collegia Saliorum* and the Dionysus and Sarapis cults (Tert., *Apol.* 39).

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 11:17–14:40; *Did.* 9–10; 14; Just., *1 Apol.* 67; Iren., *Haer.* 1.13; Clem. Al., *Str.* 6.113; Athenag., *Plea* 3; 31; Theophil., *Autol.* 3.4; *Acta Petri* 13; Min. Fel., *Oct.* 8.4; 9.6; 31.1, 5; Tert., *Apol.* 7; 39; *Nat.* 1.2; 1.7; *Trad. ap.* 25–29; Or., *C. Cels.* 1.1; 8.32; Cypr., *Ep.* 63.

ground that the Jewish and Christian groups themselves, in various degrees, were part of Hellenistic culture as a whole, the dichotomy between “Hellenistic” and “Jewish” has become increasingly untenable. This tendency could only be reinforced by the more sociological approach to the early Christian gathering, which directed its attention to social forms rather than to ritual texts and formulas. Accordingly, many scholars now question<sup>10</sup> or completely abandon<sup>11</sup> the method of trying to find the origins of Christian liturgical practices only in Jewish traditions.

Yet, whilst holding on to a questionable premise and a contestable view of Graeco-Roman culture, some scholars still try to find the roots of the Christian liturgical gathering in Jewish rituals, as well as, more recently, in the rituals of the Jewish temple.<sup>12</sup>

Other recent authors on the subject do reject the old approach but continue to insist that in a number of ways the Christian groups of the first century were quite different both from cult associations in the Graeco-Roman world and other kinds of voluntary associations, such as craft guilds. According to Wayne Meeks, for instance, Christians developed new social forms of their own. The Church combined features of a household, cult, club and philosophical school, without being altogether like any of them.<sup>13</sup> However, researchers now increasingly accept and further explore the view that the periodical gathering of the Hellenistic association is the model which best explains the Christian gathering. The main manifestation of virtually all religious voluntary associations was a periodical gathering that had a bipartite structure: a supper and a drinking party afterwards. This is the background

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Maxwell Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, eds. G. Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23–55, esp. 44–48.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Alistair Stewart-Sykes, “The Domestic Origin of the Liturgy of the Word,” *SP* 40 (2006), 115–120, esp. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Reinhold Messner, “Der Gottesdienst in der vornizänischen Kirche,” in *Die Geschichte des Christentums, Band 1. Die Zeit des Anfangs (bis 250)*, ed. Luce Pietri (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2003), 340–441, esp. 350–354; Ben Witherington, *Making a Meal of It* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007); Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2008), 1–44, 167–220; Alfons Fürst, *Die Liturgie der alten Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2008), 12–13.

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Meeks, “Social and Ecclesial Life of the Earliest Christians,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. I, *Origins to Constantine*, eds. Frances M. Young and Margaret M. Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 151–152.

against which, according to a growing number of researchers, the early Christian gathering must be considered.

As a refinement of the new direction in research on the beginnings of the Christian assembly, Paul Bradshaw has challenged the idea that the format of a supper followed by a drinking party was the *sole* model on which the Christian gathering was based. Bradshaw argues that meals in the Graeco-Roman world could also have another structure. He points to information about meals in the Qumran scrolls and the Mishnah as well as to the account of a meal of the Roman Emperor Tiberius recorded by Pliny the Elder. According to Bradshaw, this evidence shows that in the first century CE, the prevailing pattern (supper—symposium) occurred in different variants, for instance, one in which the wine was offered, or the blessing over the wine pronounced, before the meal.<sup>14</sup> However, Bradshaw's argumentation rather seems to confirm that banquets in the Graeco-Roman world were generally modeled on the bipartite format of a supper with a symposium. That this format occurred in practice with some variation is only to be expected and need not be denied.

The paradigm shift mentioned above demands a new inquiry into the origins of the Christian gathering. This investigation should take into account all available evidence that sheds light on how the earliest Christians conducted their communal meals as well as seeking to establish afresh which traditions Christians adopted to shape their gatherings.

Although the Christian gathering had a twofold structure, most attention in recent research has been given to the first part of the gathering, that is, the supper, otherwise known as the Eucharist. This is already clear from the titles and content of several recent publications: "The Early History of the Lord's Supper;" *From Symposium to Eucharist*; *Das Abendmahl*; *Eucharistic Origins*; *Paul and the Lord's Supper*.<sup>15</sup> Less attention, however, has been given to the second part of the Christian gathering, which corresponds to the *symposium* of the Graeco-Roman banquet. It is true that before the paradigm shift of the

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, 43–44.

