

# **What They Knew Before There Was Theology**

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## Prologue — When the Dust Was Still Settling

The morning after resurrection wasn't a colloquium. It was shock therapy. Women walked to a tomb with spices and grief and walked away with an assignment and a story no empire had language for. The stone wasn't "rolled" like a decorative boulder; it was gone from where it had been set, like a seal snapped off the world's last certainty. Soldiers who'd stared down insurgents suddenly stared at the sky. Nobody was writing treatises. Everybody was running.

Everything in Jerusalem still smelled like Passover—roasted lamb, wine, smoke, sweat. Sabbath had just turned the corner into the first day. The city was a pressure cooker: Roman surveillance, temple politics, families in from the countryside, rumors pulsing like a fever under the skin. Resurrection didn't land in a vacuum; it crashed into a city that had precise rituals for burial and no category for a body that refused to stay buried.<sup>1</sup>

The first witnesses didn't invent theology; they tripped over reality. They weren't scheming founders with a marketing plan. They were out of breath. "He's alive" is not an ideology. It's a collision. And collisions make vocabulary stutter. The earliest proclamation is more shout than syllogism. The women don't footnote an empty slab, they announce it. The fishermen don't parse metaphysics; they touch scars.<sup>2</sup>

Before anybody argued "how divine" or "which nature," the community did what humans do when something too large to hold erupts in their midst: they sang, they named, they

confessed, they ate together and told the story until it became the shape of their days. Theology did not start the fire; it was the grammar the Church later forged to keep the fire from being smothered by clever lies.

They had no “systematic grid,” no councils, no chapter-and-verse addresses on their scrolls. They had faces and voices and the felt strangeness of a world where the wrong man—the crucified one—turned out to be the right King. When Paul later reached for words like *eikōn* [image], *Kyrios* [Lord], and *Logos* [Word], he wasn’t carving marble. He was grabbing buckets in a house already ablaze.

The miracle is not that later creeds polish the edges; it’s that the jagged center never changed. Between fear and courage, between breath and awe, something like worship broke out. That is where “theology” was born—not in silence, but in singing; not in laboratories, but in living rooms and prison cells. The Church did not begin by defining God; it began by kneeling before Him.

So this is a return trip—back to the moment when language bent under the weight of what eyes had seen. Back to the hymns and the names and the confessions that carried revelation before arguments had chapters. Back to what they knew before there was theology—and how their knowing remade the world.

## **Part I — The Songs That Remembered**

Before doctrine had sections, faith had a soundtrack. The earliest churches were not lecture halls; they were gatherings where truth arrived sung. The New Testament still carries the echo—short, tight stanzas scholars call “Christ-hymns,” lines that break into poetry mid-paragraph as if prose couldn’t hold the pressure.

### **Why they sang first**

First-century believers didn’t stumble into music because they were sentimental. In Israel, singing was how Scripture traveled—psalms braided into memory, Torah framed by cadence, festival prayers that walked with people from childhood to burial. Add a Greco-Roman world bathed in public performance and a synagogue tradition that trained the ear to catch parallelism and refrain, and you have a people formed to remember by rhythm.

Singing also made the faith portable and testable. Portable, because a creed you can hum survives a raid; testable, because heresy hates congregational unanimity. When a whole room answers the line, you can hear if the center is slipping.

### **Philippians 2 — Descent before exaltation**

Paul is not composing from scratch when he writes:

*Though He existed in the form of God,  
He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,*

*but emptied Himself... becoming obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him...*

The Greek tightens, the cadence steadies. It reads like quotation—Paul pasting a known hymn into a pastoral exhortation because nothing he could improvise would say it better. Notice the verbs tumble downward: existed, emptied, took, became, humbled, obeyed, died. Then the hinge: *Therefore... God highly exalted Him*. The arc is a V—descent into death, rise into glory. The Church learned the pattern before it learned the terms. They didn't yet debate *kenōsis* [emptying]; they watched it wash their feet.<sup>3</sup>

The structure wasn't abstract. It catechized imagination: if the Lord's path runs down before it runs up, then following Him will feel like losing before it looks like winning. The hymn taught the shape of discipleship while naming the identity of the One they followed.

