

Ancient Ways, Future Paths:  
A History of Christian Worship

Part 3: The Feast

## A History of Christian Worship: Part 3

*Fade from black. Introduction.*

### **Narrator:**

Celebrations and feasts have always been an essential part of worship. Old Testament Jews marked significant events by celebrating with festival days and seasons. Once a year they gathered at the feast table to celebrate the Passover meal, and it was this meal that Jesus shared with His disciples shortly before His death and resurrection. Christians observe the feast through special days and seasons of remembrance and anticipation such as Advent and Lent, and they gather at the table to partake of the Eucharist as a participant in the redemption story. The celebration of the feast is part of a rich and enduring legacy we know today as the history of Christian worship.

*Fade to opening credits: Ancient Ways, Future Paths: A History of Christian Worship. The Feast. Fade to black.*

*Fade from black.*

### **Narrator:**

On the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, saying, “This is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same manner, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

The Eucharist is an important element of Christian worship, an act full of mystery and celebration. It is called by many names and is viewed differently among Catholic,

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Orthodox, and Protestant churches, yet all agree upon its importance and original significance. Though the Eucharist centers on Jesus and His death as atonement for sin, it is rooted in the traditions of the Jewish people and the Feast of the Passover. It was during the Passover that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples, and it was this earlier feast that first called God's people to reflect upon the story of redemption.

David Neff (Editor, *Christianity Today*):

The Christian gospel is rooted in what God has done; breaking into history to save a people that He calls out for Himself. So, why then is it important for worship to be connected to redemptive history? Because that is what the gospel is about. In Israel's history, their worship was connected to saving events. So you look at the feasts in Israel's history like Passover: that was the night when the Lamb was slaughtered and the blood was put on the doorposts. And so they celebrated Passover to remind themselves of that.

Dr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, C.P.P.S. (Institute for Liturgical Ministry):

The central celebration for Christians in this early church – the coming together around the Lord to do in memory of Jesus, what Jesus did with His disciples at what we call the Last Supper – is one of the earliest structures that we have. In fact, our supper structure of word and table dates at least in a ritual form that's identifiable to mid second century, if not earlier. The Last Supper itself was no doubt a Jewish festival meal. And some of those words and actions continue these many thousands of years later in our own Christian observances.

**Narrator:**

In the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, we find the first clues as to how different names developed for the Christian celebration of the table feast. The Apostle Paul uses the phrases “Communion,” “Lord’s Supper,” and “Eucharist” to describe the same event. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul refers to the cup and bread as the “communion” of Christ. In chapter 11, he states that Christians gather together to “eat the Lord’s supper,” and that on the night Jesus was betrayed, Christ took bread and “gave thanks.” The Greek word for “gave thanks” is “eucharsteo,” from which we derive the English word “Eucharist.” Whether we call it Communion, the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist, the sacred meal is just that: believers breaking bread together with Christ at the center.

Michael Pasquarello III, PhD (Asbury Theological Seminary):

From the time of the early church, the central act – the act that continually by God’s grace through Christ and the Spirit, constituted, recreated or renewed the life of the church – was the Eucharist. Which is “great thanksgiving,” the celebration of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the triumph of God over sin, evil and death.

**Narrator:**

In the earliest days of the New Testament church, the Eucharist was celebrated as part of a meal, along with the reading of the Word of God.

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Dr. James R. Hart (President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

In the early church, in the first few centuries of the church, the churches met primarily in homes. And in the first century and maybe even a little bit into the second century, they met around a meal. And they would have Eucharist in the context of a meal. In fact, the word was also proclaimed in the context of that same meal. There wasn't a separation of the word, not necessarily from the service of the Eucharist; they were one and the same.

**Narrator:**

In the late New Testament era church, the Eucharist began to be celebrated as a separate event from a meal of fellowship, which was called an agape meal, or love feast. The writings of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan in the early second century reveal that Christians met in the morning for the singing of hymns and, most likely, the Eucharist, and again in the evening for a fellowship meal. Cyprian, an early church writer and bishop of Carthage, confirms this pattern of a morning Eucharist and an evening fellowship meal.

Dr. James R. Hart (President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

The Agape became separated from the Eucharistic celebration probably in the first century, maybe the early second century, because of the abuses that would happen around the meals.

**Narrator:**

The abuses of the fellowship meals referred to the overindulgence in food and drink that sometimes occurred. The practice of the agape meal continued until the fourth century, when it was discontinued in the Western tradition until its renewal by the Moravians in the eighteenth century.

As for other ancient practices associated with the Lord's Supper, early church historians and documents shed further light. Justin Martyr wrote in his *First Apology* of the connection between the spoken and written word of God and the table celebration, and of the prayers of thanksgiving offered before the partaking of the Eucharist, which he described as bread and wine mixed with water.

