

EARLY CHURCH WORSHIP AND AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES: REFLECTIONS ON THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Religion is one facet of life that blends readily with African culture. Although Christianity was introduced to Africa from outside, the continent already possessed values that, rightly employed, can enrich religious life. Indeed, the cultures of the Mediterranean, where Christianity originated, and those of Africa are not so dissimilar, which gives Christianity the capacity to flourish within African culture. This study investigates early church worship in order to identify aspects of it that resemble African cultural values. Based on the findings from the investigation, the study then reflects on the plausibility of incorporating aspects of African culture and the early church mode of worship into the Seventh-day Adventist African church worship experience.

Keywords: early church, worship, African culture, second century.

1. Introduction

Efforts to conceptualize the calling of the church have resulted in three fundamental keywords: *leitourgia* (worship), *martyria* (witness), and *diakonia* (service).¹¹² These concepts rightly affirm the mission of the church in worshipping God, witnessing about God, and serving God and humanity. From the inception of the Christian movement to this day, these three concepts remain the bedrock for the advancement and revival of the church. This is evident in every part of the world where the Christian movement is present, including Africa.

Christianity has been present in North Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia since the first century, and it has been able to expand across sub-Saharan Africa through Western missionary movements between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. What can be observed is that African culture inherently possessed values similar to the bedrock concepts of Christianity. According to Adam Chepkwony, African culture has three main values. The first is human solidarity which sees everyone as children of one father, God, so human dignity is of high importance among Africans. The second value is communal living, fostered

¹¹²Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 20.

through kinship relations, which ensures that everyone is guided and protected. The third value is respect for the unborn and the aged, those that society naturally marginalizes.¹¹³ Reverence to God and service to humanity are evident in these values.

John Mbiti also observed the relational identity that is so pervasive in African culture, “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am, because we are; since we are, therefore I am.’”¹¹⁴ To this, Emmanuel C. Umeh aptly adds, “In African cultures and worldviews, human person is not considered as self-subsistent being, but as being in solidarity with others.”¹¹⁵ These African values of high regard for humanity and community are also present in the African worship experience.

Matthew Kustenbauder asserts that “the symbol of gathered assembly, with its accompanying notion of human community, divine-human communion, and thanksgiving to God, is deeply rooted in African consciousness,”¹¹⁶ leading him to the conclusion that “African Christianity most often resembles the pre-Reformation churches, insisting that faith must be framed in a communal context.”¹¹⁷ And James Okoye affirms that “the core values of African religious culture are at bottom Christian.”¹¹⁸

Based on the claims of the scholars mentioned above concerning the similarity of African culture and Christian values, this article has two main intentions. The first is to investigate the worship practices of the early church in order to have an insight into the core values that guided their worship experience. Though the scarcity of materials impedes any attempt to establish with certainty the pattern of religious practices of the early church,¹¹⁹ the available sources consulted, namely the First Apology of Justin Martyr, the Didache, and the correspondence of Pliny with the Emperor Trajan, are sufficient for the purpose of this study.

¹¹³ Adam K. A. Chepkwony, “Church and Democracy: A Personal Reflection,” *African Ecclesial Review* 36, no. 5 (1994): 312–28.

¹¹⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 108–9.

¹¹⁵ Emmanuel C. Umeh, *African Theology of Solidarity* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2008), 26.

¹¹⁶ Matthew Kustenbauder, “Rediscovering the Eucharist as Communal Meal: African Contributions to the World Christian Church,” *The Other Journal* 6 (2005), <https://theotherjournal.com/2005/08/rediscovering-the-eucharist-as-communal-meal-african-contributions-to-the-world-christian-church/>.

¹¹⁷ Matthew Kustenbauder, “Rediscovering the Eucharist.”

¹¹⁸ James Chukwuma Okoye, “The Eucharist in African Perspective,” *Pastoral Music* 40, no. 4 (2016): 32–38, 34.

¹¹⁹ See Maxwell E. Johnson, “Christian Initiation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 693.

As a result of the insight gleaned from the sources, a section of the study expands on right living and ethics along with the celebration of the Eucharist as important elements that are part of the early Christian worship and their presence in some African traditions. The second intention of this article is to reflect on how incorporating the motivations present in the early church worship addressed in the first section with African values might enhance communal worship in the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa. The following section will briefly survey the state of scholarship on early church worship.

Sources that mention the worship of the early church in its early centuries are scarce. William Oesterley argues that this scarcity is due to the fact that the early Christians continued the worship practices that the Jews held in the synagogues.¹²⁰ He claims that the early church did not need to record its form of worship because it was not a distinct one. Sources became readily available when the Christian church was clearly separated from Judaism. This was the dominant view¹²¹ until Paul Bradshaw argued that “after the close of the first century, liturgical influence from Judaism to a now predominantly Gentile church is likely to have been marginal.”¹²² He further stressed that “a single, simple picture of early liturgical practice can no longer be painted. We are in many ways less sure now than we once were as to what the worship of the early church was like.”¹²³ Geoffrey Wainwright’s position comes closer to that of Bradshaw, observing that it is only in the early third century that we began to see a more complete picture of the various processes of early Christian initiation emerging, together with detailed evidence of several additional ritual elements. The extent to which any of these elements are present, however, varies according to liturgical tradition.¹²⁴

Maxwell Johnson also posited that the early church from the start is best known for its “liturgical diversity and multiple patterns.”¹²⁵ The majority of the literature produced on early church liturgy aims at surveying various worship practices. The attention is thus on the forms and elements of worship throughout the early centuries in order to identify patterns and differences.