### **Colossians 1 — Scope that breaks categories**

Another stanza, older than the parchment that carries it:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;  
for by Him all things were created...  
and in Him all things hold together...  
He is the head of the body, the Church...  
for it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him...*

This isn't Galilee nostalgia; it's cosmology. For Jews who breathed the *Shema* each morning—"The LORD is one"—to sing this about Jesus is not "adding a title." It is re-hearing

Israel's God in the register of a crucified man. The hymn doesn't invent divinity; it recognizes it, then dares to declare that the carpenter sits inside creation as its coherence. When the assembly sang "in Him all things hold together," they were not trying out metaphysics. They were locating themselves in a universe where the resurrected Lord is the logic under their losses.

## **Hebrews 1 — Thunder set to melody**

Hebrews opens like a temple curtain being pulled back:

*God... has spoken to us in His Son...*

*Who is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature...*

*"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever."*

The author stacks Scripture upon Scripture, letting the Law and the Prophets bear witness in chorus. Angels don't compete with the Son; they worship. Creation is not a boundary the Son cannot cross; it is His work and His inheritance. If Philippians sings the shape, and Colossians sings the scope, Hebrews sings the supremacy.

## **Songs as survival**

These weren't art projects. They were life support. In a world where Caesar carried the title *Kyrios* and temples multiply gods like trophies, singing Jesus' supremacy sorted loyalties quickly. Music formed resistance. The gathered Church didn't chant slogans "about values"; it

confessed allegiance in a key Rome could hear. You could be vague in private. You could not be vague when the room stood and sang.

Singing also did what prose rarely can: it put worship ahead of worry. The hymns carried believers past fear and into clarity. When you name the Son as the One through whom all things were made, you're not warming up the crowd—you're telling the truth your fear keeps forgetting.

### **What the hymns taught—before anyone explained**

- **Person, then blueprint.** The Church didn't first ask, "How does salvation work?" It first asked, "Who is Jesus?" Songs answered with identity, not flowcharts.
- **Cross, then crown, always both.** The V-shaped arc of Philippians became the Church's gait. Down with Him, up with Him. No shortcut, no despair.
- **Monotheism enlarged, not abandoned.** Singing Jesus inside Israel's God-language stretched Jewish monotheism without ripping it. "Lord" didn't displace YHWH; it revealed Him.

### **The synagogue and the table**

The first Christians did not jettison their synagogue bones. They read Israel's Scriptures, prayed the psalms, and then added what the synagogue never could: a table with a crucified Host. The meal became an enacted hymn—bread broken, cup poured, the narrative re-told in the present

tense. The words, “Do this in remembrance of Me,” are not a suggestion; they are a ritual that sings.

And the table sang the same as the hymns carried: body given, blood poured, therefore life. The Eucharist was Philippians 2 with bread and wine.

### **A note on memory and meter**

Oral cultures do not keep ideas safe in filing cabinets; they keep them in patterns. Parallelism, inclusion, refrains, and short creedal lines mobilize memory under pressure. A congregation can store an entire worldview if it knows the chorus. That’s why lines like “Jesus is Lord” would travel faster than any letter: they are sticky on purpose. The Church wasn’t naive about propaganda; it simply believed truth should be as repeatable as lies.

### **Worship as early orthodoxy**

Long before bishops gathered to guard boundaries with canons and anathemas, congregations guarded the center with melody. Heresy frequently came as over-explanation—flattening a mystery into a slogan. Worship refused to do that. You can’t sing *only* a man or *only* a god without the melody breaking. The hymns demanded the tension the creeds would later codify: very God, very man; humbled to death, exalted above all; one Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

### **Why this matters now**

Most of us try to solve modern drift with more white papers. The earliest Church answered drift by singing the center into place. That isn't anti-intellectual; it's pre-intellectual. Not "before thinking," but "beneath thinking"—forming the imagination that later arguments must not betray.

If your church's singing can be embraced by any polite religion, you're not singing what they sang. Theirs was a playlist that would get you misunderstood at dinner and questioned by magistrates. It still should.

## **Part II — The Confessions That Spread**

If the hymns were the heartbeat, the confessions were the spine—short enough to memorize, strong enough to die for. In the first century, a sentence could get you killed more quickly than a sword could save you.

