

Unit 7 Assignment

The Origins of Christian Worship



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April 2003

Assignment Unit 7

The Origins of Christian Worship

Considering Sacrifice and Festivals:



1 Explain their form and purpose in Old Testament worship.

Sacrificial worship of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament has many instances of worship and many which include some form of sacrifice. Though there are many differing details there are three main types of sacrifice:

The burnt Offering

In this sacrifice the whole of the offering was consumed. These were offered twice daily, morning and evening, and by all people. It was important that it was the best of the flock or herd and that all was given to God. There were special regulations for how it was chosen and prepared and handed to the priests for burning. They could also be accompanied by other offerings of cereals, drinks, tithes and first fruits.

The sacrifice symbolised the offerer's total devotion of himself to God and signified all that God meant to him. Every burnt offering contained an acknowledgment of general guilt, and a typical expiation of it.

The Sin Offering

This differed from the burnt-offering in that it always had respect to particular offences against the law either moral through ignorance, or criminal. No part of it returned to him who had given it, but the sacrificing priest had a share of it.

This offering was a means of reconciliation back into the worshipping community after a crime or sin had been committed.

The peace offering

These were offered in the fulfilment of vows, to return thanks to God for benefits, (thank-offerings,) or to satisfy private devotion, (freewill-offerings.) The Israelites accordingly offered these when they chose, no law obliging them to it, and they were free to choose among such animals as were allowed in sacrifice, The law only required that the victim should be without blemish.

This type of sacrifice often took the form of a fellowship meal where all the worshippers would share the meal.

There is the assumption that sacrifice is a God given means of worship and a response from people to God. It demonstrates obedience and a willingness to maintain proper conduct towards God and between people. To offer sacrifice to God in worship allows people to express thanks and fear (in awe) and in all cases the sacrifice should be costly to the giver.

The physical act, however, is not as important as the attitude in which it is carried out. As Spurgeon once said “Sincerity is the salt of the sacrifice. Without it the offering can never be acceptable to God.

Festivals of the Old Testament.

The people of Old Testament times celebrated several festivals and for general daily life reasons as well as for specific historical events. They were used as a communal method of remembering the relationship they have with God.

Sabbath

The seventh day belongs to God for rest as God rested after the creation so a tithe of time is given in obedience and joy.

Passover

This recalls God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. It is a family festival celebrated at home. The story of Moses is retold so all can appreciate God’s faithful rescue of His people. The Passover lamb is sacrificed to declare God’s continuing redemption.

Unleavened bread

This festival represents the start of the barley harvest, a thanksgiving and a prayer for a bountiful crop. It is also tied to the Passover festival as part of the exodus desert story.

Weeks

Seven weeks after the unleavened bread festival this celebrates and commences the wheat harvest.

Tabernacles

For a people reliant on farming for their livelihoods all knew the importance of the changing seasons. For the seven days of the grape harvest everyone would sleep outdoors in tents, booths or tabernacles and this festival began these events.

Day of Atonement

Called Yom Kippur this special day was developed after the exile. It is the day the high priest enters the Holy of Holies in the temple. On this day God’s holiness is fully recognised as is the sins of the Israeli nation. On this day the nation’s sins are atoned for, forgiven, and there is reconciliation between man and God.

These festivals were an important means to remember God, what He had done in the past and the fact that He was there in their present

2 Show how they are developed in the New Testament.

Sacrificial worship in the New Testament

In the early Christian church many followers were Jews and consequently continued the tradition of Jewish worship. This would take place both in the temple and at followers homes.

The pattern of early church worship was made of two distinct elements; the Synaxis and the Eucharist. The Synaxis consisting of prayers of approach, scripture readings, a teaching sermon, a benediction before the non-baptised could leave, intercessory prayers, and an expression of peace. The Eucharist, developed from Old Testament sacrifice in worship, consists of; the offertory, the thanksgiving, the breaking or fraction and the sharing of communion.

Although much of the ritual was removed the heart and the attitude of sacrifice remained. Eucharistic worship puts the glory of God as the central focus, the basis of Christian belief is foremost; the death of Christ, the resurrection and the real presence of a living God. Worship was offered with an attitude of thanksgiving by all involved. The eating of a meal is also central, either symbolically as with communion, or in fellowship with other Christians as with Agape.

In the very early church the offering of money was done on a need basis where those Christians with resources would present it to the disciples for redistribution as necessary. The Jewish custom of tithing was an easier system of enabling the church to care for it's upkeep and provide for the poor. The major difference here was that whatever form of sacrifice was done as love offering to God rather than an obligatory act. No longer was the key to redemption linked to offering and sacrifice enough had been done in the crucifixion of Jesus to atone for all sin forever.

Festivals of the New Testament.

