



# THE SHIFT

How the  
Early Church  
Evolved from  
House Meetings  
to Temple Worship

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THE SHIFT: HOW THE EARLY CHURCH EVOLVED  
FROM HOUSE MEETINGS TO TEMPLE WORSHIP

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## Foreword

My PhD dissertation seeks to analyze why the NT never uses Greek “worship” terms when it discusses Christian assemblies. While the modern church routinely speaks of “going to worship,” an “order of worship,” having “worship pastors,” “worship teams,” “houses of worship,” and “worship services,” such terminology is foreign to the NT. While investigating Christian writings in the post-NT period (up to 400 A.D.) to discover when “worship” terminology was first applied to Christian meetings, I began to see a clear pattern that helps to explain the “worship anomaly,” as I call it. This paper is an abridged version of my research into patristic writings on this topic.

## Introduction

Around AD 320, the church historian Eusebius addressed a crowd of church bishops at the dedication of a new building to be used for church meetings. He began, “Friends, and priests of God, and ye who are clad in the sacred gown.” He then proceeded to speak of the building as a “new and holy temple of God.”<sup>1</sup> Many Christians today would never think of calling their church minister a “priest,” dressing that minister in a “sacred gown,” or viewing their meeting place as a “holy temple of God.” Where did that terminology originate? How did such concepts get started? The thesis of this paper is that the early church, after the New Testament period, gradually resurrected Jewish temple and sacrificial terminology, applying these concepts to the Christian assembly. This paper will attempt to trace the development of these specific ideas in the early church.

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<sup>1</sup>Eusebius, *Church History* 10.4.2.

## The New Temple

First, several patristic texts understood that Christians had a new perspective of “temple.”

Barnabas, for example, explicitly identifies God’s new dwelling place as “in us.” He says:

*Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. AD 115):<sup>2</sup> “Finally, I will also speak to you about the temple, and how those wretched people went astray and set their hope on the building, as though it were God’s house ... Consequently God truly dwells in our dwelling place—that is, in us ... This is the spiritual temple that is being built for the Lord.” (16.1-10, Holmes translation)<sup>3</sup>

This approach to God seemed radical to the surrounding culture. Since Christians had no temple and no traditional ‘worship,’ some outsiders accused Christians of being atheists.

Justin Martyr (ca. AD 160): “What sober-minded man, then, will not acknowledge that we are not atheists, worshipping (σεβόμενοι) as we do the Maker of this universe, and declaring, as we have been taught, that He has no need of streams of blood and libations and incense ...” (*Apology* 1.13, ANF translation)

The notion of a religion without temple ‘worship’ was offensive to some. When Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was about to be executed in the mid-second century, the crowd:

... cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice (θύειν) or worship (προσκυνεῖν).” (12.2, Holmes translation)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Most patristic citations in this paper will include an approximate date. As with dating NT documents, specific dates are often difficult to determine. For example, concerning the dating of the *Didache*, Michael Holmes says, “A remarkably wide range of dates, extending from before AD 50 to the third century or later, has been proposed for this document ... *The Didache* may have been put into its present form as late as 150, though a date considerably closer to the end of the first century seems more probable,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 337.

<sup>3</sup>See also Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 2; Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 4.14; 5.8; 5.20; 6.1; 6.2; 6.9.

<sup>4</sup>See also Eusebius’s account of the same Polycarp story in *Church History*, 4.15.

In the third century, several Christian writers such as Minucius Felix,<sup>5</sup> Origen,<sup>6</sup> and Arnobius<sup>7</sup> repeated the common refrain that Christians have “no temples, no altars, no images.” Origen even affirmed that Christians “*object* to building altars, statues, and temples.”<sup>8</sup>

These patristic citations reveal the normative teaching about the temple as found in the first three centuries. *Christians oppose temples, along with the worship, altars, sacrifices, and images that commonly accompany them.* Since God now dwells in the human heart, Christians honor Him by living righteous and holy lives. But these texts do not represent the entirety of patristic thought in this period. At a very early stage, some writers introduced concepts that would begin to shift away from this normative view.