### **Confession as rebellion, not sentiment**

"Jesus is Lord" was not a quiet devotional thought. It collided head-on with the imperial cult, where *Kyrios* and *Soter* (Lord and Savior) adorned Caesar's titles, coins, and festivals. To say those words of Jesus meant un-saying them of the emperor. The clash wasn't academic; it was legal and public.<sup>1</sup> A Christian could pinch incense to the genius of Caesar, whisper *Kyrios*

*Kaisar*, and walk out alive—or confess *Iēsous Kyrios* and risk forfeiting property, trade, and, sometimes, pulse.<sup>2</sup>

### **Baptism as oath of allegiance**

Roman soldiers bound themselves by *sacramentum*, a sworn pledge of loyalty. Early Christians borrowed the term for baptism, not by accident but on purpose: going down into water and rising in Christ was the oath that re-ordered every other loyalty.<sup>3</sup> It was not a private rite of passage; it was a public transfer of jurisdiction. You emerged dripping and marked—no longer primarily a client of your patron or a citizen of the empire, but a subject of a different Lord. The gathered church asked questions, and the catechumen answered with confession. The water was courtroom and coronation at once.

### **The earliest formula: cross, grave, resurrection**

Before the evangelists wrote, Paul recited:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:  
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,  
and that He was buried,  
and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (1 Cor. 15:3–  
4)

The cadence, the parallel lines, the “received/delivered” language—everything signals tradition in circulation before Paul penned the letter.<sup>4</sup> This creed is not commentary; it is scaffolding. It holds the shape of the Gospel in four strokes: died, buried, raised, witnessed (vv. 5–8). When persecution scattered assemblies, they could carry this much in memory and rebuild.

### **“One Lord, one faith, one baptism”**

By Ephesians, the family password had become architecture:

“There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” (Eph. 4:4–6)

Unity here isn’t sociology; it’s confession. “One Lord” puts a crown on Jesus’ head and removes it from every rival—imperial, spiritual, tribal.<sup>5</sup> “One baptism” says the oath is non-duplicable; you cannot be multi-pledged. The early church did not stabilize community with personality or preference but with repeated allegiance.

### **The church’s first prayers in one word**

The earliest prayers were tight enough to fit on the breath:

- **Maranatha**—“Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor. 16:22). An Aramaic cry left untranslated in Greek congregations, as if to keep the prayer in the tongue it was first shouted.<sup>6</sup>

- **Kyrie**—“Lord, have mercy.” A title, a plea, a melody compact enough for catacombs.
- **Amen**—not the period at the end of prayer but the signature of faith: “true/so be it,” borrowed from Israel and carried through the table and the streets.

Short prayers traveled where scrolls could not. They trained reflex more than they furnished information. When the magistrate asked a leading question, the heart had already learned its answer.

### **The Didachē’s plain courage**

The *Didachē*—a late first- or early second-century church manual—reads like someone writing instructions on the run. It sketches baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” prefers living (running) water, and sets fasting days distinct from surrounding Judaism.<sup>7</sup> The Eucharist prayers are spare and fierce: thanksgiving for “life and knowledge” revealed through Jesus, and a plea that the scattered grains (the churches) be gathered into one loaf (the kingdom). Simplicity here isn’t thinness; it’s clarity under pressure. The document assumes confession and shapes it into durable practice.

### **“To Christ as to a god” — how Rome overheard worship**

Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia-Pontus around A.D. 112, interrogated Christians and reported to Trajan that they met “on a fixed day before dawn and sang antiphonally to Christ

as to a god.”<sup>8</sup> A pagan official, with no reason to flatter, accidentally leaves us a window: the confession had a tune, the tune had content, and the content placed Jesus in the category that Roman piety reserved for deities—and Roman law regulated. Pliny’s note also mentions pledge-like commitments to moral behavior (no theft, no adultery), which tells us confession was inseparable from conduct.

### **Public, embodied, risky**

To modern ears, “confession” sounds private—a statement you keep inside. To the early church it was vocal, visible, time-stamped by water and table, and verified under scrutiny. You didn’t get to smuggle a private Jesus into a public Caesar. Every time believers said His name, they re-drew the map of their world and dared the old map to protest.

### **What we lost—and can recover**

We turned their lifelines into wall art. They turned breath into creed and creed into courage. Recovering their way does not require novelty; it requires nerve. The same sentence still weighs the same: *Jesus is Lord*. It shortens arguments and lengthens courage.

## **Part III — The Names They Reached For**

The first believers didn't invent titles as poetic garnish; they reached into Israel's Scriptures and the Greco-Roman vocabulary to find words that could bear what they had seen. Every name is an attempted translation of awe—and every one strains, because the reality outruns language.