Because feasts were often associated with pagan practice the Christian calendar of festivals wasn't in evidence at all until about the fourth century. The first and no doubt most important was Easter though there was much discussion about how it was prepared for and when in the year it should be celebrated.

Eventually The Christian calendar, as the Jewish, became a systematic way that God's people remember various important events and covenants. Many celebrated the events from the gospel of Jesus Christ while being rooted in Old Testament prophesy and connected with Jewish Festivals.

In much of the pagan world during New Testament times the sun was the focus of devotions. The shortest day of the year being pertinent as it would herald in the promise of new light and life. As it had been a public holiday since AD274 it seemed an obvious choice for another new light and life in the birth of Jesus. The only controversy was a difference in calendars which put winter solstice on December 25th in the west and on January 6th in the east. Rome eventually won the argument for the west and Christmas day was celebrated in December world wide from then on while Epiphany is moved to 6th January.

3 Assess their influence on Christian worship today.

Sacrificial worship today

Our Christian worship today would not appear wholly different for people of the Old Testament times, many items have altered in format and style and language though the elements are still very similar. The reading of scripture, prayers, the singing of praise songs, teaching via a sermon are all commonplace within our worship still today.

The offering

Bringing part of ones life as a thanksgiving to God is an important part of our sacrificial worship. By giving part of that which we work all week for maintains God's central status in our lives and underlines our commitment to be obedient to Him. The concept of tithing lives on in many Christian churches due to direct banking it is no longer presented before the high priest or the disciples or even the presiding Minster but it's acceptance is acknowledged during many Sunday services as part of the collection.

Lent

In preparation for holy week Christians often 'give up' something, normally something they enjoy greatly, both as some form of penitence and as a reminder of the events to come in Holy week.

Holy Communion

The roots of a holy communion go all the way back to the peace offering of Old Testament times. There a free will offering is made to God in thanksgiving for all He has done for them. After the escape from Egypt the Passover meal celebrated their freedom and thanked God their rescue. It was this meal that Jesus was celebrating at the last supper before He was arrested and crucified. It is the words of Jesus at that meal that are most often used in our acts of Holy Communion today. By the taking of the elements of bread and wine and listening to the words of Jesus we take ourselves back to that upper room where the Old Testament meets the New and we can see, feel, taste, smell and hear the body and the blood of Christ.

Whilst in Holy communion with God we can look upon His awesome love and the sacrifice that gave us our salvation..

Festivals today

For nearly two thousand years the Church calendar has evolved and special days and festivals are celebrated throughout the Christian world. The core are those which have Jesus as the central character.

Advent

Where we prepare for the Christ child, Jesus' first coming to earth in glory. Prophetic readings and Old Testament scripture is used to look forward to the coming of the Messiah.

Christmas and Epiphany

Celebrates the Birth of Jesus the Christ, God with us. The Nativity story is often re-enacted as told in the Gospels. Some acts of worship are tailored specifically for particular points of the story as with midnight mass, Christmas morning and Epiphany.

Lent

The 40 day festival prepares people for Holy week often involving some form of personal sacrifice. It is also used as a time of study and self examination of ones faith. Lent is normally associated with a time of reverent solemnity and penance.

Palm Sunday

The coming of the Messiah as a mighty warrior was foretold in the Old Testament and on the first Palm Sunday these prophesies came to be. The day is now remembered as the time Christ rode into Jerusalem hailed as a King, cheered and worshipped by the people. It is also used to anticipate the coming of holy week and the events that would follow.

Maundy Thursday

Usually celebrated with a special service of worship, the last supper and the arrest in the garden at Gethsemane are remembered. The original last supper would itself have been the celebration of the Passover where Jews remember their rescue from slavery in Egypt.

Good Friday

The greatest sacrifice of all is commemorated solemnly as Christians contemplate Jesus' death on a cross. The trial can be read or dramatised and the event is sometimes used as a public witness by a street procession and re-enactment or other public event.

Easter

The victory of Christ is celebrated; God raised Christ from the dead to live for ever. The final price of man's sin paid once and for all. The celebrations are rightly exuberant and colourful often with fresh flowers to symbolise new birth. Scripture of empty tomb stories and Jesus appearing to people give added excitement to a supernatural time for Christians.

Pentecost

Having its history from the Old Testament festival of weeks, Pentecost is now celebrated as the day the disciples received the gift of the holy Spirit. This is seen as the birthday of the Christian church.

As Christianity spread throughout the world many local and national festivals were adopted often to help evangelise the pagan or unchurched communities. Harvest festival in this country for example. Specific commemorative days and services continue to be added to the church calendar as with Remembrance Sunday for those who have died in military conflict and Holocaust Sunday in memory of Jewish people persecuted during the second world war.

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