### **Shift #1: The Lord’s Supper is a Sacrifice**

At the same time when patristic writers are denouncing temples and sacrifices, some early writers speak of the Lord’s Supper as a “sacrifice.” An allusion to this idea may appear as early as in Ignatius. But a clearer reference to the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice appears in the middle of the second century, when Justin Martyr refers to Mal 1:11-12, saying:

Justin Martyr (ca. AD 160): “He (God) then speaks of those Gentiles, namely us, who in every place offer sacrifices to Him, i.e., the bread of the Eucharist, and also the cup of the Eucharist ...” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 41, ANF translation)

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<sup>5</sup>*The Octavius* 32.

<sup>6</sup>*Against Celsus* 7.64.

<sup>7</sup>*Against the Heathen* 6.1.

<sup>8</sup>*Against Celsus* 8.20.

Here Justin identifies the eucharist as a “sacrifice” that Christians offer to God. This connection is odd, because in the NT, the Lord’s Supper represents *Jesus’s* sacrifice for *us*, not *our* sacrifice for *God*.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the idea caught on.<sup>10</sup>

Toward the end of the second century, *The Acts of Peter* makes the same connection between “sacrifice” and the Lord’s Supper.

*The Acts of Peter* (ca. A.D. 185): “And they brought bread and water to Paul for the sacrifice so that after the prayer he should distribute to everyone. Among them as it proved there was a woman named Rufina who indeed wished that even she should receive the Eucharist at Paul’s hands. But as she approached, Paul, filled with the Spirit of God said to her, ‘Rufina, you are not coming to the altar of God in truth ...’ (2.2, Schneemelcher translation)<sup>11</sup>

This text adds the additional temple terminology of the “altar,” which was the place in the temple where the sacrifice was offered. This addition is a logical conclusion. If the supper is a “sacrifice,” then the table on which it sits is “the altar of God.” It would only be a matter of time before these temple concepts would spread to other aspects of the assembly.

Shortly thereafter, Irenaeus carried the idea even further, citing the same passage from Malachi 1:

Irenaeus (ca. AD 190): “For we make an oblation (προσφέρομεν) to God of the bread and the cup of blessing ... And then, when we have perfected the offering, we invoke the Holy Spirit, ... that the receivers of these antitypes may obtain remission of sins and life eternal.” (*Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus* 37,<sup>12</sup> ANF translation)

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<sup>9</sup>Speaking of this reference in Justin, Ferguson says, “The Eucharist is explicitly called a sacrifice for the first time,” in Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries, Vol. 1* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1999), 118. For the idea that Jesus was the one sufficient sacrifice, see Heb 10:12; 9:26-28; 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2.

<sup>10</sup>For other early usage of sacrificial terminology in reference to the Lord’s Supper, see *Didache* 14:1-3; *1 Clement* 44:4; and Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 4.

<sup>11</sup>Schneemelcher, *NT Apocrypha*, 288.

<sup>12</sup>In Migne’s *Patrologia Latina*, this is chapter 38, not 37.

When Irenaeus speaks of the Lord's Supper as a "sacrifice" or "oblation," which are common temple terms, he presents a minor theological problem. However, when he states that this sacrifice results in the receivers obtaining "remission of sins and life eternal," he creates a larger theological problem. He implies that partaking of the Supper *obtains* remission of sins and eternal life. The sacrificial terminology is the root of the problem because sacrifices were commonly viewed as offerings for sin (Heb 5:1-3, et al.). Here, instead of the Lord's Supper being taken "in remembrance of" Jesus's sacrifice (1 Cor 11:25), the bread and wine *become* the sacrifice that *obtains* "remission of sins and life eternal." *In short, Irenaeus has changed the purpose of the Lord's Supper from "remembrance" to "remission."*

By the mid-third century, these ideas had certainly reached Cyprian of Carthage, who explicitly states that "the Lord's passion is the sacrifice which we offer." The persistence of these ideas inevitably led to other temple concepts that further complicated the simplicity of the early Christian assemblies.