But in his book *Christian Worship in the Primitive Church*, Alexander Macdonald made an interesting observation. He stated that “social fellowships, such as the Christian churches offered, were things that made instant appeal to

¹²⁰ W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 84–85.

¹²¹ See Reginald Maxwell Woolley, *The Liturgy of the Primitive Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 48–53.

¹²² Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

¹²³ Bradshaw, *The Search*, x.

¹²⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Christian Worship: Scriptural Basis and Theological Frame* (ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 39.

¹²⁵ Johnson, “Christian Initiation,” 694.

the mind of the age.”¹²⁶ Wainwright acknowledges that “the social constitution of humankind finds redeemed embodiment at worship, even if its realization remains imperfect.”¹²⁷ Comparing the worship of the early church with that of the 20th century, MacDonald asserted:

Today, the social and philanthropic activities of the church are not initiated, and planned, and carried towards execution within the actual place of worship and in presence of the worshipping people, but elsewhere, in church committee – rooms and halls; and a very large part of our Christian philanthropy is done through societies and organizations which have ceased to have any official connection with the church at all. But in the first Christian churches it was quite otherwise. These small and compact worship assemblies which met, it appears, chiefly in private houses, were the sole centres of early Christian life, and were the reservoirs into which gravitated everything that concerned the fellowship and the cause, and out of which issued the streams of Christian effort and service.¹²⁸

Two observations can be deduced from this brief review. First, there is no clear format or template of worship in the early church. This might be due to the absence of materials relating to the period. But there are evidences that the early church engaged in worship and it is beyond the goal of this article to establish a template of early church worship. The second observation pertains to the mention in the literature of the presence and impact of community and social life in the early church worship. With these two remarks in mind, the next section will review the earliest documents available for worship in the early church, namely, the first Apology of Justin Martyr, the Didache, and the correspondence of Pliny to the Emperor Trajan.

2. Worship in the Early Church: Evidence of Worship

The earliest comprehensive evidence available for Christian worship after the apostolic age comes from Justin Martyr.¹²⁹ Justin wrote his *First Apology* around AD 150 in Rome as a defense of Christianity against the speculations and misconceptions of those outside the church. Justin thus addressed this writing to the Romans, especially to the Emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons. Bradshaw observes that Justin’s description leaves room for several interpretations, hence it is only an informative piece of evidence. Justin Martyr is not prescribing a style of liturgy.¹³⁰ Even though Bradshaw argued

¹²⁶ Alexander Buchanan Macdonald, *Christian Worship in the Primitive Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1935), 12.

¹²⁷ Wainwright, *The Oxford history of Christian worship*, 13.

¹²⁸ Macdonald, *Christian worship in the primitive church*, 16–17.

¹²⁹ Bradshaw, *The Search*, 98.

¹³⁰ Bradshaw, *The Search*, 98–100

that it is difficult to determine if the epistle was giving “a more generic description of the sort of worship which might be encountered” in all Christian gatherings of the empire or if it was “the specific form of worship practiced in Rome,”¹³¹ I am of the opinion that in writing to a figure as illustrious and august as the emperor of Rome, Justin would describe a practice that he would want to be the norm, if it is not already. Keeping in mind the ostracizing that Christians were going through at that time, it is likely that Justin would want to have his facts right, and would seek to describe the practice in Rome at least, so that if ever verified, his defense would hold more credibility, thus protecting the religion of the Christians.¹³²

The second evidence available is from Pliny the Younger. Pliny was a Roman administrator sent to the province of Bithynia about AD 110. When faced with the Christian threat, he wrote letters to the Roman Emperor, Trajan, to inform him of how he was dealing with the situation and to receive counsel if needed. His description of Christian worship, though little, is not without interest.

The third evidence stems from *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, commonly known as the *Didache*¹³³, a manual on church order written by Christians to Christians. Respectively, these evidences come from the perspectives of a Christian to a pagan, a pagan to a pagan, and a Christian to a Christian.

2.1 Justin Martyr

Justin writes,

On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time. Then, when the reader had finished, the president of the assembly verbally admonishes and invites all to imitate such examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer our prayers, and, as we said before, after we finish our prayers, bread and wine and water are presented. He who presides likewise offers up prayers, thanksgivings, to

¹³¹ Bradshaw, *The search*, 112.

¹³² Mazza is of this same view. See Enrico Mazza, *The Celebration of the Eucharist: The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation* (trans. Matthew J. O’Connell; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 107.

