

CHAPTER EXCERPT OF BOOK “THE CHURCH OF CHRIST”

THE DAY OF ASSEMBLY

*“On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread.”
(ACTS 20:7)*

The connection of the assembly with the events of salvation and with eschatology points to one particular day as especially associated with the assembly, that is, the Lord’s day, the day of the resurrection. The church as a people must manifest itself by assembling together. It may meet at many times for various purposes, as the list given above of passages referring to the meetings of the early church shows, but at the minimum it will meet on Sunday because of participation of the assembly in the events of Passover and Pentecost that called it into existence.

Terminology

Early Christian literature used four terms to refer to the same day of the week. The “first day of the week” was the Jewish designation. The phrase refers to the first day between the Sabbaths (Sabbath used in the sense of “week,” since the Sabbath defined the week for Jews), and accords with the custom of numbering the first five days in the week leading up to the day of Preparation (Friday) and the Sabbath (the seventh day, Saturday). Modern Greek follows the Jewish method of designating the days of the week except for the substitution of “Lord’s day” for “first day.”

The “first day of the week” is the most common name for this day in the New Testament, and it continued in usage in the early church in writings addressed to Jews or reflecting a Jewish milieu.

Another designation reflecting the custom of numbering the days of the week was the “eighth day.” The terminology probably originated in a Hellenized Jewish-Christian context where there was a desire to “trump” the Jewish usage that made Sabbath the climax of the week. It lent itself also to a typological interpretation of “eighth day” in the Old Testament. It is doubtful that the reference to “eight days” in John 20:26 influenced the usage, but it is possible that the passage reflects the same background that led to the adoption of this description. More likely, the passage simply reflects the ancient practice of inclusive numbering according to which the second “first day of the week” would be the “eighth day.” The special reason for the adoption of the terminology of “eighth day,” however, seems to have been a Hellenistic context where the number eight was a symbol for the heavenly world and the age to come, a symbolism adopted in Jewish apocalyptic writings. Eschatological symbolism made “eighth day” particularly appropriate for the day of the resurrection. As a more learned, if not esoteric, term this name had a limited currency.

The pagan designation was “day of the Sun” (or “Sunday”), the terminology followed in the Germanic languages of northern Europe and in English. It follows the practice of identifying weekdays with the heavenly bodies, which in turn were identified with pagan deities. This terminology is missing from the New Testament but appears in second-century writings addressed to pagans.

The distinctively Christian name for this day was the “Lord’s day.” It appears in the New Testament only in Revelation 1:10, but “Lord’s day” was the name that came to prevail in Christian usage. It is preserved not only in modern Greek but in the Romance languages of southern Europe. “Lord’s day” seemed peculiarly appropriate as the designation for the day on which Jesus arose from the dead.

The Jews began their day at sunset, so the “first day” began for them at what would be in modern American terminology Saturday evening. Romans began the day at midnight, and Greeks often at sunrise. This difference in reckoning beginning and ending of a day results in different interpretations of when the gathering in Acts 20:7 occurred (our Saturday night or Sunday night?). From the indications of time given, I rather think Greek usage was being followed by Luke, and the gathering occurred on Sunday night. The determination of this point does not affect the theological significance of “the first day of the week.” Whatever method of time reckoning is to be observed in a given culture would apply to Christian practice. In a Jewish context, Saturday evening would be on the “Lord’s day”; in Roman, Greek, or modern American context the “Lord’s day” would begin at a later time.

New Testament Passages

The Gospel writers do not generally give much attention to chronological matters. In view of this, it is notable that the four unanimously record the day of the week on which Jesus arose from the dead—the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1, 13, 21, 46; John 20:1-19). Thus, on the first day of the week he was declared to be the Son of God (Romans 1:4). The resurrection made him Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom. 14:9), the one who will be “judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:41-42; 17:31).

Moreover, Jesus met with his disciples after the resurrection on the first day of the week. John makes a particular point of this occurring not only on the day of the resurrection but also one week later — John 20:1, 19, 26.

It seems likely that the events in Acts 2 (the coming of the Holy Spirit, the “birthday of the church,” the first gospel sermon, the conversion of 3,000, and the beginning of Christian worship and corporate life) occurred on the first day of the week. Pentecost (Acts 2:1) came on the first day of the week, according to one method of reckoning the time references in Leviticus 23:15-16.

The Pharisees, to the contrary, interpreted the “sabbath” of that passage as being “Passover,” with the result that Pentecost could come on any day of the week, even as Passover did. Most modern commentators, following Josephus, assume that the reckoning of the Pharisees was observed at the temple and is reflected in Acts. The Sadducees, however, reckoned the “sabbath” as the Sabbath of Passover week, with the result that Pentecost, fifty days after the day following the Sabbath (on the inclusive method of counting again) always fell on a first day of the week. Luke’s language has been much discussed, but it’s possible that even if the temple was following the Pharisees’ calendar, Luke was following the Sadducees; The presence of the time reference indicates that this fact had some special significance for Luke.

The early church assembled to partake of the Lord’s supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). There were daily meetings of Christians in the early days, and it has been widely held on the basis of Acts 2:46 that there was daily “communion.” If so, this is the only evidence in the early period for the practice. It is not certain that the “breaking of bread” here is of a reference to communion (cf. *the usage for beginning an ordinary meal* in Acts 27:33-36); nor is the construction unambiguous that “daily” modifies “breaking bread” as well as “being together in the temple.” Whatever is made of Acts 2:46, weekly communion early established itself as the norm throughout the Christian world. There were assemblies especially for the purpose of taking the Lord’s supper (1 Cor. 11:20, 24, 25-26, 33).