<sup>15</sup> H.J. de Jonge, "The Early History of the Lord's Supper," 209–237; Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*; Jens Schröter, *Das Abendmahl. Frühchristliche Deutungen und Impulse für die Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2006); Paul Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*. These authors discuss only briefly the other elements of the Christian gathering that took place before or after the communal meal.

nineties in the twentieth century, much work was done on what was called “the service of the Word,” held in the morning.<sup>16</sup> Such “services of the Word” were supposed to have comprised reading, preaching and prayer but not a Eucharist.<sup>17</sup> The problem is that prior to the third century, there is no evidence for services where praying, reading and preaching took place without a Eucharist.<sup>18</sup>

Invariably, scholars who studied the origins of individual components within the Christian gatherings, such as reading, preaching and prayer, traced them back to certain activities that took place in the synagogue on the Sabbath.<sup>19</sup> However, on the Christian side these components were part and parcel of the same gathering to which the eating and singing belonged as well. From the discussion of Christian meetings for worship in Paul (1 Cor. 11–14), Justin Martyr (*1 Apol.* 67) and Tertullian (*Apol.* 39), it is clear that praying, reading and preaching were parts of one and the same “package,” that is, the gathering consisting of both *deipnon* and *symposion*. If all components mentioned (eating, singing, reading, preaching and prayer) are seen to be all integrant parts of one ritual event, it becomes very difficult to see the synagogue on the Sabbath as the cradle of the Christian Sunday evening service. The origins of the various components of the non-eucharistic part found in the Christian gathering, such as reading, preaching, singing and praying, clearly deserve to be studied anew.

Studying the early Christian gathering in the wider context of banqueting practices in the Graeco-Roman world, seems to recommend itself for several reasons. Firstly, it draws on the broadest possible variety of relevant Hellenistic sources: pagan, Jewish and Christian. Secondly, it may shed light on the form as well as the social dimensions of

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Jörg Salzmänn, *Lehren und Ermahnen: Zur Geschichte des christlichen Wortgottesdienstes in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1994).

<sup>17</sup> This view is advocated by a recent author. See, e.g., Alfons Fürst, *Die Liturgie der alten Kirche*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> G. Rouwhorst, “The Reading of Scripture in Early Christian Liturgy,” in *What Athens has to do with Jerusalem. Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honour of Gideon Foerster*, ed. Leonard Rutgers (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 324.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church. A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Hughes Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 1, The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998); G. Rouwhorst, “The Reading of Scripture in Early Christian Liturgy,” 305–331.

the early Christian meals, often neglected by earlier scholars; in their search for Jewish antecedents, they concentrated one-sidedly on the prayer texts and theological interpretations accompanying the meals. Thirdly, it makes one aware of the extent to which the Christians' meetings and meals resembled those of other groups in the world surrounding them. Finally, the study of Graeco-Roman community meals may provide useful information about customs observed at the eucharistic meal as well as those observed during the gathering that took place after the meal.

The approach advocated here remains attentive to possible specifically Jewish traditions that early Christians may have adopted in giving shape to their gatherings and meals. It cannot be denied, for instance, that the weekly cycle of the early Christian gathering is in some way connected with that of the observance of the Sabbath. Nor can one ignore the close affinity of certain early Christian prayers with Jewish meal *berakhot*: the prominence of thanksgivings and blessings at Christian eucharistic meals can hardly be explained satisfactorily without taking into account prayer traditions transmitted at ceremonial Jewish meals.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, one should have an eye for the innovation that traditions underwent once Christians adopted and used them. From the earliest moment the followers of Jesus developed their own understanding and interpretation of their ritual practices, which served to shape and reinforce the movement's identity, life and belief and to help distinguish it from other groups.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the Christian gathering had its specific Christian features. The food and drink consumed at Christian suppers, for example, were often said to represent Christ, whereas taking the meal was sometimes regarded as a rite accomplished in remembrance of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> The Christian character of the meal also led to its being designated by typically Christian appellations, such as "the Lord's Supper." Since the meal was used as an occasion for thanksgiving to God, it was, from the beginning of the second century onwards, commonly called the thanksgiving, *eucharistia*, or Eucharist.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> G. Rouwhorst, "The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?", 302.

