

## The Lord's Day: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Foundations for Sunday Worship

### Introduction

In contrast to the Law of Moses, the New Testament does not require God's people to observe specific days for rest, worship, or the celebration of religious festivals. Perhaps the clearest example of this can be seen in Paul's instruction in Romans 14:5: "One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind."<sup>1</sup> In such matters of liberty, believers should do what is right before God according to their consciences (vv. 1–12) and what demonstrates love to one's brothers and sisters in Christ (14:13–15:7). This gives the modern church freedom to schedule weekly corporate worship as most appropriate and effective in the local church's context. However, this does not mean that the decision regarding the day and time of regular corporate worship is without theological importance and consequence.

The term "liturgy" generally conjures up images of worship services with robed clergy, readings from a lectionary, and responsive congregational recitations. In short, we associate the term with formulaic modes of worship. However, the term "liturgy" in and of itself refers simply to our patterns of worship, no matter the style. In other words, all churches have a liturgy, regardless of whether we would label them as high church, low church, seeker sensitive, etc. While the content and spirit of our worship is paramount, our forms and patterns in worship (our liturgy) also communicate our beliefs and shape us in important ways. This is reflected in God's wisdom in establishing the rituals of baptism and the Lord's supper as ordinances for the church, ways of physically remembering and celebrating the gospel as a congregation. Another example of this at Cornerstone is our habit of singing a song reflecting on Christ's crucifixion before communion and a song celebrating his resurrection after communion. These are patterns meant to reinforce the centrality of Jesus's death and resurrection for us as God's people.

Therefore, we should approach the question of when we choose to worship corporately not only from the perspective of Christian liberty and missional focus but also from a desire to shape our liturgy in a way that weekly focuses our hearts on Jesus and his saving work. To this end, I will explore both the historical precedent and theological symbolism of meeting together to worship Jesus on Sunday mornings.

### Historical Precedent

While we submit to the final authority of scripture only and are not bound by church tradition, it would be unwise to discard the wisdom and insight we can gain from our brothers and sisters who have served Christ faithfully throughout the history of the church. Regarding the day and time of corporate worship, we find that the tradition of worshipping Jesus on Sunday is an ancient tradition that was viewed as theologically significant as early as the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. Here, I will briefly survey the evidence for Sunday corporate worship in both the New Testament and the earliest writings of the post-apostolic church.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Paul's assertion of Christian liberty regarding Sabbath observance in Gal 4:10–11 and Col 2:16–17.

## New Testament

### *1 Corinthians 16:1–2*

<sup>1</sup> Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. <sup>2</sup> On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

In this passage, Paul gives the Corinthian church instructions to collect funds for an offering for impoverished Christians in Jerusalem on a weekly basis until he comes to visit them and collect the offering. The passage mentions that this should be set aside “on the first day of every week,” implying that the Corinthian church gathered corporately on Sundays (the first day of the week in antiquity) rather than on the Sabbath (Saturday, or the last day of the week in antiquity). Since this letter was likely written in 54 or 55, this would represent the first reference to Sunday worship in the church.<sup>2</sup>

### *Acts 20:7*

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.

This passage mentions the church in Troas gathering on Sunday for fellowship and teaching. This example should caution us against seeing complete continuity between the tradition of Sunday morning corporate worship and practice in the New Testament period, since it seems that this particular gathering occurred in the evening rather than the morning.<sup>3</sup> Paul would have visited Troas in 57 or 58 AD, and Acts was probably written somewhere between the 60s and 80s AD.<sup>4</sup>

### *Revelation 1:10*

On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...

This is the first reference to Sunday as “the Lord's Day,” which shows an early association between Sunday and the resurrection of Jesus. John probably wrote Revelation in the mid-90s.<sup>5</sup>

## Early Church

### Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Magnesians*, chapter 9

And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days of the week.<sup>6</sup>

Ignatius penned this letter shortly before his death in 107. It attests to the early and regular observance of the Lord's Day as a gathering for Christian worship. Note that the association with Jesus's resurrection is explicit and that Ignatius refers to this day as a festival, a weekly celebration of Jesus's resurrection.

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<sup>2</sup> See Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 21, 324.

<sup>3</sup> See David Schrock, “Seven Things You Should Know About the Lord's Day,” The Gospel Coalition (January 17, 2018) <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/a-brief-history-of-sunday/>. Remember also that Ancient Jews viewed that day as beginning at sundown. So, this meeting likely occurred on what we would call Saturday night (but was regarded as the beginning of Sunday at this time and place).