¹³³ Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 25, argues for an early date, probably before the writing and publication of some NT writings. Aaron Milavec and Eugene LaVerdiere agree on a mid-first century origin. Of importance, an increasing number of critics are of the position that the *Didache* does not assume any knowledge of NT writings. See LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 135; Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (ed. Attridge; trans. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 46–50. Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, & Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50–70 C.E.* (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 695–739. Marcello Del Verme, *Didache and Judaism: Jewish Roots of an Ancient Christian-Jewish Work* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 81–86.

the best of his ability, and the people express their approval by saying ‘Amen’. The Eucharist elements are distributed and consumed by those present, and to those who are absent they are sent through the deacons.¹³⁴

The language here is communal. Emphasis falls on the community, as shown by the predominant use of the pronouns “we”, “us”, “our”, and “all”. Worship was not private, nor relegated to the performance of a few for the benefit of the congregation; rather, everyone from the “cities or in the outlying districts” came to participate in common worship. After the reading from the Scripture, “all” are admonished and invited to imitate those examples. Prayers are offered, and those absent are not forgotten.

The communal sense of the worship is conveyed in the writing of Justin. One could argue that Justin was deliberate in his description to point out their unity and care for one another. That intention is reinforced by his mention of those absent, who also received the Eucharistic elements when believers gathered. McGowan asserted that “the breaking of bread was not a social event additional to worship, or a programmatic attempt to create fellowship among the Christians, but the regular form of Christian gathering.”¹³⁵

Justin’s description also offers an insight into the participation aspect of the worship experience. During the Eucharist, the presider “offers up prayers, thanksgivings,” and the congregation participates by responding “Amen.” This practice of the congregation’s participation in the Eucharist must not have been unique to Justin’s congregation, since Egeria, a Spanish nun of the 4th century recorded in the account of her travels to Jerusalem that during the Eucharist the presbyter who presides and the congregation engage in responsive reading.¹³⁶

2.2 Pliny the Younger

Pliny said of the Christians that they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day (*stato die*) to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, ... After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.¹³⁷

Though Pliny’s description is succinct, it reveals that the early Christians held regular meetings for worship in which everyone participated through the

¹³⁴ Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67, in *Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, FC 6 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), Thomas B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr* (trans. Thomas B. Falls; FC 6; New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 107.

¹³⁵ Andrew Brian McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 19.

¹³⁶ John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 1999), 56.

¹³⁷ Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.7, in *Letters, Volume II: Books 8–10. Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, LCL 59 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 289. Pliny, *Letters of Pliny* (Hoboken, N.J.: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 1999).

singing of hymns, after which they met later for a meal. It is difficult to ascertain whether the Eucharist was embedded in the meal each time they met, or whether the Eucharistic elements alone constituted the meal, but the evidence shows that they met regularly for worship and communal fellowship.

2.3 The Didache

Chapter 14 of the Didache instructs, “Κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου συναθρόντες κλάσατε ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσατε, προεξομολογησάμενοι τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν, ὅπως καθαρὰ ἡ θυσία ὑμῶν ᾗ,”¹³⁸ which could be translated as, “When gathering for the Lord’s own communion, break bread and give thanks, after having confessed your unlawful deeds, so that your sacrifice may be pure.”¹³⁹

The Didache seems to associate gathering for worship with the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist was conducted with an attitude of gratitude, which may have given rise to joy, thus corroborating Pliny’s description of the meal as harmless.

3. Observation

This section reviewed the primary sources about worship in the second century. Even though they are few, their perspectives are illuminating. Some values that were inherent in the worship of the early church include regular worship gathering which fosters communal fellowship, the reading of Scripture from which learning is passed on, the offering of prayers and thanksgiving, emphasis on ethics and right living, care for all members of the community including the absents, and communal meals. These sources indicate that worship in the early church encompassed the celebration of the Eucharist but was not limited to it. For instance, the regular reading of Scripture played a central role in instruction, spiritual growth, and communal identity. This echoes patterns in African traditions where oral transmission, storytelling, and teaching as a communal activity are vital for preserving core values and wisdom across generations.¹⁴⁰ Prayers and thanksgiving in the worship assembly provided a space where the collective could express their dependence on God, paralleling

¹³⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (2 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1:439.

¹³⁹ My translation. While Κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου is usually translated as “on the Lord’s day,” the noun “day” (ἡμέραν in the accusative case) is not present in the text. For a treatment on the subject, see this article written by Zdravko Stefanovic, “‘The Lord’s day’ of Revelation 1:10 in the current debate,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 262–264.

¹⁴⁰ On the methodological standing of oral tradition in African contexts, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012); and Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). For the theological and communal dimensions, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1–5; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); and John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

several African traditions' emphasis on communal spirituality and connecting the seen and unseen realms.¹⁴¹ Acts of care, such as looking out for the needy and ensuring the participation of those who were absent, reflect the African disposition of hospitality, shared responsibility, and an ethic of care for both kin and stranger alike.