David Neff (Editor, *Christianity Today*):

I experience liturgical worship in a variety of ways, but the real revelation came to me when I read the account in the writings of Justin Martyr where he described early Christian worship from about the year 150. When he talked about how they read from the memoirs of the apostles for as long as there was time – well, the memoirs of the apostles we would say scripture. And then they would explain it to the people – well, that's a sermon. But then they would bring forth bread and wine and have a communion service together – the word “communion” wasn't used by Justin Martyr but that's what it was. And it became clear that there were really two basic focuses in worship. One was around scriptures, and one was around the shared meal: the Eucharist, Communion, the Lord's Supper, whatever term you're used to using.

**Narrator:**

These two distinct focuses in worship continue today in some churches as there is a separate Liturgy of the Word from the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the Latin mass, the Orthodox divine liturgy, and the Anglican communion service.

Another important part of the Eucharist celebration is prayer. *The Didache*, an early church document, confirms the importance of prayer for thanksgiving and repentance. Its prayers echo the earlier prayers of Judaism, particularly a table blessing called the *Birkat Hamazon*, in which Jews offer thanks for their food and their land and ask for blessing and protection. The words of the prayer also recall significant events in the history of God's people such as the Exodus, the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land, and the building of Jerusalem and the Temple. This connection from New Testament Christians to the faith practice of their ancestors can be heard in this prayer for the cup from *The Didache*:

*Female reader:*

We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your child, which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever.

**Narrator:**

It is also found in the prayer for the piece of broken bread, taken from the loaf:

*Female reader:*

As this piece was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so

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let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever. – *The Didache, Chapter 9*

**Narrator:**

The building and unity of the Church was essential in ancient New Testament Christianity. The Apostle Paul, and later Ignatius of Loyola, both spoke of the Eucharist as vital to promoting inclusion and harmony in the Body of Christ.

Rev. Dr. John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship):

We have interesting historical records that talk about the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, being celebrated first in the public assembly and then brought to those who were unable to participate for some reason. And we have a strong sense that that practice was a way of acknowledging that the Body of Christ was not limited by the people one could see at the assembly, but it extended very tangibly to these members of the community, and also in so many prayers and writings of the early church, a strong sense of the church identifying with those who had died or were martyred.

**Narrator:**

The early church was not without certain requirements for who was eligible to participate in the celebration of communion.

*Female reader:*

On every Lord's Day – his special day – come together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone at variance with his

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neighbor must not join you, until they are reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled. – *The Didache, Chapter 14*

### **Narrator:**

In the fourth century, the *Apostolic Constitution* elaborates on the Eucharist as a worship practice.

Rev. Dr. John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship):

It's a fairly extensive document, much more extensive than the earlier Church order documents that we have. It reflects the cultural situation of a church no longer under persecution, with the freedom to develop more elaborate policies and regulations and procedures. It includes descriptions of Lord Supper practices at ordination and in regular life – congregational life – and also includes significant materials on baptism practices. One of the portions that I think is particularly significant are the long Lord Supper prayers that are found in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. So long, that some scholars have some doubt about whether these were used on a regular basis. But, nevertheless, they seem to represent ideals of the writers and compilers in the late fourth century. And there are clear resemblances with Lord Supper practices in Jerusalem, to a lesser extent in Egypt, but with other texts also that became more prominent, especially later in what we now know as Eastern Orthodoxy. And a key feature of these texts is this sweeping sense of history: praising God for creation, for God's faithfulness with the people of Israel, for the life of Jesus, for the work of the Spirit. These are comprehensive prayers. You can study these prayers and they are as comprehensive, in some ways, as a theology textbook. And the sense of the entire theological vision is prayed back to God at the Lord's Supper.

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So the Lord's Supper, then, is not just a celebration of a particular event; but this huge sense of the sweep of history.

### **Narrator:**

In *The Apostolic Constitution*, we discover a prayer of consecration that not only mirrors Scripture, but also is similar to the words spoken as part of the modern celebration of the Eucharist:

### *Female reader:*

He took bread and gave thanks to you, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body, which shall be broken for you." Likewise also the cup, saying, "This is my blood, which is shed for you; when you do this, you make my remembrance." – *The Apostolic Constitution, Chapter 4*

### **Narrator:**

In the fourth and fifth centuries, several writers address what may be best called the mystery of the Eucharist. Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century wrote that the bread and cup are transformed to the flesh and blood of Christ after being consecrated. Cyril of Jerusalem in the late fourth century, added that "whatsoever the Holy Ghost has touched is sanctified and changed."