### **Shift #2: Ministers Become Priests**

One other example of temple terminology also developed quite early: the idea that Christian ministers are "priests." It makes sense. If the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice that is offered, then the person who offers that sacrifice must be a priest.<sup>13</sup> In the Old Testament, the priests were those who worked in the "house of God," handling the sacrifices at the altar and related sacred tasks. Yet, the NT documents clearly affirm that *all* Christians now comprise "a holy priesthood" (1 Pt 2:5, 9). Further, the NT knows no religious titles or cultic roles such as

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<sup>13</sup>James D. G. Dunn says, "Historically the categories of sacrifice and priest go hand in hand," in *The Partings of the Ways*, 106.

“priests.” Still, many Christian leaders in the patristic era freely used priestly terminology in reference to those who labored among the Christian flock.

Even as early as the end of the first century, priestly concepts were already being developed. Clement of Rome, the *Didache*, and Ignatius all reveal various levels of this terminology. Clement says:

Clement of Rome (ca. AD 95): “... the Master has commanded us to perform at the appointed times ... the offerings and services (προσφορὰς καὶ λειτουργίας) ... For to the ... priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries (διακονία) have been imposed.” (*To the Corinthians* 40:1-5, Holmes translation)

Ignatius adds:

Ignatius (ca. AD 105): “Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid.” (*Smyrnaeans* 8.1-2, Holmes translation)

These citations certainly begin a separation between “clergy” and “laity,” but they fall short of indicating that the designation of “priest” was a common title for bishops or elders. However, by the mid-second century, the terminology is becoming standard. Again, the temple concept of offering sacrifices is the factor that drives the idea that they are priests.

Later in the second century, Irenaeus confidently affirms that “all the apostles ... are priests,” adding that they “serve God and the altar continually.”<sup>14</sup> About the same time, Tertullian criticizes a certain Christian faction that imposes the duties of priesthood “even on laymen.” Since he can speak of “the duties of priesthood” in this way, it seems clear that the title and role of “priest” have become entrenched in the Christian culture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>*Against Heresies* 4.8.3, ANF translation. Irenaeus wrote in Greek, but most of his surviving works are in Latin, in a translation that may date to the fourth century. See ANF, Vol. 1, 312. The Latin text in this citation is from Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 7, column 995.

<sup>15</sup>*Prescription Against Heretics* 41, ANF translation.



Fifty years later in the same city of Carthage, the writings of Cyprian are filled with proud references to “priests” and “the priesthood.” He says:

Cyprian (ca. AD 250): “Yet I hear that certain of the presbyters, neither mindful of the Gospel ... nor reserving to the bishop the honor of his priesthood and of his dignity, are already communicating with the lapsed, and ... giving them the Eucharist ...” (*Epistle 11.2, ANF translation*)

By the late fourth century, the *Apostolic Constitutions* would claim even greater glory for those in the priesthood. Temple concepts and terminology are in full bloom and unrestrained. The priests (bishops) wear special garments, as did the priests of the temple, and they sit on a “throne,” they “offer the sacrifice” (the Lord’s Supper), and they are explicitly described as “the mediator between God and people ... (who are) your earthly god.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Shift #3: Christians Build Holy Temples**

The picture is not yet complete. Temple terminology has absorbed the Lord’s Supper, the table on which it sits, and the Christian leaders who preside in the assembly. But what of the building that holds that assembly? The literal application of OT temple terminology is not complete until a building becomes “a temple.”

Up until about 250 A.D., Christians had no sacred structures and primarily met in homes. In the late third century, in the places where they actually built meeting houses, these buildings were called “places of instruction,”<sup>17</sup> “houses of prayer,”<sup>18</sup> and “houses of assembly” where they would “perform their customs.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Apostolic Constitutions* 8.5.46.

<sup>17</sup>*Apostolic Tradition* 35.

<sup>18</sup>Eusebius, *Church History* 8.2.1.

<sup>19</sup>Eusebius, *Church History* 9.9a.11.

Then, Eusebius, speaking of the persecution of 303 A.D., says:

Eusebius (ca. AD 320): "... some of the churches of God (τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ) were razed to the ground, some were closed, so that no one accustomed to frequent them could get into them nor render God the worship that we owe (τῷ θεῷ τὰς ἐποφειλομένας ἀποδιδῶ λατρείας)" (*Church History* 10.8.15, Cruse translation)

Eusebius implies that the Christians needed to "get into" these buildings to "render God the worship that we owe."<sup>20</sup> Surprisingly, Eusebius here uses the Greek term λατρεία, which is a term associated with sacrificing, to depict what Christians do in their assemblies. This may be one of the first times in history when Christians are described as conducting "worship" in church.