### **Why names mattered before definitions**

Names were how the church fenced mystery without flattening it. Say too little and you drift into denial; say too much and you domesticate the uncontainable. Names balanced both dangers. They carried Scripture forward and set heresy to the curb. Before councils forged creeds, congregations guarded the center with titles that could be sung and sworn.

### **Son of Man — authority wrapped in suffering**

To modern ears the phrase sounds modest. In Daniel 7, it is volcanic. “One like a son of man” comes with the clouds to the Ancient of Days and receives dominion, glory, and a kingdom that shall not pass away.<sup>9</sup> When Jesus takes that title for Himself and links it to suffering and vindication, He fuses authority and affliction in a single identity. The early church learned to say: the judge is the one with wounds; the ruler is the one who serves. “Son of Man” rewrites royalty with a cross in the center.

The title also performs a quiet revolution on expectations. Many hoped for a throne descending in fire; instead they received a carpenter ascending through death. The clouds of

Daniel become the cloud of ascension, and the dominion granted there interprets the mission here. You don't follow the Son of Man by grasping; you follow by losing and being raised.

### **Son of God — the royal title widened into eternity**

Israel could call itself God's son; Davidic kings bore the title as representatives of the nation's covenant. After the resurrection, the phrase dilates. The centurion's "Truly this was the Son of God" at the cross is Rome's accidental confession that the crucified man is no mere agent.<sup>10</sup> When the church names Jesus "Son," it doesn't mean "less than" the Father; it means "of the same life"—the Father known in flesh, the exact imprint walking into Galilee's dust (Heb. 1:3). The title keeps the story anchored in Israel while refusing to let it shrink back to royal metaphor.

### **Kyrios (Lord) — the name with weight**

In the Greek Scriptures (LXX), Israel's unpronounced divine name YHWH is rendered *Kyrios*.<sup>11</sup> To apply *Kyrios* to Jesus is not flattery; it is identity. Paul quotes Isaiah's "every knee shall bow" and applies it to Christ in the very hymn that sings His descent and exaltation (Phil. 2:10–11; cf. Isa. 45:23). The church did not simply say, "Jesus is like the Lord." It said, "Jesus is the Lord Israel adores."

Rome heard this, too. *Kyrios* was Caesar's word. Give it to a crucified Jew, and you have committed semantic treason. Give it to Him in worship, and you have committed political

treason as well. The name sorted allegiances clearly enough that no magistrate needed a theology degree to understand the issue.

### **Logos (Word) — reason and power made flesh**

John chooses a bridge word that could speak to Greek and Jew simultaneously. For Greeks, *logos* named the rational principle that orders the cosmos; for Israel, *dabar* (word) is power in motion—speech that accomplishes what it says (“Let there be...”). John welds them: “In the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh” (John 1:1, 14). The logic behind existence put on skin; the creative speech of God moved into a neighborhood with a postal route. The prologue is not a philosophical essay; it is temple theology—the glory that once dwelt in tent and temple now dwelling in a person.<sup>12</sup>

### **Image — the visible of the invisible**

Paul calls Jesus “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Not a mirror reflecting back a distant light, but the radiance of that light itself (Heb. 1:3). The line does double work: it gathers creation under Christ and it recovers humanity’s fractured vocation. The Image restores images. In Him, what Adam bent, Abraham hoped, and Israel longed for finally stands upright—and breathes on us.

### **Shepherd — rule as rescue**

“Good Shepherd” is not a pastoral postcard; it is royal polemic. Israel’s prophets indicted bad shepherds—leaders who fed on the flock—and promised that God Himself would shepherd His people and set over them a shepherd from David’s line (Ezek. 34). Jesus takes the title and pairs it with a claim only God can make: “I lay down My life for the sheep... I have other sheep... I lay it down that I may take it up again” (John 10). The title braids kingship, sacrifice, and mission into one frame. The earliest churches learned to recognize leadership by this yardstick: if it does not bleed to rescue, it does not rule like Him.

### **Alpha and Omega — time bracketed by a person**

Revelation refuses to let time be an impersonal river. Beginning and end bend around Jesus. “I am the Alpha and the Omega... the First and the Last.” The title is not numerology; it is sovereignty. Rome can date coins; Jesus dates history. For assemblies facing exile, famine, and prison, this name turned panic into patience. The last word has already been spoken, and it has a face.