Writers from the early Middle Ages also described some Eucharistic traditions that are still performed today. Cyril of Jerusalem noted the practice of receiving the bread in the cupped right hand, as is the tradition in some churches still today. Augustine wrote in a

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sermon of the use of the phrase “the Body of Christ” and the answer, “Amen,” being used in the Eucharist services of his day. He also stressed, as in earlier centuries, the importance of unity among Christians.

*Female reader:*

Many grapes hang on the cluster, but the juice of the grapes is gathered together in unity. So also the Lord Christ signified us, wishing us to belong to Him, consecrated on His table the mystery of our peace and unity.” – *Saint Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 272*

**Narrator:**

Chryostom, a famous preacher from the fifth century, offered his own interpretation of the Eucharist, further linking communion with the Jewish Passover and ultimately with salvation.

Lester Ruth, PhD (Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

He would say, “Now remember the story about the Passover Lamb and the blood being painted over the door post, and that’s how the angel of death knew how to pass over that house. In the say way when you took your first communion the blood of the real Lamb of God was painted on the doorposts of your soul, and that’s how you experienced salvation when you took the Lord’s Supper.

**Narrator:**

The practice of the Eucharist was largely unchanged in the early centuries of the Middle Ages, with the major advancement being that the Western Church grew more reflective

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and introspective in its observance of the Eucharist, adding silent prayer and the prayer of confession to its practice, while the Eastern tradition continued its focus on the reverence and greatness of God.

At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Church settled on a name to describe the mystical transformation that was believed to occur of the Eucharist from bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Christ. “Transubstantiation,” as it became known, was decreed by the Council as an act of divine power that could only be accomplished by an ordained priest. This pronouncement, and many others of the Church, would be challenged in the early 1500’s by leading voices of the Protestant Reformation.

Dr. Tom Boomershine (Founder, Network of Biblical Storytellers):

A dimension of the Protestant movement at the time of the Reformation was a reexamination of the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church in relation to the original scriptural sources. So, the Reformers were constantly evaluating the tradition in relation to the scriptures. That became a source of different understandings of, for example, the Eucharist.

**Narrator:**

The Protestant Reformers were concerned not only about the official Church doctrine of the bread and wine as the literal body and blood of Christ, but also of the diminishing role of the spoken word as part of the Eucharistic celebration.

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Michael Pasquarello III, PhD (Asbury Theological Seminary):

Up until the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the sermon was a way to prepare and to lead to the Communion Table, or what we call the Eucharist. The word that was read and heard through scripture, the word that was proclaimed through the sermon, was to lead to the Table where the word would be received through bread and wine and was to be taken into one's life. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a concern that the word over time had been diminished. And so, what we see is an elevation of the spoken word in a complementary way with the Eucharist. And so, to this day, Protestant denominations when they refer to their worship will say, "word and sacrament." Not one or the other, but both and. But I would say that it's the time of the Reformation that preaching is brought back into prominence and there is an attempt to try and redress what is seen as an imbalance. Not enough of the word spoken and heard, and almost an exclusive emphasis on the word received at the Table.

### **Narrator:**

The aftermath of the early Reformation was that the Roman Catholic Church decreed at the Council of Trent to uphold the doctrine of transubstantiation, while the Church of England wrote against this belief in its *Articles of Religion*. Other Reformers, likewise, had various views. Martin Luther believed that the real body of Christ was present in the Eucharist by virtue of the words spoken. Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli took the argument in a different direction. Regarding Christ's statement, "This is my body," Zwingli believed the word "is" was symbolic and not to be taken literally. John Calvin continued the dialogue on this issue, recognizing that the mysteries of God are beyond

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comprehension. The Anabaptists, and those influenced by their teachings, viewed the Eucharist as a memorial.

Dr. Tom Boomershine (Founder, Network of Biblical Storytellers):

What happened was that a range of various approaches to the understanding of Communion, of the Eucharist developed in different Protestant traditions precisely because different communities developed different interpretations of the scripture. In other communities, there has developed a tradition based on Luke's version of the Supper in which Jesus says, 'Do this as often as you do it in remembrance of me.' And in those communities, primarily Anabaptist communities, and as the Anabaptist tradition has developed, in a variety of contexts in Baptist churches and various communities that grew out of the Anabaptist tradition, the Last Supper is seen as a remembering of Jesus, as a memorial of His presence, and is specifically based on the commandment: 'Remember me whenever you do this.'

**Narrator:**

Orthodox Christians believe that the real presence of Christ is in the Holy Eucharist, and in these churches, the Sacrament of Sacraments, as it is also known, is offered only to members of the Orthodox faith.

For Catholics, the Eucharist is an essential sacrament, largely unchanged from medieval times until the reforms of Vatican II, which brought more prayer and lay involvement to the Eucharist as well as more frequent table celebrations.