<sup>21</sup> Meeks, "Social and Ecclesial Life of the Earliest Christians," 160; G. Rouwhorst, "The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?", 305.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Cor. 11:24–25.

<sup>23</sup> Ign., *Eph.* 13.1; *Did.* 9.1, 5; Just., *1 Apol.* 66.1.

The participants experienced the meal as a gathering of the new family of the children of God. In their view, it expressed their community and unity “in Christ.” Looked at sociologically, it helped to mark the boundaries between them as Christians and the outside world.

In summary, in studying the origins and early history of the Christian gathering, it is necessary to take into account the banquet traditions of the Hellenistic world at large as well as being aware of the contribution made by the Jewish and Christian communities as their specific traditions developed.

## 2. A BRIEF SURVEY OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The history of the Christian gathering has aroused the interest of scholars throughout the twentieth century. Scholars who tried to describe what early Christians did in their meetings during the first three centuries, usually took their subject matter either as a history of the “Christian liturgy” or as a history of early “Christian worship.” It looks as if Catholic authors tended to conceive the history of the Christian gathering as a history of the “liturgy” because for them the later Roman-Catholic liturgy was the continuation of the Church’s rites during the first three centuries.<sup>24</sup> They instinctively looked for a pre-history of the Mass and thus found in the first centuries much that resembled their modern practice. Protestant authors, on the other hand, understood their task of describing the early Christian gathering rather as the history of early Christian “worship” or “Gottesdienst.” This clearly reflects the emphasis in their own churches that was put on the elements representing the Word, namely the reading of Scripture and preaching, rather than on the eucharistic meal.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925); G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1945); J.A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959); G.G. Willis, *A History of Early Roman Liturgy to the Death of Pope Gregory the Great* (London: Boydell Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> O. Cullmann, *Urchristentum und Gottesdienst* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1950); G. Delling, *Der Gottesdienst im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952); F. Hahn, *Der urchristliche Gottesdienst* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1970); Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); A. Cabaniss, *Pattern in Early Christian Worship* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1989); L. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Carlisle: Pater Noster Press, 1999).

Scholars from both these groups, either independently or as a result of common presuppositions, used to conclude that the early Christian forms of liturgy or worship, consisting of the reading of Scripture, sermon, prayer and Eucharist, arose as a blend of the synagogue's alleged "liturgy of the Word" with Jewish meal traditions. It was generally assumed that early Christians adopted and merged these Jewish practices because they were Jews themselves: they would have known no form of religious meeting other than the one taking place in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Gregory Dix, in his magisterial work *The Shape of the Liturgy*, forcefully argued that the meeting of Christians was a combination of two separate assemblies: the *synaxis* and the Eucharist. In Dix' view, the *synaxis* was in its shape just a continuation of the Jewish synagogue service of Jesus' days; the Jewish nucleus of the earliest Christian Church would have carried it straight over into the Church in the first decade after Jesus' death. The Eucharist would be a purely Christian creation, rooted in one of the Jewish types of meal: the Passover meal, religious household meals, or meals held by Jewish religious brotherhoods.<sup>26</sup> Dix preferred to explain the early Christian meal as having evolved out of the Jewish celebration of Passover and did so by tracing the Christian meal back to Jesus' Last Supper, a Passover meal, as recorded in Paul and the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>27</sup> A variant of this view derived the Eucharist from Jesus' Easter meals with his disciples.<sup>28</sup> The reason why Dix and some other scholars explained the origin of the Christian liturgical gathering as a combination of the synagogal "service of the Word" and a tradition that sprang from Jesus' Last Supper is that, according to the mid-second century data preserved in Justin's *1 Apologia*, the reading out of texts, the sermon and prayers all preceded the eucharistic celebration. The confluence of the two traditions would have resulted in what early Christians called the Lord's Supper or Eucharist.

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<sup>26</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> See Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 107–108. The view that the Eucharistic gathering of Christians had its origin in the Jewish Passover meal held by Jesus during his Last Supper had already been eloquently rejected by H. Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper* (originally Bonn: Marcus and Weber, 1926; English version Leiden: Brill, 1979), 172–174.

