

Sunday Worship

“We hold our common assembly on the Sun’s Day because it is the first day, on which God put to flight darkness and chaos and made the world; and on the same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead; for they crucified him on the day before Saturn’s Day, and on the Sun’s Day, which follows Saturn’s Day, he appeared to his Apostles and disciples and taught them these things, which we have handed on to you for your consideration.”ⁱ

--Justin Martyr (100–165), *The Apology*

The driving thought of the early Christians was Christ’s love, and Him crucified, risen, and living in His Church. This was celebrated every week, especially on the resurrection day - Sunday. The revelation of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27) brought it all home on a personal level.

Believers met in synagogues, homes, and churches. The earliest Christians continued with synagogue and temple experience as long as they were tolerated, but to these they added meetings in house churches for communion and love feasts. Sometime after 70 AD, Christians met in homes, desert places, graves of martyrs, and the crypts of the catacombs in various places. By the time of Tertullian (150-220 AD), the concept of *church* was a building in which to meet. His contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, mentioned the double meaning of church—a building and the people of God. After the middle of the third century, the construction of churches flourished. After the Edict of Milan in 313 in which the Church was legalized, incorporated, and approved, the building of churches became quite common.

Meeting on Sunday was accepted from the beginning. Sunday was the first day of the week, and afterwards, it was called the Lord’s Day. Jesus rose from the dead on this day and it instantly became the most important meeting day of the Christian week. It was a day of thanksgiving and joy. We see evidence of its importance in Scripture. Acts 20:7 - Paul preached to the disciples at Troas until midnight; 1st Corinthians 16:2 - Paul ordered the Corinthians and Galatians at their weekly services to give charitable contributions. John was worshipping and received the *Revelation* on the Lord’s Day (Acts 1:10).

Christians still went to synagogue on Saturday, but it became primarily as a launching place to share the gospel with the Jews. A perusal of Paul’s missionary journeys would prove as much. Sunday quickly became a replacement for the Jewish Sabbath. Already by the time of Ignatius (110 AD), Sunday was the Christian Sabbath. Tertullian later associated it with the idea of Sabbath rest.ⁱⁱ

The fact that Sunday worship was not contradicted in the second century can only be explained by the fact that it was authorized by the apostles themselves

and passed on as a part of tradition and the rule of faith. As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Justin Martyr said, “We hold our common assembly on the Sun’s Day.” This was not convenient, however. The lowly condition of the majority of Christians and their dependence upon heathen employers and masters who did not celebrate Sunday give some idea of how these went against the norm of society. Under Constantine, Sunday became a legal holiday.

Exhortation to daily prayer was given by Hippolytus. In the *Apostolic Tradition*, he advocated Christians to pray seven times a day: on rising, at the lighting of the evening lamp, at bedtime, and midnight. If at home, also pray at the 3rd, 6th, and 9th hours in association with Christ’s passion.

What happened at church meetings? The parts of worship in house churches included: preaching the gospel, reading portions of the Old Testament, and prayer. It could be done in various forms, including the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and the Aramaic *Maranatha*, “Come, Lord Jesus” in 1st Corinthians 16:22, Revelation 22:20, and in the *Didache* at the end of the Eucharistic liturgy.ⁱⁱⁱ There was also singing in festive poetic style, confessions of faith, plus the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

With respect to music, Jesus and the apostles sang hymns (Matthew 26:30) and Paul exhorted Christians to sing in worship (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). Singing and chanting were customary in the synagogues so they were carried over into the house churches. The surviving sources that explain early Christian worship are limited, but we have some: Chants of “Alleluia” were used in a chant of praise. Philo of Alexandria said that early ascetic communities near Alexandria implemented choirs of men and women. Below are two hymns. The first is an example of a 2nd century hymn of joy taking the form of a wedding hymn; the second is a 3rd century praise of the Trinity:

Praise the Father, you holy ones. Sing to the Mother, you virgins.
We praise. We the holy ones extol them.
Be exalted, brides and bridegroom; for you have found your bridegroom,
Christ. Drink your wine, brides and bridegrooms.

While we hymn Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, let all creation sing Amen,
Amen.
Praise, power to the sole giver of all good things. Amen, Amen.

By the end of the 6th century, chanting as Rome did it became the model for the rest of the Christian world. By the 9th century, under Pope Gregory the Great, it became known as Gregorian.^{iv}

Other days besides Sunday were important in early Christian circles. Wednesday and especially Friday were devoted to commemoration of the Lord's suffering. There were also yearly festivals. Easter (Passover) and Pentecost were the two main festivals. Christmas was not celebrated until the 4th century. The Easter controversy has already been mentioned, so it was observed according to whether one resided in the west or east.

Chapter Seven: Early Christian Living

ⁱ Henry Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 63.

ⁱⁱ Philip Schaff, *History of the Early Church: Volume 2* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002),
201 -205.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: Wyndham Hall Press, 1953), 13.

^{iv} Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1993), 272 – 277.