

SUNDAY WORSHIP

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1. Worship on Saturday after sundown

In the New Testament we encounter the Jewish custom of reckoning days from sundown to sundown as distinguished from the Roman reckoning from midnight to midnight. The question sometimes comes up whether Christians today could have church on Saturday evening instead of Sunday morning and/or Sunday evening.

We do not conceive of Sunday as beginning at dark the night before. It is doubtful that we would be associating Saturday evening with the Lord's resurrection day. It would still be, as we say, Saturday evening. Of course, not all Christian gatherings have to associate the time of gathering with the time of his resurrection; but it is most appropriate to incorporate that association into the "stated" gathering time. All clear passages about the time of gathering in the New Testament place it on Sunday rather than some other day. Meeting on the day of his resurrection was consistent enough that "*the Lord's Day*" (κυριακή ἡμέρα) became a designation for the first day of the week (Revelation. 1:10).

Acts 20:7-12 records an evening gathering of Christians on "*the first day of the week*" at Troas as Paul was working his way to Jerusalem for the last time. We could read the account as describing what took place on our Saturday evening; Paul prolonged his discourse till midnight, intending to leave the next morning. We could infer a primarily Jewish congregation and that Paul's traveling party had no compunction against unrestrictive traveling on Sunday. If it was Sunday evening, everything flows as we would expect given a midnight-to-midnight reckoning for days. They would be meeting that evening with the intention of leaving Monday morning.

The advisability of worshiping on Saturday evening instead of Sunday morning depends on the motive. If the reason is to free up Christians for recreation all day the next day or to sleep in all morning, the practice becomes more questionable. Using interpersonal factors helps make decisions more of a toss-up; scripture gives no guidelines, so judgment depends on interpersonal principles to get God's people through unrevealed matters they need to solve.

2. Worship on the first day of a five-day week rather than a seven-day one

A few cultures do not have seven-day weeks. When missionaries go into such societies, they wonder whether they should try to change that practice or to adjust themselves from a seven-day to a five-day pattern and consider every fifth day the first day of the week. There are no guidelines in the New Testament for dealing with such a difficulty. It would appear that neither approach would be disobedience. What missionaries do might depend on the people's openness to changing their system of reckoning. If a large percentage of the people become Christians, they might be willing to adopt the new sequence. It would be to their advantage anyway to conform to the rest of the world if they want to integrate into the international scene.

3. Worship on some other day than the first day of the week to be more culturally relevant

This issue is about the binding character of precedent vs. commandment, because there is no commandment given about the first day of the week as there was about the Jewish Sabbath. The New Testament example is uniform and universal throughout the first-century church in both the Jewish and Gentile territories. There are sufficient examples to show that a pattern existed, and it was obviously done with approval at apostolic behest. The terminology “*the Lord’s Day*” (Revelation 1:10) shows that Christians at the time recognized this day. Though not necessarily esteemed above other days like the Jewish Sabbath, Sunday had become the Christians’ stated day of worship. In Acts 20:7 Paul waits seven days at Troas to get to the first day of the week evidently so he could meet with the local Christians. 1 Corinthians 16:1 shows that the gathering on the first day of the week was customary, not only for the Corinthian Christians, but for the other churches that were participating in the ministration for the poor in Jerusalem. No other regular day of worship has any distinctive meaning for Christians.

The choice to meet on Sunday was evidently deliberate, because it did not conform to the Jewish worship cycle despite the fact that the first Christians in Palestine and in every Gentile territory were Jews. It also did not conform to any Gentile pattern. It means that both Jewish and Gentile adherents had to fit their corporate worship experiences into a situation that did not give it a natural place. Adherents to the Way had to carve out this time.

We are not enthused, then, about putting “seeker services” in the traditional Christian worship slots for evangelistic purposes and moving the Christian worship time somewhere else during the week. Surely we can arrange some other effective system for evangelism that does not displace worship with outreach. Pragmatism is not the final court of appeals in Christian practice. Early Christians did not meet on the day they did to be more “culturally relevant,” whether to Jewish culture with its interest on Sabbath or to Greek culture with its lack of any recurring day that was distinctive.