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Fr. Robert Reed (Network Director, Catholic TV):

When you think of it, the Mass is beautify inclusive of all the elements of worship. We begin by making an act of faith, by blessing ourselves in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – expressing our belief in the one God, three Persons, so great a mystery. We ask humbly for mercy, because we know we are sinners. We give glory to God with all of the angels and saints. We listen to God’s holy word, and we have it explained to us. We offer ourselves completely in a symbolic way through simple gifts of bread and wine that are placed on the altar. And then those simple things become the God whom we worship. We literally believe that bread and wine are transformed into His body and blood. So that all that remains, the accidents of look and taste and smell remind us of how simple a gift this is.

**Narrator:**

For Christians today, the celebration of communion varies. Some churches offer the Eucharist weekly, while others celebrate the feast of the table monthly or only on certain special days of the year. Some offer a common cup and loaf, while others use individual cups and pieces of bread or wafers. Some use wine, while others use grape juice or water. Some churches, such as the Brethren, have reinstated the practice of footwashing as part of the Eucharist, while others may observe this practice during Lent, or not at all.

Dr. James R. Hart (President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

At the Institute for Worship Studies, we had one of our classes present a practicum that was a Eucharistic/Agape – a love feast – that included a celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

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I was so touched by that, that I brought it into my own church where I served as music minister. And our choir actually hosted this Eucharistic/Agape for our entire church on Maundy Thursday. We had the consecration of the bread before the meal; we had a very simple meal in which we also acted out the gospel in John chapter thirteen. And the consecration of the wine afterwards, and we followed up with a foot washing. And it was just a wonderful time of our community sharing the Agape love of Christ with one another in the context of the Eucharist.

#### **Narrator:**

As with other worship practices such as baptism, it remains a challenge in today's church to retain the significance and meaning of the Eucharist.

Lester Ruth, PhD (Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

As a trained Christian theologian and Christian historian teaching in an academic environment I could get all caught up in thinking these large grandiose big sweep sort of things. But, one of the reasons why I really appreciate the Lord's Supper is that it takes everything in the grand sweep of salvation, by which I know that God loves me, and everything in the grand sweep of salvation that brings me about to love God, it takes all of that and puts it in my hand and then on my tongue. And I know that all of this is real and it's for me. In the Episcopal Prayer Book there's a concluding prayer, Thanksgiving for Discipleship, and it says something to the effect, "We thank you, God, because you made us living members of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. And, you have fed us in this sacrament." So, it's not abstract anymore, not a grand sweep, I know that everything

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this creator God has done for the benefit for the entire universe is found here in my hand in a concrete way. And then ends up on my tongue, where I can indeed, as the Psalmist says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”

**Narrator:**

For contemporary Christians in a fast-paced and often distressing world, the Eucharist can be a pathway to experiencing God’s peace and presence.

Dr. James R. Hart (President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

Well, my friend and mentor, Bob Webber, use to talk about “fleeing to the Eucharist,” a place to go for refuge, for healing, for connection with God. John Wesley saw the Eucharist as being a converting sacrament. It is a place that we would go where we are almost reconverted to Christ every time we participate in it.

**Narrator:**

Like many church practices, the Eucharist remembers and celebrates the past, enriches the present, and anticipates the future.

David Neff (Editor, *Christianity Today*):

Our Eastern Orthodox friends talk about how in worship we are taken up into heaven and into the heavenly worship. Just as in the incarnation Jesus took human nature up into divine nature. In the west we always talk about the Eucharist as being a foretaste of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb that’s pictured in the Book of Revelation. So there’s this

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glorious picture that implied in all the rescue operation that Jesus was involved in. You can't separate the two. So worship does the two things, it looks back and it looks forward at the same time.

Lester Ruth, PhD (Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

An image that I use sometimes comes from watching my mom make cakes. When I was a little boy and she would take the mix and put it in a bowl and take those beaters and stir it all up and then take the batter and put it into a pan and put the cake pan into the oven on, it would eventually, a cake would come out of the oven. But in the meantime what did I have? I had the beaters with the batter on them. And what did she let me do? She let me lick that batter off the beaters. In the same way, I think what it is we are enjoying in the Lord's Supper is that batter that's on the beaters, and when the Lord comes again we are going to be enjoying the full cake at that time. But there is a real relationship between what we enjoy and receive in the Supper and what we will enjoy and receive when He comes again.

**Narrator:**

For over two millennia, the faithful have gathered at the feast table to recall the words and deeds of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for all humankind. The Eucharist spans the history of Christian worship, uniting believers across the centuries in the eternal story of God and his redeeming work in the world.