### **Names as anti-heresy**

Gnosticism seduced with a docetic Jesus (appearing human, not actually so). Adoptionism offered a merely human Jesus adopted by God later. Arianism would eventually minimize the Son to “first among creatures.” The names the church already prayed and sang left no oxygen for these options. *Son of Man* guards His humanity; *Son of God* and *Kyrios* guard His

deity; *Logos* guards His pre-existence and agency; *Image* guards likeness without collapse; *Shepherd* guards His mission's cost. Before councils drew lines, names drew gravity.

### **Language cracking where glory presses**

Every title eventually groans under the freight. That is not failure; it is fidelity. Names confess without pretending to contain. The church learned to live with language that points beyond itself—just as the Witness whose names they bore kept outrunning their categories by rising from graves and raising them too.

## **Part IV — The Gospels as Testimony, Not Textbook**

The Gospels aren't neutral biographies that wandered into church life; they are confessions set down before the singers died. They do not pretend to show *everything* Jesus did; they show *enough* to force a verdict. That is not a flaw in genre. That *is* the genre.

### **Memory before manuscript**

The apostolic movement began oral. In a world formed by synagogue cadence and household storytelling, memory was a practiced craft, not a party trick. Teachers repeated, disciples echoed, communities rehearsed key episodes until they were shared property. Parallelism, inclusion, and short chreiai (concise anecdotes) made truth portable under pressure.

The Jesus tradition survived arrest because the apostles had already put it to music and meter in their bones.<sup>13</sup>

### **Why they had to write**

Oral doesn't mean permanent. Witnesses age; persecution thins rooms; distorters multiply. Luke admits urgency up front: "many have undertaken... it seemed fitting... having investigated everything carefully... to write it out in consecutive order" (Luke 1:1–4). That's triage language. He is not chasing novelty; he is arresting amnesia.<sup>14</sup> Mark moves like a man writing down a fisherman's breath—"immediately" tumbling across the page—because he *is* writing Peter's recollections as the nets finally fall from old hands.<sup>15</sup> Matthew frames Jesus inside Israel's story for communities choking on synagogue hostility after the temple fell. John, last to speak, refuses to rush and writes a theological portrait that renders the meaning behind the motions. They did not pick a day to start a new "religion." They picked a day to stop the loss.

### **Four angles, one light**

- **Matthew** locates Jesus in the covenant bloodstream—genealogy, fulfillment formulas, the new Moses on a new mount. He wants Jewish and Gentile believers to see that nothing has been abandoned; everything has found its center.
- **Mark** puts us in a storm. You can feel Peter's voice behind the verbs, unvarnished and painfully honest. Why keep the embarrassing bits—the rebukes, the failures—unless the point is truth, not propaganda?

- **Luke** writes with physician steadiness and a historian's conscience. He loves widows, Gentiles, and margins, and he tells you plainly he interviewed people.
- **John** opens in eternity so no one can reduce Jesus to a Galilean guru. Signs are selected, not stacked; the point is faith, not footage.

The Church did not harmonize them because convergence, not sameness, authenticates testimony. If four eyewitnesses tell the exact same story in the exact same voice, a good magistrate gets suspicious. Divergent angles around one light read like real memory.

### **Amanuenses, scrolls, and how stories travel**

Ancient writing was collaborative. Authors often dictated to trained hands (amanuenses) who could pace, punctuate, and format for reading aloud.<sup>16</sup> Scrolls (and later codices) moved along networks of house churches, where leaders read, copied, and sent them on. That is why addresses and asides peek through (“Let the reader understand,” “Greet so-and-so”). The texts were meant to breathe in rooms, not sit in glass cases.

### **Why they didn't sanitize the story**

If the goal were sales, you cut Judas, soften Peter, delete the cry of dereliction, and turn the resurrection into a tidy epilogue. Instead, the Gospels keep the choke points—Gethsemane's agony, the women as first witnesses (a risky move in the ancient world), the disciples'

unbelief—because faith isn’t manufactured by airbrushing; it is provoked by unhideable reality. Rome could explain away slogans. It struggled to explain an empty tomb, hostile witnesses turning loyal, and a movement that sang while bleeding.