While all of these principles could be elaborated further to demonstrate how they blend with African cultural values, it seems that the central point shared by these three sources, namely the Apology of Justin, the correspondence of Pliny with the Emperor Trajan, and the Didache, is the presence of the Eucharist. Hence, a treatment of the Eucharist is necessary. Before we move on to the Eucharist, however, the following subsection will address another early church value that fits right in the African culture. That is, the emphasis on right living and ethics.

3.1 Right Living and Ethics

Another value that emerges from the sources is the expectation that worship would issue in a transformed moral life. The sources seem to present worship as an act that either presumed or could lead to a particular kind of conduct, a moral conduct. This concern is variously expressed in all three witnesses.

Justin makes the moral expectation an integral part of the Sunday liturgy. After the reading of "The Memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets," he reports, "the president verbally admonishes, and invites all to imitate such examples of virtue."¹⁴² Justin understands that the Scriptures are read in order to be lived. Worship and ethics are joined in the gathering.

Pliny, reporting on the testimony he received from Christians themselves, identifies the same concern in a way that could have surprised him. Reporting to Trajan what he had learned under interrogation, he notes that the Christians bound themselves "by oath, not for the commission of some crime, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, never to break their word, nor to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it."¹⁴³ The gathering of various groups and associations was banned for political reasons which led to Pliny's questionings, but he found the Christian community to be one that had made its weekly gathering the occasion for swearing itself to honesty, fidelity, and restraint. The seriousness with which the assembly beheld right living was visible to an outside observer.

¹⁴¹ See John S. Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion* (London: SPCK; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975), esp. the introductory chapters on the communal character of African prayer and its mediation between the visible and invisible worlds. As Mbiti elsewhere notes, "African Religion has a deep awareness of spiritual realities. It portrays existence in terms of visible and invisible realities, human and spiritual dimensions." Mbiti, "'Never Break the Pot That Keeps You Together': Peace and Reconciliation in African Religion," *Dialogue & Alliance* 24, no. 1 (2010). 10.

¹⁴² Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67.

¹⁴³ Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.7.

The Didache extends this concern inward, into the worship of the gathered congregation itself. Confession is required of the whole community, not of a few. And the rationale for the “pure” offering could mean that the integrity of the worship depends on the integrity of the worshippers.

Altogether, these three sources demonstrate that the early Christian assembly understood ethics as part of worship. Worship in the early church was a corporate act in which the conduct of the worshippers was placed under continual review and to which the community held one another accountable. However, worship also included praise, and thanksgiving, and the celebration of the Eucharist, which seems to be an important aspect of the worship experience. The Eucharist will be addressed in the next section.

4. The Place of the Eucharist in the Early Church

While the Eucharist holds a central and distinctive role in the worship of the early church, it should be noted that the worship practices of early Christians comprised a broader set of activities. In addition to the celebration of the Eucharist, the early church gave prominence to prayer, the reading and teaching of Scripture, singing of hymns, acts of hospitality, and collections for the needy. These practices are variously attested in the writings of Justin Martyr, Pliny, and the Didache, and they together shaped the communal and spiritual life of early Christian communities. Prayer was a central feature, both as communal intercession and individual devotion. Teaching and admonition followed the public reading of sacred texts, and hospitality extended both to fellow believers and to strangers, embodying the Christian ethos of care and inclusion. It is within this broader liturgical context that the Eucharist functioned. It was not an isolated rite, but the focal point and culmination of a diverse and participatory worship life. The following section will focus specifically on the Eucharist and its meaning for the early church, while recognizing its interconnection with these other forms of worship.

Sources on the celebration of the Eucharist in the first three centuries of the early church are rare. Bryan Spinks holds that the few pieces of evidence available are informative only of the practice of a particular community or the teaching of a particular author.¹⁴⁴ The earliest evidence of the Eucharist is found in 1 Corinthians probably written by Paul in AD 55. In 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul makes clear to the Corinthian church that partaking in the Eucharist means seeking and preserving fellowship and unity with God and with one another. This same principle is reiterated in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 where Paul condemns the Corinthians for their selfishness around the Lord’s supper. He instructs them to ensure that everyone receives the same portion of food rather than attending only to their own needs.¹⁴⁵ According to Léon-Dufour, this passage highlights that the Eucharist was celebrated in the period of Paul with a meal. But it could only be referred to as the Eucharist when two conditions

¹⁴⁴ Bryan D. Spinks, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 2013), 30.

¹⁴⁵ For a full treatment on the subject, see Daniel G. Powers, *Salvation through Participation: An Examination of the Notion of the Believers’ Corporate Unity with Christ in Early Christian Soteriology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 170–171; 179–182.

are fulfilled: those present are of differing social status, that is, not all socially equal, and they all share in the spirit of brotherhood.¹⁴⁶ In this sense, all who partake of the Lord's supper become equal in status before God and a sense of community is present.