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*Fade to black. Fade from black to middle credits: The Feast: Holy Days. Fade to black and then to narrator.*

### **Narrator:**

From the festivity of Advent and Christmas to the solemnity of Lent and Holy Week, Christian worshippers today focus their times of remembrance, or what can also be called the liturgical calendar, on the life and events of Jesus Christ. However, the celebration and commemoration of holy days and seasons existed long before the time of the New Testament. In fact, the pattern of feast days and seasons dates back to the earliest history of faith practice.

Dr. James R. Hart (President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

Well, God's people have always found ways to mark time. They mark their days, they mark their weeks, they mark their years in different ways to participate in the redemptive history of God in some practical way. In the Old Testament there was a cycle of pilgrimage feasts. There were three of them where the Jews would actually make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship. And they all had different kinds of symbolism.

### **Narrator:**

To understand the significance of holy days and seasons in the Christian worship tradition, one must first look back to Judaism and the system of feast days and festivals that became the pattern for the yearly devotional and theological application of faith into everyday life.

David Neff (Editor, *Christianity Today*):

The Christian gospel is rooted in what God has done; breaking into history to save a people that He calls out for Himself. So, why then is it important for worship to be connected to redemptive history? Because that is what the gospel is about. In Israel's history, their worship was connected to saving events. So you look at the feasts in Israel's history like Passover: that was the night when the Lamb was slaughtered and the blood was put on the doorposts. And so they celebrated Passover to remind themselves of that. *Simchat Torah*, every year, it's the remembering of God's giving of the Law at Sinai. The Feast of Booths, it's remembering living in the Wilderness under God's grace. All of those things in Israel's history were looking back in order to remember what God does for them in the present. So, that's why it's important that worship be connected because we are worshipping a God who did certain things.

**Narrator:**

One person who understands the impact of Jewish thought and tradition on Christian worship is Rabbi Michael Wolf. Rabbi Wolf is a Jew by heritage, raised in a conservative synagogue, but a Messianic Jew by faith practice and Rabbi of the Beth Messiah Synagogue since 1977. Rabbi Wolf's faith journey reconciles the Old Testament prophecy of a Messiah with the New Testament fulfillment of that prophecy in the person of Jesus Christ as Messiah and Redeemer.

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Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

My father was born in Riga, Latvia, came over in the earlier part of the twentieth century when he was about 12 years old. All of his family except his immediate family, pretty much all of his family, perished in the Holocaust, but he came over to the United States before that. My mother's grandparents came over from the pale of Russia, as it's called, where many Jewish people live in Eastern Europe. I was brought up in a conservative Jewish synagogue, and it was when I was about twenty years old that I met some Messianic Jews, some Jewish believers who lived in a neighborhood near ours. I said, "God, show me somewhere in the Tanach, the Old Testament, that talks about this Jesus, Messiah, if it's really true." And the presence of God just entered the room, and I opened up to Isaiah 53, kind of miraculously, and began to read the text. When I got to, "All we like sheep have gone astray and turned to our own way, but the Lord laid on Him our iniquity," that really impacted me. I had had this sort of perspective that there wasn't anything after this life, a very materialistic perspective, you know, that many people have. And it caused a great anxiety in my heart, a kind of a spiritual vertigo, but that night when I invited the Messiah in, and really asked Him to make me what he really wanted me to be, the next morning when I woke up that place was filled that had been empty. My whole perspective was changed.

**Narrator:**

For Rabbi Wolf, there is balance and harmony between the Judaism of his heritage and the Messianic Judaism of his faith practice.

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Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

The cultural heritage and the worship practice are kind of like without conflict. One informs the other. The word “Yehudah”, a Jewish person, means “the praiser of God.”

**Narrator:**

From the earliest days of the Church, Jewish worship had a great influence on Christian worship, particularly for Christians of Jewish descent.

Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

There’s pretty clear evidence that there was an impact on the Messianic Jewish community. Many scholars feel that there were maybe over a million Jews that believed in the Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) in the first century.

Dr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, C.P.P.S. (Institute for Liturgical Ministry):

We’re not sure at what point Judaism and Christianity separated. Probably sometime from the destruction of the Temple, in 70 AD, till about the turn of the first century. At some point in there Christianity did separate from Judaism, and become its own tradition. With that separation, then, many of the Jewish practices – regular periods of prayer, ritual sacrifice in some kind of a way: very different, however, from Jewish sacrifice – would have been present.

**Narrator:**

Despite the separation of Christianity and Judaism into separate faith traditions, the Christian Church found a way to honor its Jewish roots by continuing the celebration of feasts and festival rituals as part of its worship practice.

Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

There are various things that God has given throughout the Scripture, and of course, the seven festivals, which lend themselves to worship and praise and a focus on the redemptive themes of the Scripture and the person of Yeshua, Jesus as Messiah. So, you know, all those things kind of work together.

**Narrator:**

Jews celebrate seven Biblical festivals each year, marking different seasons and Old Testament events.

Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

Every one of them has a Messianic and redemptive theme, and so they're all relevant from that point of view. A more pointed focus of personal and community redemption that relates to the festivals.

**Narrator:**

The seven festivals are the models of the liturgical seasons celebrated by Christians today. The Feasts of the Passover and Unleavened Bread commemorate the passing of

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the Angel of Death over the children of Israel, sparing the firstborn son from death in those homes where the blood of a lamb had been sprinkled upon the doorpost. The Feast of Fruit Fruits celebrates the beginning of the harvest, and the Shavuot, or Feast of Weeks, marks the giving of the law to Moses. Rosh Hashanah, or the Feast of Trumpets, marks the Jewish New Year and recalls the story of Abraham and the sparing of his son, Isaac, who was to be offered as a sacrifice. Yom Kippur, known also as the Day of Atonement, remembers the annual journey of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies in the Temple to make atonement for the people of Israel. The seventh feast, Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles, recalls the forty years spent by the Israelites in the wilderness with God dwelling among them in His tabernacle.

Rev. Dr. John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship):

Way back into the early church we Christians were developing a calendar of events to celebrate. This, of course, was not a new idea. There was an elaborate, carefully prescribed calendar in the Old Testament for Jewish practice. And in fact, many of the events in Christ's own life correspond with that calendar. So, we know, that the week of Christ's passion and death happened during Passover. And we know that in Acts 2, when the disciples gathered in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost, it was during the festival season of Pentecost, that term dating all the way back to the Old Testament. And so, early Christians continued to mark these festivals, but marked them as a way of remembering Jesus' own life.

**Narrator:**

In the early Church, time was incorporated in several ways into worship practice. There was a daily ritual of prayer, a weekly day of rest and routine days set apart for fasting, and a yearly commemoration of certain feasts and holy days, such as the celebration of Easter as a Christian Passover.

With regard to the weekly cycle of time, ancient documents such as *The Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* refer to Sunday as the day of Sabbath, which conflicted with the Jewish recognition of Saturday as the Sabbath day. While Christians in the early church gathered for worship and the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday, it was not until the early fourth century that the Emperor Constantine officially recognized Sunday as the Sabbath day. *The Apostolic Constitution*, written in the late fourth century, provides one view on why Sunday, which was also called the Lord's Day, replaced Saturday as the day of rest and worship.

*Female reader:*

But keep the Sabbath and the Lord's Day festival; because the former is the memorial of the creation, the latter of the resurrection. – *The Apostolic Constitutions, Chapter 7*

**Narrator:**

This same document also provides a historical account of why Wednesdays and Fridays were set apart as days of fasting in the early Church. Wednesday was chosen for its

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significance as the day Jesus was betrayed by Judas and Friday was chosen because it was the day Jesus was crucified.

Concerning the annual celebration of festivals and holy days, a movement grew within the church at this time to institute a repeating yearly calendar of feast days and seasons to remember significant Scriptural events.

Dr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, C.P.P.S. (Institute for Liturgical Ministry):

The Liturgical year began developing, in its flowering in its fullness, around the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to that time, in the earliest strata of Christianity, Sunday was the basic feast.

Lester Ruth, PhD (Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

The development of the Christian calendar for the year is also another important development. Someone who would have been born in the year 300, for instance, and could live to the ripe old age of 80 or 90, what they would have seen in terms of the development of the calendar would have been as radical as anything that has happened in our lifetimes. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Advent, Lent: many of those things have their origins and get established in the fourth century.

**Narrator:**

It was during the fourth century that three distinct feast periods developed in the Church. Epiphany marked the time from Christmas to the presentation of Jesus in the Temple.

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Pascha, as in the paschal or Passover feast, commemorated the events of what we call Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, while Pentecost commemorated the period of time from Christ's ascension to the Day of Pentecost. Two of the three feasts were found in Jewish worship: the Passover, in which blood sprinkled on a home's doorpost spared the life of the firstborn son from a plague of death, and Pentecost, which celebrated the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Because of the importance of these seasons and the events they represent, the feast days and times established in the fourth century have endured throughout the centuries and are still observed by Christians today.

Dr. James R. Hart (President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

We in the New Testament find that the Christian year helps us participate in the story of God as it cumulates in Jesus, in the life of Jesus. The two major parts of that are the Cycle of Light: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. And the Cycle of Life: which is Lent, Easter, Pentecost – and of course, Ascension is in there between Easter and Pentecost. So it helps us, in this cycle of the year, to remember the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ.

Fr. Robert Reed (Network Director, Catholic TV):

We do have this great journey that we make as Christians every year. You know, we celebrate the coming of our God among us in the incarnation. We reflect upon Jesus' life, His words, His miracles. We together look upon His passion, and death, and resurrection and we live that every year at Easter. And we celebrate the new life that is

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given to us as we continue to live inspired by the Holy Spirit's gift to the Church through the ages.