### **Pressure from the edges**

Even as the Gospels were settling, distortions were breeding. Some tried to make Jesus a safe spirit who only *seemed* human (docetism). Others wanted a domesticated moralist, a tame wisdom teacher. Others stole the name “gospel” to smuggle in alien cosmologies. The canonical four outlasted these not because bishops liked them best, but because churches recognized the Voice they already knew. The rule of faith acted like a tuning fork: the writings that harmonized with apostolic preaching were kept; the discordant were named and set aside.<sup>17</sup>

### **Testimony, not tactic**

The Gospels are not trying to “win a debate.” They are handing over sworn memory. “We have seen and testify,” John says, and then adds the line that makes a magistrate put down his stylus: “and our hands have handled the Word of life” (1 John 1:1–3). No committee manufactures that sentence. A committee would legal-proof it. Friends write like that when they would rather be believed than be safe.

## **Part V — When Worship Outran Words**

Before theology arrived with definitions, worship arrived with defiance. The Church did not sing to pass time; it sang to tell the truth under hostile skies.

### **House churches and borrowed tables**

The earliest gatherings were households—courtyards, tenement dining rooms, workshops after hours. Someone opened the door, a letter was unrolled, prayers were offered, bread was broken, wine poured, and names were spoken over the meal that Rome could overhear if it tried. The space was ordinary; the actions were not. In apartments that smelled like olive oil and wet clay, the world above their roofline was redefined.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Table as resistance**

“Do this in remembrance of Me” was not a private nostalgia act; it was armed memory. Bread and cup named a death that dethroned death. The Eucharist refused Rome the last word by re-presenting the Lord’s death “until He comes.” The Church did not argue for the resurrection at the Table; it enacted it. That is why outsiders accused Christians of cannibalism: people heard the language of body and blood and—devoid of the story—misread the sign.<sup>19</sup> The believers kept eating, because the Table was how courage tasted.

### **Prayers that fit in a breath**

Persecution squeezes liturgy down to what the lungs can hold: *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy). *Maranatha* (Our Lord, come). The Lord's Prayer, compact and comprehensive, catechized desire: Father first, kingdom before bread, mercy before self-defense. Fasting days shifted away from the synagogue's pattern to mark identity without contempt.<sup>20</sup> If someone confiscated your scrolls, they still couldn't take the prayers you'd memorized.

### **Singing in chains**

Acts does not tell us Paul and Silas *felt* like singing at midnight. It tells us they did (Acts 16:25). Worship under weight did what argument rarely achieves: it pressed the Gospel's claims into the joints. "Jesus is Lord" is lighter when you have a paycheck and an invitation to brunch. It becomes a granite sentence when you have bruises, court dates, and a magistrate who expects you to flinch.

### **Martyrs as living liturgy**

Ignatius writes on the way to execution and calls the cross "the Gospel" in compressed form. Polycarp prays at the stake, blessing God for counting him worthy to be "numbered among the martyrs." Perpetua's diary shows a young mother keeping her baptismal identity when every lever—family, infant, state—pulls the other way.<sup>21</sup> Rome called it obstinacy. Heaven called it worship.

Martyrdom wasn't sought; it was suffered. The point was not to die dramatically but to die truthfully. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," Stephen breathed, and turned stoning into psalmody. The blood didn't make new doctrine. It made the old doctrine undeniable.

### **Pliny's headache and the church's habit**

When Pliny reports that Christians "met on a fixed day before dawn and sang antiphonally to Christ as to a god," he also notes they bound themselves by "a solemn oath" not to crime but to holiness—no theft, no adultery, no lying, no fraud.<sup>22</sup> Worship slid directly into ethics and back again. Rome could outlaw gatherings; it struggled to outlaw a people who thought faithfulness itself was a form of praise.

### **Worship drew the fence before the councils did**

Heretical slogans often "made sense." Worship refused to. It made us kneel before a crucified Lord instead of tidying Him into a system. The creeds later safeguarded what the churches already enacted. "True God from true God" is not a philosopher's flourish; it is a way to keep the song from being flattened. Theology caught up to do what liturgy had been doing all along: preserve the scandal.

### **Why they kept gathering**

Gathering was costly. So why keep doing it? Because isolation warps memory, and Christianity is memory guarded in company. The call-and-response of psalms, the shared cup, the exchanged peace—these did not anesthetize fear; they braided a people who could remember the truth when scattered. That is why, to this day, the enemy’s first tactic is to make worship optional and then incidental. It is also why the Church’s simplest defense has not changed: show up, sing the center, share the bread, and tell the story again.