Also, Eusebius here clearly uses the term 'church' (ἐκκλησία) to refer to a building, which is a significant development in terminology. Instead of this term always indicating the assembly of Christians in a community, Eusebius uses it to refer to the building that housed the assembly. Later, when he speaks of these buildings in the *Oration of Eusebius*, he pauses to clarify that "they are called churches (or houses of the Lord)."<sup>21</sup> This clarification indicates that referring to the building as an ἐκκλησία or a "house of the Lord" is new terminology.

### **The Turning Point: The Edict of Milan**

At this point, the Christians had suffered a brutal decade of persecution. Initiated by Diocletian in 303, "The Great Persecution" was carried out "with unprecedented ferocity."<sup>22</sup> A

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<sup>20</sup>Maier translates it, "prevent any of the worshipers from meeting and giving God the service due him." *NPNF* has "none of those accustomed to frequent them could enter them and render the worship due to God."

<sup>21</sup>*The Oration of Eusebius* 17.4 (*NPNF* translation).

<sup>22</sup>Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 22.

succession of other emperors continued the ruthless violence until AD 313, when co-emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the so-called Edict of Milan, granting full toleration for all religions as well as *restitution* for the Christians.<sup>23</sup>

This ‘emancipation proclamation’ was primarily driven by Constantine, who claimed to have been led by a vision from the Christian God in his pivotal victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.<sup>24</sup> The marvelous vision and the Edict had both short-term and long-term effects for Christians everywhere. An immediate effect was that Constantine “made the priests of God his counselors, and deemed it incumbent on himself to honor with all devotion the God who had appeared to him.”<sup>25</sup> But a longer-term effect was the dominance of Christianity in the Roman Empire, along with the newfound strong connections of ‘church’ and ‘state.’ As Ramsay MacMullen says, “Almost overnight his co-religionists (the Christians) gained in wealth, prominence, numbers, and influence.”<sup>26</sup>

Constantine’s vigorous support for Christianity was obvious in his program to build the so-called “churches” for the Christians, such as the famous St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.<sup>27</sup> Constantine even held a pivotal role in the famous Council of Nicaea in AD 325. For that event, he provided travel expenses, imperial escorts, and lodging for hundreds of attending bishops,

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<sup>23</sup>Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History*, 343.

<sup>24</sup>*Life of Constantine* 1.28, *NPNF* translation.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.32.

<sup>26</sup>Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), ix.

<sup>27</sup>Gregory T. Armstrong, “Constantine’s Churches,” *Gesta* 6 (Jan 1967): 3.

along with “instructions to heighten the splendor of the festival at the emperor’s expense.”<sup>28</sup>

Most of all, massive imperial support and funding, *including personal funding* from Constantine, was poured into the erection of churches.<sup>29</sup>

These magnificent structures, spread throughout the empire, were such emperor-quality edifices that many of them are still major tourist attractions today, 1,700 years later. Eusebius offers helpful details about many of the buildings, and his reports reveal another important shift in the church’s adoption of temple terminology.

Eusebius (ca. AD 320): “There was an incessant joy ... temples again rising from the soil to a lofty height, and receiving a splendor far exceeding those that had been formerly destroyed.” (*Church History* 10.2.1, Cruse translation)

*This text is likely the first reference to a church building as a “temple.”* Eusebius would continue to use this term many times in reference to the Constantinian church buildings, often comparing the new churches to the glory of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Descriptions of the grandeur of the buildings would necessarily be accompanied by grandiose portrayals of the priests as well as the activities conducted within these structures. Eusebius writes:

Eusebius (ca. AD 320): “Yes, now indeed, there were ... performances of sacred rites, and solemn rituals of the church. Here you might hear ... divine and sacred mysteries performed. The mystic symbols of our Savior’s passion were celebrated ...” (*Church History* 10.3.3, Cruse translation)

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<sup>28</sup>Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.43.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.42. Eusebius says that Constantine “gave from his own private resources costly benefactions to the churches of God, both enlarging and heightening the sacred edifices, and embellishing the august sanctuaries of the church with abundant offerings.” (*NPNF* translation)