### **Narrator:**

The Middle Ages brought little change in the marking of Christian time as worship. One tradition that began in the second century and expanded during this period is the practice of honoring locally and well-known saints and martyrs with sermons, prayers, and feasts. These feast days grew in scope and number until the twelfth century, when Rome established itself as the sole authority for the process of canonization of saints. During the Reformation, Martin Luther advocated for the scaling back of the liturgical year and of feasts honoring saints.

Rev. Dr. John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship):

Over time, that became much more complex; far too complex for the preferences of many of the Protestant Reformers. But nevertheless, today, many churches – Catholic, Orthodox, and many Protestant churches – celebrate the liturgical year.

### **Narrator:**

As a result of the Reformation, the Church of England restricted its feast days to honoring only New Testament saints. John Wesley and the Methodists limited their overall celebration of feast or holy days. Quakers avoided holy days altogether, and the Puritans did not observe feast days except in situations where special grace abounds, such as in the celebration of the first Thanksgiving.

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The Catholic Church in the centuries after the Reformation continued to add feast days honoring saints to its liturgical calendar until the reforms of Vatican II, which reestablished Sunday as the main feast day and scaled back the Church's feast celebrations to only those saints of global or regional importance. Holy days are those feast days in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions when believers are required to attend divine service.

Today, churches vary in their celebration of the Christian calendar and in their use of a lectionary, which is a book that provides a selection of scriptures, litanies and prayers to use in the celebration of holy days and seasons.

Dr. Tom Boomershine (Network of Biblical Storytellers):

The lectionary has been a way of guiding the community through a yearly process of listening to the big story of God. What has tended to happen in churches that do not use the lectionary is that the focus of the Bible becomes whatever are the standard preaching texts of the minister, and so it becomes much more selective in relation to the parts of the Bible that may be encountered. What's good about the lectionary is that it provides a ready access and a disciplined, week-by-week exposure and engagement with a range of the scriptures.

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### **Narrator:**

Just as the lectionary leads worshippers to engage new dimensions of the Scriptures, so does the liturgical year encourage the full participation in the many facets of God's ongoing story.

Rev. Dr. John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship):

When it's well celebrated, the Christian year is remarkable for orienting us all year long to these decisive events. And also it's significant because it gives us as worshippers a balanced diet of themes and emotions – we focus on repentance in Lent and expectation in Advent and celebration in Easter – often with more balance we would ever have without that structure to guide us.

Dr. Kathleen Harmon, S.N.D.de.N. (Institute for Liturgical Ministry):

What the Liturgical year does is keep reminding me, and all of us in the Church, that the mystery of redemption, the mystery of God, the mystery of the Church, is bigger than just me. It's the community of the Church, it's the mystery of God doing God's work.

### **Narrator:**

There is a movement in the Christian Church today to recover the importance of celebrating the liturgical year.

Denis R. McNamara, Ph.D. (The Liturgical Institute, Mundelein, IL.):

One of the great emphases of the Liturgical Renewal Movement was this rediscovery of the Liturgical years: you have Advent and Lent and Christmas and ordinary time. And

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the idea is that the mysteries of Christianity are so broad, there're so wide, there're so many of them, that you really can't take them all in at one time. So there are different seasons of the year when the Church decides to emphasize different things. So Advent before Christmas takes the readings that predict the coming of Christ and it prepares you for this coming of Christ. Even though Christ already came, you get to relive it again. And then on Christmas day you get to relive the birth of Christ again because Christ's activity is eternal just as God's activity is eternal. So when you celebrate that birth on December 25<sup>th</sup> you are participating in the same reality that happen in Bethlehem thousands of years ago. And, so, the Church will use different things like different colors of vestments for the priests. Green the ordinary time, and then different vestments at different times to remind you that there are things we are suppose to remember, rather it's the suffering of Christ in Holy Week, the preparation of the resurrection in Lent, the preparation of your soul to be ready for the resurrection of Christ.

Mike Slaughter (Pastor, Ginghamburg Church):

I believe the liturgical calendar, the holy seasons kind of give rhythm to life. You know, everything from Advent, you know, through the Lenten season, the Passion of Christ. Those seasons really remind us of all the dimensions of not only God's redemptive work in the world, but our own lives and our own journey with God, and how we experience all of those dimensions. Of Christ coming afresh and new, being born in new ways and I know a lot of old people with young spirits and a lot of young people with old spirits. And that new birth needs to be a continual process. Yet in the same way death is something that we should not fear, but is a natural part of life. And it's a reminder of that

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I'm going to die – there's no come backs or do overs – and this life isn't about me, but my opportunity to use everything that God's given me – my gifts, my resources, any success I might have for God's purpose, you know, for God's glory in the world. And that Liturgical calendar – all of the seasons of the church year – remind us of that cycle of birth, life and death and how we're a part of that. And yet, always being resurrected to something new.