### **Epilogue — Theology Was the Echo**

They didn’t begin with a syllabus. They began with an earthquake. A stone moved, a name spoken, a room full of fear turning into a room full of singing. Theology came later, like a careful map sketched after someone had already crossed the mountains.

That order matters.

When the Church forgot it, we started grading each other’s maps and stopped walking. But the first believers never had that luxury. Their creed fit on one breath—*Jesus is Lord*—and then they spent the breath to say it out loud. Worship gave them a center; truth gave their worship bones. The hymns held the shape of the story; the confessions kept their courage honest; the names fenced mystery without strangling it; the Gospels pinned memory down before the witnesses went quiet; the table rehearsed victory until it felt ordinary.

This is what they knew before there was theology: the Word took on lungs and bled; the Image wore scars and still called it glory; the Shepherd laid down His life and then took it up again. They didn't debate whether this was "practical." They just kept showing up—house to house, dawn to dawn—singing to Christ as to God, refusing Caesar the final word and refusing despair the microphone.

We inherit their creeds on paper. We need their courage in our bones.

So let the order be restored: awe first, then articulation. Knees first, then categories. Let the names do their work—*Son of Man*, *Son of God*, *Kyrios*, *Logos*—until arguments run out of air and worship remembers what's true. And if we must write theology (we must), let it be the echo of a people who have already tasted and seen. Let it be scaffolding around a fire, not a museum around an artifact.

Before theology was a system, it was a song. Sing it until the room believes again. Then, if needed, footnote the melody.

## Endnotes

1. On first-century Jewish burial customs and festival context, see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 219–31; and Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Remains of His Day* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 25–44.
2. The language of tactile witness (touching scars; proclamation before explication) is concentrated in Luke 24:36–43; John 20:24–29; 1 John 1:1–3. For the

apologetic texture of tangible witness, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 359–402.

3. On Phil. 2:6–11 as a pre-Pauline “Christ hymn” with a descent–ascent (“V-shape”) structure, see Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 38–67; and N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 56–98.

4. The creed-like form of 1 Cor. 15:3–5 (“received/delivered,” parallel lines) is widely recognized; see James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 67–74; and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Resurrecting Jesus* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 233–46.

5. On Eph. 4:4–6 as a unity/confession formula, see Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 424–36.

6. The Aramaic *maran atha* preserved in Greek contexts (1 Cor. 16:22) signals very early liturgical usage; see Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 134–36.

7. *Didachē* 7–10 for baptism (trinitarian formula; “living water”), fasting days, and Eucharist prayers; see *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed., trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 343–55.

8. Pliny the Younger to Trajan, *Epistles* 10.96–97: “They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn... and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god”; text in *Pliny: Letters, Book 10*, trans. Betty Radice, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 289–95.

9. Daniel 7:13–14 as the backdrop to Jesus’ “Son of Man”; see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 142–58; and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 291–302.

10. “Son of God” as royal and more-than-royal in the passion narratives: Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39; see Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 45–62.

11. *Kyrios* as the Septuagint rendering of the Tetragrammaton and its application to Jesus (esp. Isa. 45 in Phil. 2): see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 182–232.
12. *Logos* as temple-glory theology in John 1: see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 285–304; and C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 128–35.
13. On oral tradition, *chreiai*, and memory practice, see Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 84–121; and Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Themelios* 20.2 (1995): 4–11.
14. Luke’s prologue as historiographic preface: Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
15. Papias on Mark as Peter’s interpreter (*Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15); text in *The Apostolic Fathers*, Holmes, 561–63; see also Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 203–39.
16. On amanuenses and letter production/performance, see E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 27–76.
17. Rule of faith and reception of the fourfold Gospel: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8; see Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 183–210.
18. Archaeology and social portrait of house-churches: Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 45–74; and Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 3–40.
19. Pagan accusations of “Thyestean banquets” (cannibalism) and Christian replies: see Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.2–6; Tertullian, *Apology* 7–9; texts in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 341–44, 17–21.
20. *Didachē* 8–10 on fasting days and Eucharist prayers; Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 346–53.

21. Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans; Martyrdom of Polycarp*; and *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 3–10; texts in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 229–39, 315–29; and Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

22. Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96–97 (oath to moral behavior; fixed-day assembly); Radice, *Letters*, 289–95.

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