The frequency of the celebration of the Eucharist in the early centuries, though not clearly stated, can be inferred from the available sources. Justin mentioned that the Eucharist was conducted "on the day which is called Sunday." This could be a weekly, a monthly, or a yearly event. But, Pliny mentioned that they met "regularly" "on a fixed day" indicating that the Eucharist might have been celebrated frequently on appointed days.¹⁴⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the same period as Pliny,¹⁴⁸ referred to the Eucharist in various ways in the letters he addressed to the churches on his way to martyrdom. The explicit references to the Eucharist appear in his other letters. In his letter to the Philadelphians, he urged for one Eucharist.¹⁴⁹ In his letter to the Smyrneans, he treats the Eucharist in connection with the bishop and those who discard the unity of the body of Christ.¹⁵⁰ Ignatius was on his way to martyrdom, and yet the care that he took in instructing on the Eucharist proves that it was an important subject for the church at that time, or in the case of the explanations of Justin and Pliny, a point of contention. Herbert Vorgrimler aptly observes that the Eucharist holds a prominent place in the ordinances of the church, calling it "liturgy pure and simple."¹⁵¹

In addition, in the second century, many misconceptions and enmities toward Christians were brought on by their practices surrounding the Eucharist. Because they spoke of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in reference to the Eucharist, non-Christians accused them of cannibalism.¹⁵² According to Eugene LaVerdière, the controversies around the manner in which Christians celebrated the Eucharist "reflect its central position in Christian life as well as its countercultural character."¹⁵³

¹⁴⁶ Xavier S.J. Léon-Dufour, *Sharing The Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (trans. O'Connell; New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 19–21.

¹⁴⁷ Egeria mentioned that the Eucharist "was on several occasions celebrated twice in the same day." Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 57.

¹⁴⁸ Ignatius became bishop of Antioch during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (AD 98–117), hence coinciding with the time Pliny corresponded with Trajan. See Eugene LaVerdière, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the early church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 148. Though recently, Barnes argued for a dating of Ignatius letters during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161), see Timothy David Barnes, "The date of Ignatius," *The Expository Times* 120, no. 3 (2008): 119–130.

¹⁴⁹ *Epistle To The Philadelphians* 4 (ANF 1:81).

¹⁵⁰ *Epistle To The Smyrneans* 8 (ANF 1:89).

¹⁵¹ Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 132.

¹⁵² Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Reformation* (vol. 1; New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 74.

¹⁵³ LaVerdière, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the early church*, 181.

There is no consensus on the constitution of the Eucharistic meal in the early centuries. One view holds that it was celebrated with a communal meal (*agapē*). But ethnic and socio-economic diversity among the first Christians created tensions that led to the separation of the communal meal from the Eucharist in the second half of the 3rd century.¹⁵⁴ McGowan, however, disputes the differentiation between *agapē* as a general term for fellowship meals in the early church and the Eucharist,¹⁵⁵ because in some regions of the empire, the Eucharistic meal was a complete meal with bread and wine being the staple food in the Mediterranean culture.¹⁵⁶

An understanding of the probable meaning and importance of the Eucharist for the early Christians may be derived from the world of which they were a part. Richard Ascough explained that in the Graeco-Roman culture, meals served to create and preserve “strong social bonds.”¹⁵⁷ He elaborated further that, “by choosing to dine together, individuals signalled to one another a desire for connection while also separating themselves from those on the other side.”¹⁵⁸ These elaborations are noteworthy because “in designing their meals, the ancient Mediterranean adherents of the cult of Christ were drawing on the same cultural values and were constrained by the same cultural norms of the Graeco-Roman world.”¹⁵⁹ Sheerin asserts that “for that ecclesial community, the eucharist was at once the representation, the manifestation, the fact and the cause of its unity,”¹⁶⁰ hence the eucharist functions as “both symbol and source of unity in the church.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ See Daniel Sheerin, “Eucharistic Liturgy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (eds. Harvey and Hunter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 713. And Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic origins* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 114–115.

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Brian McGowan, “Naming the Feast: The *Agape* and the Diversity of Early Christian Meals,” *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997): 314–318.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Brian McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁵⁷ Richard S. Ascough, “Communal Meals,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual* (eds. Uro, et al.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 204. David Hellholm and Dieter Sängler, “The Eucharist - Its Origins and Contexts: Sacred Meal, Communal Meal, Table Fellowship in Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity,” *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 1, no. 376 (2017), 959, 963, 973.

¹⁵⁸ Ascough, “Communal Meals,” 210.

¹⁵⁹ Vojtěch Kaše, “Meal Practices,” (Oxford university press), 409. See Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*, eds. den Boeft, et al.; vol. 102 of *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language*, Trans by (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010).

¹⁶⁰ Sheerin, “Eucharistic Liturgy,” 723.

¹⁶¹ Sheerin, “Eucharistic Liturgy,” 714.

5. Summary

Upon investigating the worship experience of the early church from the earliest sources consulted, it has been observed that while forms of worship varied, certain values such as communality and participation persisted across contexts. These communal and participatory aspects are evident in the administration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist enhanced the participation of all congregants, it challenged them to strive for unity and solidarity as social status did not matter, and there was a regularity in the practice of the Eucharist.