**Narrator:**

Part of the recovery of the Christian calendar as part of worship must be to address the human tendency to focus on the present, for what makes the feast a vital part of worship is not only its celebration of the present, but also the remembrance of past events back to the time of creation and the anticipation of the future and the Second Coming of Christ.

Rev. Dr. John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship):

I think there is a profound temptation in North American culture to shut out the past and to not think too much about the future, to live in the present moment. Some scholars in other cultural groups will say that happens in cultures that are comfortable, that have, comparatively speaking, access to many material possessions. So in a consumerist culture, where we emphasize the present tense gratification, the shaping of significant experiences, that ends up shaping worship in ways we don't always acknowledge, and we end up trimming out the remembrance of the past, the looking ahead to the future, and the whole focus becomes on generating a significant spiritual experience in the present moment. Of course, that's good. But it just misses the whole breadth of God's activity

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way back to creation and ahead to new creation, and we end up missing really the core of what Christian worship has meant for two thousand years.

**Narrator:**

An equal challenge for the modern church, whether it is the celebration of a feast such as the Eucharist or the feast of a holy day or season such as Christmas or Advent, is retaining the sense of joy and thanksgiving spoken of in the scriptures as these events are celebrated.

Brian McLaren (Author, *Finding Our Way Again*):

When a congregation harmonizes, and comes together and expresses joy I think that it's no mistake that again and again in the Scriptures, the word "joy" is associated with the presence of God and with worship, because it's very easy for religious people to make God seem grouchy and negative and grim and a cosmic killjoy who doesn't want anybody having fun. But in scripture, no. The tone that is associated with God is joyful, and when you're in the presence of God, it's time for song and dance and celebration.

**Narrator:**

For Rabbi Michael Wolf and the worshippers of Beth Messiah Synagogue, the celebration of feast days is an essential part of worship, as is the expression of joy and thanksgiving expressed through music and dance that is such an integral part of traditional Jewish worship.

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Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

In the Scripture, you clearly see this talked about. “Come, let us dance and sing unto the Lord” and just various different, the dance, this whole idea of the dance, and words in Hebrew to express that, various different words. In the book of Exodus, of course, Miriam, they dance. They danced with the tambourines, with the timbrels. There was rhythm and there was probably very well known steps. These things go back ages, ages. And there’s no question in my mind that some of the Psalms, especially the ones that have the expression of clapping or dancing or singing in them, involve dance. There’s no question. So in the Messianic community today, dance is a strong and important part of the celebration and the worship. I mean, these are all listed in the Psalms: dance, sing, shout, clap, lifting of the hands, all that stuff.

**Narrator:**

As for worship itself, Rabbi Wolf sees it as an expression of praise, directed toward God, in both a public and private experience.

Rabbi Michael Wolf (Beth Messiah Synagogue):

First of all, worship has to be in spirit and in truth, as it talks about in Johann, John 4. And so it’s really spiritual experience. It has an individual context to it and a corporate context. And so I think both of those things play into it. We can certainly worship in our own time with God and also worship in a corporate experience that includes many of the things I mentioned that have to do with how the Psalms express and other things as well. And it’s expressing our adoration toward God, of course.

**Narrator:**

The rhythm of worship as seen in the feast is a captivating expression of the events and truths, past, present and future, that have been celebrated through centuries of faith practice.

Lester Ruth, PhD (Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies):

One of the holdover effects of Jewish worship was that God was honored by remembering His saving activity. And it's appropriate to do that on a weekly basis, but it's also appropriate to do that on a yearly basis. That's just a long way of saying that remembrance, commemoration of the entire sweep of salvation history is kind of like a foundation for Christian worship. And what the Christian year does, what all the major feasts do, and all the seasons do, is they just kind of systematically walk us through all the different aspects to that. It is as if the entirety of what God has done for us, to save us and redeem us, is like a beautiful diamond. And over the course of the year we just slowly turn it, in each one of the faces of the diamond have their own beauty. But through each face we can see the beauty of the whole. So in the same way as we walk through the Christian year and celebrate the major feasts and seasons, we are slowly turning that gospel diamond and seeing all the different, beautiful nuances and aspects of what God has done for us.

**Narrator:**

When observed with a sense of reverence and joy, the celebration of holy days and seasons helps the body of Christ to remain in community with one another and to bring the worshipper into a fuller understanding of and participation in the unfolding story of God.

*Roll Credits, fade to black.*