<sup>28</sup> O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 15; W. Rordorf, *Der Sonntag. Geschichte des Ruhe- und Gottesdienstes im ältesten Christentum* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962), 228–231.

However, after Dix it became axiomatic to trace the origins of every aspect of early Christian liturgical practice back to Jewish antecedents.<sup>29</sup> Later on, other scholars tried to prove that the worship of the early Church was influenced to a considerable extent by the pattern of Jewish worship as practised not only in the synagogue service, but also in the cult of the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>30</sup>

Some authors have tried to discover continuity with Jewish rites in almost every element of the early Christian gathering. Others have minimised the connection between Church and Synagogue, often seemingly on the basis of the dogmatic conviction that for the Christian faith to become a religion on its own, it had to either radically change or reject the religious traditions from which it stemmed.<sup>31</sup> Without exception, these scholarly positions continued to sustain the common view that the liturgical gathering of the early Church evolved organically out of Jewish rites.

A remarkable feature of the study of the Christian gathering during the twentieth century was that scholars investigated the origins of the meal, or the Eucharist, separately from those of the other components of the Christian gathering. At the same time, much more attention was given to the eucharistic meal than to the other activities that took place in the gathering. The major study was H. Lietzmann's *Messe und Herrenmahl*.<sup>32</sup> He came to the conclusion that the Lord's Supper had its origin in a festive Jewish *chabura* meal,<sup>33</sup> that is, the meal of a group of friends coming together for religious purposes. Lietzmann also tried to reconstruct the evolution of the eucharistic communion service, arguing that the Eucharist was the result of the fusion of two distinct types of early Christian meals: the eschatological fellowship meal of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem and the Pauline type of Eucharist celebrated in commemoration of Jesus' death.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 18–27.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Lietzmann, *Messe und Herrenmahl: eine Studie zur Geschichte der Liturgie* (Bonn: Marcus und Weber, 1926). English translation *Mass and Lord's Supper* (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> H. Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper*, 185. For a critique of this view, see J. Jeremias, *Die Abendmahls Worte Jesu*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 23–25.

<sup>34</sup> H. Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper*, 209–215.



Another feature of the quest for the origins of the Eucharist was the researchers' one-sided preoccupation with liturgical texts. They often tried to show that the Christian eucharistic prayer derived from the Jewish prayer of grace offered after meals. These attempts were affected by the assumptions that in the first century CE the text of the *birkat ha-mazon* was more or less fixed and that it was in general use: both of these were unwarranted suppositions.<sup>35</sup>

Twentieth-century research into the early history of the Eucharist generally came to the conclusion, albeit presented in several variations, that the early Eucharist followed the pattern of the Last Supper with the blessing of the bread preceding that of the wine, the institution narrative recited during the eucharistic prayer, and the ritual as a whole primarily commemorating the death of the Lord.

As to the research into the so-called "service of the Word," several scholars tended to suppose that, from the beginning of the Church, besides their communal supper (the Eucharist), Christians held a separate gathering, without a Eucharist, for the purpose of reading, preaching and other oral activities.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, authors who investigated the genesis and development of individual elements of the Christian gathering, such as preaching, singing, prayer and the ordination of officers, invariably tried to trace the origin of these liturgical elements back to traditions supposedly practised in the synagogue.<sup>37</sup>

The view that each and every element of the early Christian gathering could be derived from the synagogue service on the Sabbath began to lose ground during the last decade of the twentieth century. The change that was taking place is illustrated by a telling statement made by Harry Gamble in 1995: "It is easily assumed that the early Church simply transported synagogue practice into its own context, but this cannot be taken for granted."<sup>38</sup> Some of the factors that contributed to this change have already been mentioned above, such as a more

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 139.

<sup>36</sup> Walter Bauer, *Der Wortgottesdienst der ältesten Christen* (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1930).

<sup>37</sup> E. Lohse, *Die Ordination im Spätjudentum und im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951), 29–35; C.H. Kraeling, "Music in the Bible," in *New Oxford History of Music, vol. 1, Ancient and Oriental Music*, ed. E. Wellesz (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 303; Cheslyn Jones *et al.* (eds.), *The Study of Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1992), 68–79, 339–347; O.C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>38</sup> Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 211.

sociological approach to early Christianity and a better understanding of the nature of Graeco-Roman culture. Another factor was the ongoing research into Judaism practised during the Graeco-Roman period which revealed that very little is known about worship in the synagogue before 70 CE.<sup>39</sup> As a result, attempts to find the roots of the components of the Christian gathering in traditions of the synagogue lost cogency.