The next section will review how the African values of right living and ethics intersect with African communalism. It will also study more closely how community and the respect for one's dignity are present in the African worship experience through the Eucharist.

6. Early Church Worship and African Values

6.1 Right Living and African Communal Ethics

The early church understood the gathered assembly as the place for ethical admonitions, confessions, and the proclamation of rightful living. African traditional ethics likewise treat moral life as a fundamentally communal matter. The maxim “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual,”¹⁶² quoted earlier through Mbiti, states an ontology of relatedness but beyond that, it conveys an ethics of accountability. When translated in the context of right living, the rule means that because the self is constituted by its relations, the self's conduct is the community's concern. Furthermore, Chepkwony's concept of human solidarity which sees everyone as children of God the father, carries the same implication.¹⁶³ Where the individual's standing is tied to the community's, moral lapses bear upon the whole.

As Justin's presider, after the reading of the Prophets, “verbally admonishes” the assembly “to imitate such examples of virtue,” African moral formation has historically been entrusted to the gathered community of elders, kin, and neighbors, whose role is to admonish, to recall, and to summon to virtuous conduct. As Pliny notes the Christians swearing themselves “by oath” not to steal, not to commit adultery, and never to break their word, traditional African communities have understood the binding word as a public, communal act. An oath in many African settings is primarily a declaration before kin and community, witnessed and enforced by them. This practice seems to parallel Pliny's description of the oath-taking of the Christian community.¹⁶⁴ And where

¹⁶² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108–9.

¹⁶³ Chepkwony, “Church and Democracy” 312–28.

¹⁶⁴ On the public, communal character of African oath-taking and its enforcement by kin and community, see Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Anselm Aleke Oyon, “Oath-Taking,

the Didache instructs on the confession of transgressions, in several African traditions also, the ritual of confession and reconciliation is crucial, especially in the presence of the gathered community.¹⁶⁵

In summary, the early church and African tradition seem to agree on the importance of stressing right living in a gathered assembly, because it affects the whole community. Justin's presider's admonition, Pliny's description of the public oath, and the Didache's confession of transgressions are instances for which African communal ethics offers long-standing analogues. The next section will present the usefulness and importance of the Eucharist within African values.

6.2 The Eucharist and African Values

Meals form a great part of community, humanity, and relationships in most African cultures. Izunna affirms that "A meal appears to be the most basic and most ancient symbol of friendship, love and unity within the traditional African context. Most Africans believe that when food and drinks are shared, it is a sign that life is shared."¹⁶⁶ The place of meals in contexts where communal identity remains strong cannot be overstated. Kustenbauder compares it to "a root metaphor in African celebrations of the Eucharist."¹⁶⁷ Additionally, Kevin Vanhoozer observes that African theologians are more interested in a theology that is "relevant, and it must make a difference; it must address people's concerns, and it must transform the structures of everyday life."¹⁶⁸ This section will further explore, based on the findings from the early church, how the Eucharist present in African worship can foster members' participation, unity, and may eradicate tribalism.

Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution in Traditional African Society: The Izzi Example," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 10, no. 13 (2024): 499–509.

¹⁶⁵ Claudia Nolte-Schamm, "The African Traditional Ritual of Cleansing the Chest of Grudges as a Ritual of Reconciliation," *Religion and Theology* 13, no. 1 (2006): 90–106. See also Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), on reconciliation rituals as means of restoring the force of life and the well-being of the community.

¹⁶⁶ Okonkwo Izunna, "Eucharist and the African Communalism," *African Ecclesial Review* 52, no. 2 & 3 (2010): 105–118, 112.

¹⁶⁷ Kustenbauder, "Rediscovering the Eucharist." [Author: this and the other Kustenbauder citations (notes 6, 53, 58) support direct quotations but give no page locator. Supply a page or paragraph number for each quoted phrase; if the online article is unpaginated, cite a section heading per SBL style for unpaginated electronic sources.]

¹⁶⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "One Rule to Rule Them All? Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 96.

6.3 Eucharist and Members' Participation

In most African cultures, the Eucharist engages the involvement and participation of everyone. People from the community bring festive foods and a package is prepared to be given later to the poor. The Eucharistic community engages in the singing of hymns and in the case of a reading, responsive litanies are incorporated for the benefit of the congregation.¹⁶⁹ In places that value communal identity, the Eucharist is fully realized only when the entire community is invested in it, from the meal to the sharing of provisions with the poor. Kustenbauder aptly observes that “The Eucharist is centered on the active participation of the entire community.”¹⁷⁰ The benefit of such participation is that believers become aware of their commitment to God and also their sense of responsibility for others around them.¹⁷¹ Bénézet Bujo argues that the Christian faith is parallel to how Africans understand life, in that every member of the community has the duty to care for his own life and for that of the other members, even the dead, since the fate of all rests in that care, much as the Christian view holds that human beings are bound to God.¹⁷² Bujo then sees the Eucharist as the “proto-ancestral meal,” and suggests that it “must not be treated simply as an object of contemplation,” but “the very life of the church and the source of its growth.”¹⁷³

6.4 Eucharist and Unity

The third stanza of the beloved Christian hymn *Onward, Christian Soldiers* affirms that, “We are not divided; all one body we, One in hope and doctrine, one in charity,”¹⁷⁴ yet Kustenbauder observes that “endless fragmentation”¹⁷⁵ is the primary cause of the church’s loss of its mission. The African church is not immune to internal divisions and fragmentation, but it has

¹⁶⁹ James Ault, “African Christianity Rising,” (Northampton, MA: James Ault Productions, 2001).