In *Church History* 10.4, we come full circle. Here, Eusebius records a lengthy address he gave in honor of the building of the churches.<sup>30</sup> He begins his oration, saying:

Eusebius (ca. AD 320): “Friends, and priests of God, and ye who are clad in the sacred gown adorned with the celestial crown of glory, the inspired unction and the sacerdotal garment of the Holy Spirit. And thou, O excellent ornament of this new and holy temple of God ...” (*Church History* 10.4.2, Cruse translation)

Just like the Levitical priests of the OT (cf. Lv 16:4), these Christian priests have specific sacred garments to wear as they perform their priestly functions in “this new and holy temple of God.”

Note that this structure is not just a building. It is not just a temple. It is a *holy temple of God*.<sup>31</sup> This represents another significant shift in terminology for the early church. This may be the first time in recorded Christian history that these Christian buildings are viewed as “holy” or “sacred.”<sup>32</sup> The transformation to literal temple terminology is now complete.

The progression of terminology is a logical one. If the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice, an altar is required. If the church has a sacrifice and an altar, it must have a priest to make the offering properly. If the church has a sacrifice, an altar, and a priest, it is thereby conducting worship in the biblical sense of λατρεία. If the church has a sacrifice, an altar, a priest, and worship, it is only natural to have a temple for conducting these proceedings. By religious necessity, then, all these items must be “holy”—a holy eucharist, a sacred altar, a holy priest,

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<sup>30</sup>Eusebius says that the address was given by “a certain one of those of moderate talent,” which has widely been assumed to be Eusebius himself. The *NPNF* footnote says, “This person was clearly Eusebius himself.” (*Church History* 10.4.1)

<sup>31</sup>Eusebius also calls them “divine temples” (θείων ναῶν) in *Church History* 10.4.20 (*NPNF* translation).

<sup>32</sup>See Joan E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 295.

divine worship, and finally, a holy temple. The cornerstone concept of this new holy temple is the conception of the Lord's Supper as a "sacrifice." Within a generation or two, Christians would be venerating martyrs, the "Blessed Virgin Mary," Christian relics, as well as the entire "Holy Land."<sup>33</sup>

### **The Problem of the Shift**

The shift between first-century terminology and fourth-century terminology is astonishing. "In its first centuries Christianity was a religion highly inhospitable to the idea of 'holy places,'" says Robert Markus, "by the end of the fourth century it had become highly receptive."<sup>34</sup> Even as recently as Origen in the third century and Arnobius in 300, Christians proudly proclaimed that they had no temples, no altars, and no sacrifices, which are principles grounded in NT teaching. But with the transformation emboldened by the imperial support of Christianity, Eusebius reveals that (at least some) Christians embraced such temple concepts less than one hundred years after Origen and only *twenty years* after Arnobius.

Such terminology runs against the grain of NT teaching. Regarding the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice is "a distinct break from the teaching of the apostles."<sup>35</sup> As I. Howard Marshall says,

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<sup>33</sup>See R. A. Markus, "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (Fall 1994): 257-71; (no author named), "Can These Bones Live?": Selections from Church Fathers on the Veneration of Relics," *Road to Emmaus Journal* 7:2 (2006): 63-71.

<sup>34</sup>Markus, "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy?" 259.

<sup>35</sup>G. N. Davies, "Sacrifice, Offerings, Gifts," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1072. Roger Beckwith says, "It is foreign to the earliest patristic traditions, and contrary to the teaching of the New Testament," in "The Relation between Christ's Sacrifice and Priesthood and those of the Church: An Attempt at a Summary Statement," *Churchman* 103:3 (1989): 238.

“Nothing in the NT suggests that the Lord's Supper is to be seen in any way as an offering by us to God, and the practice of offering the elements to God reverses the whole direction of the atonement in which God himself offers his Son to die and gives to us the benefits of his passion.”<sup>36</sup> In the NT, Christ's sacrifice was accomplished “once for all” (Heb 9:27; 10:12). If Jesus's sacrifice is viewed as inadequate so that it must be repeatedly offered, have we not, in the words of Heb 10:29, “spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant, and outraged the Spirit of grace”?