The older approach to the study of the Christian gathering also shows three other weaknesses. First, it was often assumed too readily that liturgical customs found in later centuries had been in continuous existence from the first century onwards.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, historians of early Christian worship often attempted to harmonize disparate pieces of evidence to form a single and homogeneous, composite picture of the history of the liturgy.<sup>41</sup> Thirdly, research was often based on a limited selection of sources: sources that did not fit the authors' conclusions were easily dismissed as heterodox or marginal.<sup>42</sup>

A new model for researching the origins and development of the early Christian gathering was advocated by M. Klinghardt (1995), H.J. de Jonge (2001) and D. Smith (2003). They argued that the periodical suppers of the early Christian communities, in shape, function and symbolic significance, fitted in with, and were part of, the common banquet culture in the Graeco-Roman world. Early Christian groups adopted the generally current banquet tradition and adapted it to suit their own needs and purposes. Although the new model takes the periodical association banquet as its reference point, it allows for the great variety of data reflecting the different ways in which early Christians practised their communal meals. Only after a long process of standardization, which did not come to a close before the fourth or fifth centuries, were these different practices reduced to a limited number of "orthodox" liturgies.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Heather McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue. The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> *Ib.*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> This has rightly been observed by G. Rouwhorst, "The Roots of the Early Christian Eucharist: Jewish Blessings or Hellenistic Symposia?", 298, 300.

<sup>43</sup> Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 5. Smith's *From Symposium to Eucharist* of 2003 was preceded by his "Social Obligation in the Context of Communal Meals: A Study of the Christian Meal in 1 Corinthians in Comparison with Graeco-Roman Meals" (PhD diss. Harvard University, 1980; not seen).

Andrew McGowan's study of early Christian eucharistic meals in which only bread and water but no wine was consumed led him to propose a model of their origins which differs from that developed by Klinghardt, De Jonge and Smith. Ultimately, Smith traces back the history of the Christian assembly to one single, very early tradition of Christians coming together, holding a community supper and staying together for further exchange of thoughts and feelings. According to McGowan, however, the history of the Eucharist cannot be traced back to either one single or two "sources." He believes that there existed a broad range of different meal practices in Graeco-Roman culture; this would make it necessary for historians of the Eucharist to pay attention to the specifics of each particular early Christian meal in order to determine which type of meal in the surrounding culture it belonged to. McGowan wishes to distinguish between the various types of Christian gatherings that, in different ways, followed the common pattern of Graeco-Roman meals. According to McGowan, one should beware of downplaying the relevance of specific features of these Christian rituals in the interest of fitting these rituals into the taxonomy of meals in Graeco-Roman culture in general. It remains necessary to pay close attention to formal aspects of each Christian gathering mentioned in the literary sources, not only in terms of its shape and order, the times when, and the places where, they took place, but also the officials who presided over them, as well as components such as reading out of texts, preaching, singing and other ritual actions.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. THE PRESENT STUDY

The following chapters will investigate the origins and development of the Christian gathering until the middle of the third century. This study aims to look afresh at the evidence and seeks to understand both the Christian gatherings as a whole and their constitutive elements in light of the dining practices in the Graeco-Roman world at large.

The first chapter will highlight the essential similarities and dissimilarities between the early Christian gathering and the gatherings of other religious associations in the Graeco-Roman world, especially with regard to dining customs. This chapter will also discuss the ques-

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 250.

tion why the Sunday became the day for Christian gatherings. Furthermore, it will examine the evidence concerning the physical spaces in which these gatherings took place, their content, the order in which the various components took place and the question who presided over the Christian gatherings.

The second chapter will deal with the question why early Christians introduced a gathering in the morning alongside the regular gathering on the Sunday evening; there will also be an investigation into how the morning gathering developed.

In chapters three to six, this study will investigate the genesis and development of the major components of the Christian gathering, among them the meal proper or Eucharist, the reading of Scripture, preaching, singing and prayer. Finally, chapter seven will briefly explore the origin and function of some other ritual actions that could occur within the framework of the Christian meetings. These actions include the holy kiss, the ordination of office holders, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, liturgical acclamations, collections and giving of alms, foot washing, exorcisms and healings.