¹⁷⁰ Kustenbauder, “Rediscovering the Eucharist.”

¹⁷¹ Nlenanya Onwu, “The Eucharist as Covenant in the African Context,” *Africa Theological Journal* 16, no. 2 (1987): 145–158, 156.

¹⁷² Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (trans. John O'Donohue; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 18–23.

¹⁷³ Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 93–94.

¹⁷⁴ Sabine Baring-Gould, “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” (1871).

¹⁷⁵ Kustenbauder, “Rediscovering the Eucharist.”

been noted that the Eucharist can promote “social cohesion,”¹⁷⁶ even in national affairs. Izunna buttresses this idea by stating that in traditional African values, “A meal is even an essential component of most reconciliatory rituals.”¹⁷⁷

The Eucharist can foster unity in the African church through its fellowship aspect, emphasized by the sharing of a meal, but also through its covenantal aspect.¹⁷⁸ William Cavanaugh believes that the church as the body of Christ becomes visible on earth through the celebration of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, the church becomes the embodiment of forgiveness and reconciliation.¹⁷⁹ Though the meal plays an important role in bringing people together, it is the realization that all are one and each is accountable to God that propels the desire for unity. The Eucharist fosters communion with both God and people,¹⁸⁰ consequently, it is “God-oriented” and “human beings-oriented.”¹⁸¹

6.5 Eucharist and Tribalism

The words of Laurenti Magesa are adequate to describe the evils that plague the African continent,

Africa’s problems, continentally and within nations, are problems of gross disunity, born of abysmal failure to control the roots of all inhumanity: racial, tribal or gender pride, economic greed, unrestrained lust for power, anger, gluttony, envy, and laziness. These are the root-causes of Africa’s disunity, and therefore of its weakness, rampant poverty, ignorance, disease and, worst of all, interminable gorish stifle between what are actually kith and kin.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁶ Segkgothe N. Mokgoatšana and Mischeck Mudyiwa, “The Role of the Eucharist in National Healing, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding: A Case Study of Zimbabwe’s Fractured Society,” *Theologia Viatorum* 46, no. 1 (2022): 1–10.

¹⁷⁷ Okonkwo Izunna, “The Sacrament of the Eucharist (as Koinonia) and African Sense of Communalism: Towards a Synthesis,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 137 (2010): 88–103.

¹⁷⁸ Onwu states that the Eucharist can become a means of unity in the church when recognized “as a covenant with the Lord and with one another.” Onwu, “The Eucharist as Covenant in the African Context,” 154.

¹⁷⁹ See William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 234–39.

¹⁸⁰ George Kwame Kumi, “Basic Ecclesial Communities As Communion,” *African Ecclesial Review* 37, no. 3 (1995): 160–179, 161.

¹⁸¹ Izunna, “The Sacrament of the Eucharist (as Koinonia) and African Sense of Communalism: Towards a Synthesis,” 95.

¹⁸² Laurenti C. Magesa, “Priestly Ministry of Service and the Eucharist in Contemporary Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 30, no. 3 (1988): 145–150, 147.

Among the woes that Magesa listed which flood the continent, are the issues of “racial, tribal, and gender pride,” as well as the “stifle between what are actually kith and kin.” These issues are in their vast majority found under the umbrella of tribalism. Tribalism has caused, and continues to cause, divisions and wars in Africa, as evidenced by the conflicts in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Nigeria, and South Sudan, among others. While ethnic identity is not inherently problematic, since it gives Africans a sense of belonging to a family, a community, and a group, it begins to impede the Christian mission in Africa when believers fail to realize that in Christ they form a new identity and belong to a new community, regardless of the different tribes present in the community. Onyalla rightly observes that “The lives of many Christians in Africa are yet to be culturally and biblically integrated.”¹⁸³

For a long time, Christians have emphasized their exclusivity from the world, but when believers in Africa rightly understand their new identity and new belonging in a new community led by Christ, tribalism can be “challenged by the culture of Christianity which upholds an inclusive solidarity as opposed to exclusiveness.”¹⁸⁴ The gathering of believers together around the Eucharist table harnesses this realization of the new identity in Christ and its implications. In the words of Magesa,

“Our sharing in the Priesthood of Christ, confirmed by him at that meal is, I believe, a mandate for a unitive ministry. It requires of all of us, baptized in his name, to do all we can, by our words and action, to gather together all the people of this continent; in love, or at least in mutual understanding and tolerance.”¹⁸⁵

The inference from the quotation above is that believers have a duty to break the barriers of exclusivity and tribalism and seek unity, in the church, and everywhere. Partaking in the Eucharist conveys a visible and cognitive consciousness of this duty.