Beginning with this foundational idea that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice, the fourth-century church had fully resurrected the associated “temple worship” ideas of altars, priests, and temples. *Do any of these four concepts have sin-remitting power?* One might argue that these terms are only applied figuratively, with no intention of resurrecting a Christian sacrificial cult. However, in reality, if a table is called an altar, it will be viewed as a *literal altar*. If a minister is called a priest, he will be viewed as a *literal priest*. If a Christian building is called a “temple” or a “house of God,” it will be viewed as a *literal house of God*. Such terminology will lead each new generation of Christians to fail to see the great difference between the ἐκκλησία of the NT and the temple of the OT, if not the fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism.

### **The Cause of the Shift**

Tracing the development of the shift can be demonstrated and documented. However, determining the causes of the shift is primarily a matter of speculation. Why did the early fathers view the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice at an altar? Why did Cyprian so firmly embrace the idea that Christian ministers are priests? Why was the term ἐκκλησία used to refer to a Christian

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<sup>36</sup>I. Howard Marshall, “Church and Temple in the New Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40:2 (1989): 219.

building? Why would Eusebius glorify the new Christian buildings as temples? I offer a few possible answers only briefly.

Humans have a tendency to sacralize objects. With little effort, people can turn a plain rock into sacred stone. The one who sacralizes an object may intend to “honor God,” but does he not also take the place of God by *determining that which is holy and that which is not*? A larger problem is created when these man-made sacred concepts are *forced upon others*. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for doing so in Matthew 23. When church leaders determine sacred places, people, and practices, these can quickly become traditions that, as Jesus says, “make void the word of God” (Mt 15:6).

The desire for social approval may also have driven Christians to resurrect these sacrificial concepts. In the first three centuries after the resurrection, idolatry was popular throughout Greco-Roman society, along with the sacrifices, priests, and temples that accompanied such.<sup>37</sup> The church fathers of this era, such as Justin, Tertullian, and Origen, frequently fought against the social scorn that accused Christians of being “atheists” who had no sacrifices, no altars, and no temples. Consequently, when Christians found reason to claim their own sacrifices, altars, priests, and temples, they could gain long-sought social approval. Such was certainly true after their emancipation by Constantine. After being persecuted, slaughtered, and ridiculed for three centuries, they finally found relief for their pent-up desires for social acceptance. Yet, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus decried seeking public approval for one’s

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<sup>37</sup>P. A. Rainbow, “Idolatry,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments (DLNT)*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 528.



religion (Mt 6:1-18), and Paul taught “not to please man, but to please God” (1 Thes 2:4; cf. Gal 1:10).

The tendency among early church fathers to engage in typological and allegorical exegesis may have also contributed to the shift. This desire to connect the two Testaments could have driven certain church leaders to find all the ways that the sacrificial system of Judaism was allegorically resumed in the Christian system.<sup>38</sup> Such exegesis began in the East but also spread to the West before “a vigorous reaction” denounced it in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the shift may have been motivated by church leaders who sought to elevate their position in the church. “Priests” were not only prominent in Jewish society but in Greco-Roman society as well.<sup>40</sup> When Christian leaders called themselves “priests” and refused to allow lower-status Christians to “handle the Eucharist,” they were setting themselves apart from, and above, the rest of the flock. The sin of pride goes back to the beginning of creation, and it still plagues church leadership to this day. Jesus knew the tendency for leaders to “lord it over” the others. Consequently, he said, “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” (Mt 20:25-28)

### **Conclusion**

Whatever the reasons for the early church gradually reverting to the sacrificial terminology of Judaism, the shift from simple house meetings to elaborate holy temples

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<sup>38</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 71.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 75-6.

<sup>40</sup>Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 247.

undeniably took place. Specific statements by specific church fathers reveal a clear path of footsteps that led the church to the extreme sacrificial concepts cited by Eusebius in the fourth century. While some might blame Constantine for the shift, many of these sacrificial concepts had begun long before Constantine was born.

For us, the key questions are: Do we think that the Lord's Supper, the altar, the ministers, and the church building have "sin-remitting power"?

Are remnants of the shift still at work in your church?

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