There is evidence of weekly Christian meetings also in 1 Corinthians 16: 1-2. Paul’s instructions concerning the collection have often been taken as referring to a private activity, principally on the basis of the phrase “by himself,” which can mean “at home” or “privately,” but can also mean “in his own judgment” (Rom. 12:16; 1 Cor. 3:19; 2 Cor. 1:17), referring to the decision of each person how much to give (cf. 2 Cor. 9:7). Several considerations argue in favor of a public contribution to a church treasury. (1) A common day on which this was to be done, the first day of the week, points to a corporate activity, not private (when no particular day would matter). The specification of a particular weekly day makes sense only if it was a special day that offered some occasion or opportunity for the activity.

(2) This is strengthened not only by the other evidence of Christian meetings on the first day but also by the Jewish practice of the weekly collection of alms in the synagogues and its subsequent distribution to the poor. (3) The word “collection” (*logelā*) seems to refer only to the public collection by groups, including religious groups, not a private activity. (4) The reference in 2 Corinthians 8:6 to “complete” the collection would make no sense if it was private; the statement implies there were group funds that fell short. (5) Moreover, a private storing up would require collections when Paul came, the very thing he does not want. (6) The church was to choose its messengers to carry funds to Jerusalem, a fact that emphasizes this was an organized church activity. The whole passage refers to congregational collection and disbursement of funds.

On the Lord’s day (Rev. 1:10), the Lord, who is “the living one” (Rev. 1:18), is present among the lampstands that symbolize the churches (Rev. 1:13, 20). The New Testament is silent about Christians meeting as a church on the Sabbath day. No doubt most Jews who became Christians continued to observe the Sabbath day (Acts 21:20-21). Paul and other Jewish Christians attended the synagogues and used the opportunity it afforded to preach of Jesus (Acts 13:14-16; 17:1-2, 10; 18:4; cf. 6:9). There is no evidence, however, of purely Gentile converts keeping the Sabbath (the different customs are listed in Romans 14:5-6), nor of Christians having their distinctive meetings (for the Lord’s supper) on the Sabbath.

Actually, the Sabbath and Lord’s day are two different kinds of days. The former was in the Old Testament a day of rest, a day on which by the first century Jews in addition had come to have their meetings; the latter was a day of meeting, which came in later Christian practice to be a day of rest. There was no incompatibility in Jewish believers observing both days, each in its distinctive way, the Sabbath as a day of rest and the Lord’s day as a day of meeting. From that perspective it is incorrect to speak of the one day “replacing” the other. For Gentile Christians, however, the Sabbath had no significance, and they adopted the Lord’s day as their one special religious day!

Testimony of History

The uniform testimony of early church history confirms that the assemblies of the church were on Sunday. Many early Christian texts speak of the custom of meeting on the first day of the week to take the Lord's supper. These Christian sources regularly connect this day and Christian meetings with the resurrection of Jesus. They stress the joyfulness of the day for Christians.

Doctrinal Considerations

The connection of the first day of the week with the resurrection of Jesus expressed in both the New Testament and other Christian texts gives the day its doctrinal significance. Even as the Sabbath day was chosen for a doctrinal purpose for the Jews, so the Lord's day gave a doctrinal purpose to the day of meeting.

The first day of the week is the day of Jesus' resurrection and the day when he met with his disciples. It is, therefore, the Christian's day of deliverance from sin and the power of death (Rom. 5:10, 17, 21; 8:11). Christians meet, moreover, on this day because they are conscious on the day of the resurrection of Christ's presence in their midst (cf. Luke 24:13-35). If the Pentecost of Acts 2 was also a first day of the week, then there is the added significance of this day as the birthday of the church and the celebration of the presence of the Spirit in the church. By way of the resurrection, the first day is further connected with the eschatological coming of Jesus; the resurrected Jesus will come again in glory (Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 11:26).

The Sabbath had special meaning for the Jews. It commemorated the Exodus from Egypt according to Deuteronomy 5:12-15. It is true that Exodus 20:8-11 gives as the reason for the remembrance of the seventh day the rest by God from creation on the seventh day. The religious and political life of many peoples furnishes examples of commemorating something on a day chosen for another reason (e.g., celebrating the birthday of Jesus on December 25 to replace a pagan holiday, and in modern America the observance of certain national holidays on Monday so as to give a long weekend). In the same way, the day to commemorate the national deliverance of Israel from bondage was placed on the seventh day because of the rest from creation.

The Sabbath was given to Jews alone (Ps. 147:19-20 for the Law as a whole), and such was the Jewish understanding in the first century. The day had a significance only to them. Christians had a different day of deliverance.

It is significant that the adjective “Lord’s” (*kyriakos, -ē*) occurs only twice in the New Testament—in reference to the Lord’s supper (1 Cor. 11:20) and to the Lord’s day (Rev. 1:10). Both are peculiarly the Lord’s, and both belong together, united to each other by the resurrection. The day, as the day of the resurrection, is the day for taking the supper; and the supper, in remembrance of the event of our salvation, gives significance to the day.¹

¹ Ferguson, E. (1996). [*The church of Christ: a biblical ecclesiology for today*](#) (pp. 236–243). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