In summary, the Eucharist was an important aspect of worship in the early church as it fosters members’ participation, sense of belonging, and unity. The Eucharist can also be incorporated in the communal value of the African culture and the regard accorded to a meal. This does not mean that the Eucharist is a cure-all for all of Africa’s problems, but its communal aspect “builds the church and thus impacts every aspect of the life of the community.”¹⁸⁶

7. Some Reflections on Worship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa

The preceding sections established that the communal and participatory character of the Eucharist and the practice of right living are two convergences

¹⁸³ Don Bosco Ochieng Onyalla, “Tribalism in Religious Communities in Africa,” 47 (2005): 160.

¹⁸⁴ Onyalla, “Tribalism in Religious Communities in Africa,” 163.

¹⁸⁵ Magesa, “Priestly Ministry of Service and the Eucharist in Contemporary Africa,” 147.

¹⁸⁶ Okoye, “The Eucharist in African Perspective,” 36.

among others between early church worship and African cultural values. What follows is offered not as a set of prescriptive proposals but as a series of questions that these convergences raise for the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa. Each question asks how the church might allow the early church and African communalism, which already point in the same direction, to inform its worship while recognizing that any answer must be grounded affirmatively in Scripture and theology.

A first question concerns the presuppositions and motivations that underlie worship. Early church worship was sustained by a conviction that the gathered assembly was itself a community bound together before God. This raises a question for the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa about what it would mean to examine first the theology of communal worship? If worship is understood theologically as communion with God and with one another, how might that understanding reshape the way a congregation disciplines its members, including those who are not in regular attendance, and what concrete forms might such an understanding take?

Concerning the Lord's Supper, the Adventist ordinance that stands in continuity with the Eucharist of the second-century church, it recalls the commonality of the church's mission and strengthens its common hope in the return of Christ. In the ordinance the participants are set before God as equals, irrespective of social status, tribe, or race. Seventh-day Adventists, on theological grounds, do not celebrate the Lord's Supper as a fellowship meal but observe it as a memorial ordinance, together with the rite of foot washing.¹⁸⁷ The only biblical instruction pertaining to the frequency of the Lord's Supper's celebration is contained in the statement "as often as you drink it" (1 Cor 11:26). Herbert Kiesler stated that the Seventh-day Adventist's quarterly celebration of the Lord's Supper might have stemmed from "the American Methodist tradition, but has been found satisfactory to most church members."¹⁸⁸ To this point, the early church's frequent practice of the Lord's Supper prompts a set of questions, like what rationale should govern the frequency of the Lord's Supper in Seventh-day Adventist worship in Africa? And should that rationale consider cultural convenience or congregational preference?

A final question follows from the early church's practice of hospitality and care for the needy. What would it mean for the care of the vulnerable to be recovered as an act of worship, visibly enacted within the gathered congregation, rather than delegated entirely to separate departments or external programs? And how might such a recovery be grounded in a theology of worship that holds together the praise of God and the care of the neighbor, so that hospitality becomes a participatory act of the whole community rather than an optional addition to it?

¹⁸⁷ For a full treatment of the Lord's Supper according to Adventist Theology, see Herbert Kiesler, "The Ordinances: Baptism, Foot Washing, and Lord's Supper," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 582–609.

¹⁸⁸ Kiesler, "The Ordinances," 603.

8. Conclusion

Worship is at the heart of Christianity because it is God who initiates worship and invites us to commune with Him and our fellow men. It is communal worship that informs private worship, as in the beginning God and human beings worshipped in community.¹⁸⁹ This study observed that, on the basis of the earliest available evidence, the early church placed communal worship at the highest priority. Its members saw one another as bound by a common identity, and this reinforced their disposition toward worship.

Furthermore, not only did they worship together, but they celebrated the Eucharist. The Eucharist was central to the worship experience of the early church, and it strengthened the unity and sense of community that they experienced and exhibited. This might be one of the reasons for the insistence and regularity of the celebration of the Eucharist in the early church amid persecutions and prohibitions to gather.

Finally, this sense of unity and communion extended to those absent. The church remembered those who missed communal worship that day and instead of admonishing them to focus on their private worship, the believers sent the elements of the Eucharist to them so that they could also be a part of the celebration of togetherness. While their understanding of the symbols in the Eucharist might vary from ours,¹⁹⁰ they maintained the concept of the Eucharist as a means of reinforcing their communion with one another and with Jesus.

Additionally, the study also observed that some values in African culture, namely, respect for human dignity, communal identity, the role of meals in interpersonal relationships, and the care for the marginalized in society, also find their place in Christianity, especially when Christians gather at the Lord's table.

¹⁸⁹ In Genesis 2:2–3, God had a communal worship with Adam and Eve right after they were created.

¹⁹⁰ Justin Martyr for example identified the wine and bread presented at the Eucharist as Jesus' actual flesh and blood. See Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, 66.