



Rev. Jackie Bernacchi

All Saints Episcopal Church
301 South Main
Minot, ND 58701

www.minot.com/~allsaint

© 2004
All Saints Episcopal Church

History and Worship

Learning the relationship between History and Worship helps give us a better perspective on where we are today. It also helps us to understand the elements of Christian expression, as are found in our beautiful worship. Having several styles of Episcopal –Anglican worship that reflect Evangelical or Anglo Catholic views was actually a historical struggle. We have arrived in the 21st century having choices of Low Church or High Church and combinations thereof, only because history, in a sense, would not stand for just one rarified style.

The evolution of worship can be divided up into several periods. Ranging from the time of the New Testament writers, through the middle ages and reformation of the 1500s, through the Puritan influence to the Oxford Movement of the 19th century and on throughout the 20th the century... One could rightly imagine several movements and dozens of changes occurring, and be fairly accurate.

For this piece, we will look at selected developments up through the Oxford movement of the 19th century. And, I would like to dwell on mostly one element of Worship...the appeal to the senses. In early New Testament times, worship either out in the open or in homes, was a sensory experience of hearing, and sight and taste. The groups tended to be familiar and close knit. There was little separation from presider and congregation, as the people were meal guests in the presider's home. Sunday worship was always a reminder of the Resurrection and it was centered on communion.

The format was probably close to non sacramental Jewish worship involving psalms, hymns, scripture reading, some commentary and letter reading to stay connected with other cells of Christianity then called "the way". Of course, the Eucharist was in context of a meal. Folks probably shared food in potluck style, then had communion together. Now, Sunday was a workday in the Roman Empire, so worship was usually before or after work...before dawn or after sundown.

In those early days, Rome had not yet begun persecutions. But, of course, we know that between the 60s AD and through the 200s AD Roman persecutions punctuated Christian life. All

that stopped with Constantine, who, in the early 300s, ended the illegal status of the young church. The church grew rapidly, but it was also a time of the Patristic fathers who fought heresy as they worked to develop a creedal faith.

Worship went into lavish churches for the first time, and quickly became the Roman State religion. Priests and bishops acquired wealth and political prestige. Liturgical texts became standardized, beautiful vestments and the use of precious metals became the norm. Music was written for large choirs; the visual and auditory experience of worship increased as the Church took on the "pomp and circumstance" common to the Empire. But, this "progress" had a downside as well. Separation between clergy and congregation began to develop as clergy took on the status of secular leaders. People no longer chose to be Christian, but were simply born into the designation.

During the Medieval Period (up to 1500s) due to continued separation of clergy and people, corporate worship became a spectator sport. Curtains and illustrated wooden barriers were erected to separate the clergy from the laity. Regular folk were almost treated as pollution. As the Roman Empire dismantled, Latin was no longer used, so the Mass was no longer in a language of the people. Use of bells told people when the host was being consecrated. The sight of the elevated host started to replace the eating experience of the communion. Lay communions declined dramatically.

But, a good trend also developed, as the laity began to hold home devotions. Christian people stayed loyal to Sunday worship, as well as, weekday home services. The church itself also promoted more daily periodic prayer-- daily offices that nourished not only the laity, but also the growing monastic movement.

The Reformation in the 1500s brought a variety of Changes to the Eucharist. It is not fair to say that all reformers wanted the churches gutted and stripped of ornamentation. It is fair to say that the Anglican and Lutheran movements tried to hold to the centrality of the Eucharist. Still, over all, the protestant movement tended to limit or eliminate vestments, candles, statuary, and even communion. Preaching took on an important role, and in many respects replaced sacrament. The

Roman Church, even after the Council of Trent, remained a high visual and auditory experience though it remained also mostly non-participatory. Still, private devotions such as the rosary and daily prayer continued to flourish and feed hungry Christians.

The English Prayer Book was a huge help in standardizing ceremony. Arch-bishop Cranmer based his first rendition in 1549, on old Roman rites. Yet, a victory was won for the people with even the earliest prayer book, because it was written in English. The Eucharist was administered in both kinds, but after a long medieval history of non-reception the laity no longer understood the importance of the sacrament, so a prayer service was far more common.

Many Prayer Books later (in the 1600s) England was again in a political and religious struggle. The Puritans began to press for the end of church ornamentation, wedding rings, the sign of the cross, and the surplice. A new Prayer Book was published in 1611 based on the King James Bible. Men like William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, headed resistance to the stark look and feel of worship. Civil war engulfed England followed by the Commonwealth period, which abolished the use of the Anglican Prayer Book. In 1660, under Stuart monarchy, Anglican worship once again resumed.

In the 1600s Anglican worship in England and the Colonies still centered around non communion worship. Communion was offered perhaps once a month or quarterly. Psalms were the only words that could be sung until late in the 1600s. In the 1700s the Methodism of Charles Wesley brought bright song to worship. Sadly the Methodist Movement eventually parted company with the Anglican Church of England. Yet, their gift of music led to the publication of Hymnals in the 1800s

The 1800s saw that Low Church worship prevailed in England and in America. The experience was still focused on scripture and the sermon. Sunday had become a Sabbath, not a remembrance of the Resurrection of Christ as it was in the early Church. And, as I said earlier, the practice of Communion had also lost the importance it once had to early Christians. The Christian community at large was not all happy with the non-sacramental nonresurrection focused worship. Change was around

the corner.

John Keeble's sermon at Oxford in 1833 led to the reform moments within the Anglican Church known as the Oxford Movement, and later another called the Cambridge Movement . These movements did not require a new Prayer Book. It was more of a return to experiential and sacramental worship. Though these reforms were not universal, they were, for many, a breath of fresh air. The return of Eucharistic focus, vestments, hymnody, incense (and more) brought a certain beauty back into the Church, that many had missed sorely.

Once again, parishes felt free to offer weekly, even daily Eucharist. Many partook of the spiritual food in preparation for the rigors of life. There was again a real effort to create beautiful worship as a form of evangelism.

This movement to an Anglo-Catholic or High Church worship was welcomed by many in England and in the United States. It brought the styles of worship not into conflict, but into choice. Today, as result of Low and High Church choices we feel perfectly free to celebrate both lay and ordained involvement. Our current Prayer Book is filled with Lay and Ordained led worship opportunities. Today, we feel free to style a worship service that celebrates the Word and preaching, and also reveals a love of music, sacrament and the rich ceremonies of our Anglican Episcopal tradition.

Information sources:

Book of Common Prayer

Story of Christianity by Gonzalaz

Worship Manual by Brown and Ferra