<sup>4</sup> See John B. Polhill, “Introduction to the Acts of the Apostles,” ESV Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008) 2073. See also the note on Acts 20:3 in the ESV Study Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, “Introduction to the Revelation to John,” ESV Study Bible, 2453.

<sup>6</sup> From Steven A. McKinion (ed.), *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 45.

*The Didache*, chapter 14

But every Lord's Day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.

The *Didache* was a church manual written in the early 2nd century. It also attests to the Lord's Day as the weekly worship gathering for the early church.<sup>7</sup>

Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 67

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.<sup>8</sup>

This selection from Justin Martyr provides a mid-2nd century witness to the practice of gathering for corporate worship on Sunday. He connects the significance of Sunday to Jesus's resurrection but also relates Sunday back to the first day of creation (Gen 1:3–5).

### Summary

The examples cited above demonstrate that corporate worship on Sundays was a practice that developed very early in the history of the church and that this worship time held theological significance for early Christians as a commemoration of Jesus's resurrection. Though there is no biblical command for the practice, there is clearly biblical and historical precedent.

### Theological Symbolism

The value in these early witnesses to the practice of Christian corporate worship on Sunday lies not only in their attestation to the practice but also in what they reveal about the meaning of this pattern of worship to early Christians. Worshipping Jesus corporately on Sunday was clearly tied to Jesus's resurrection occurring on the first day of the week. When viewed this way, every Sunday is a mini-Easter, a weekly celebration of our risen savior.<sup>9</sup>

This highlights the fact that the resurrection of Jesus occurring on a Sunday has symbolic significance in itself. This is clear in Colossians 1:15–23. In verses 15–17, Paul declares Jesus to be the Lord of creation, stating that he is “the firstborn over all creation,” “by him all things were created,” and “all things were created through him and for him.” Then, in verses 18–23, Paul declares Jesus to be the Lord of redemption as well. The symmetry between Jesus as Lord of creation and Lord of redemption comes to the forefront in verse 18: “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” Given the preceding references to the creation of the universe, Paul's description of Jesus as “the beginning” is meant to remind the reader of the opening words of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). Paul then takes a surprising turn and applies this “beginning” not to the original creation but to Jesus's resurrection, “the firstborn from the dead.” God had promised his people that he would redeem this world from the effects of sin and that this would be an act of new creation; he would “create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa 65:17). Paul is telling us that this new creation, this new beginning, was inaugurated by Jesus's resurrection. Just as God the Father had carried out the original creation through the Son, so also he is making all things new through the Son. Just as the work of the first creation

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>9</sup> See Juan Sanchez, “Three Reasons Christians Gather on the Lord's Day,” *Facts & Trends* (May 6, 2019) <https://factsandtrends.net/2019/05/06/3-reasons-christians-should-gather-for-worship-each-sunday/>.

commenced on Sunday, the first day of the week, so also the work of the new creation began on a Sunday when God again said, “Let there be light,” and the sun shone on an empty tomb.

Therefore, there is theological gain from a liturgy that includes weekly corporate worship on Sunday morning. This is a pattern of worship whereby we can weekly celebrate and remind one another that Jesus is risen and that God is making all things new through him. When God instituted the Passover for Israel in Exodus 12, he commanded them to observe the Passover generation after generation in the promised land. Verses 26–27 provide us with a hypothetical conversation between Israelite parents and children in this setting:

<sup>26</sup> And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ <sup>27</sup> then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’

The regular repetition of Passover celebration is an opportunity to remember the exodus and to pass this down to the next generation. Likewise, regular celebration of the Lord’s Day provides an opportunity to celebrate Jesus’s resurrection and hope in the new creation as well as to teach the gospel to the next generation.

### Conclusion

While the New Testament allows Christians freedom for when we choose to gather to worship Jesus together, it is still important to consider how the patterns we establish can help reinforce our focus on Jesus and his saving work. Worshipping Jesus on Sunday is an ancient Christian tradition that began in apostolic times and was clearly the norm in Christian churches by the 2nd century. The pattern of Sunday morning corporate worship provides us with an opportunity to remember and celebrate Jesus’s resurrection and the new creation.

For further reading:

D. A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

Justo L. González, *A Brief History of Sunday: From the New Testament to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

Juan Sanchez, “Three Reasons Christians Gather on the Lord’s Day,” *Facts & Trends* (May 6, 2019) <https://factsandtrends.net/2019/05/06/3-reasons-christians-should-gather-for-worship-each-sunday/>.

David Schrock, “Seven Things You Should Know About the Lord’s Day,” *The Gospel Coalition* (January 17, 2018) <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/a-brief-history-of-sunday/>.