



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Why worship on Sunday?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Christians gather for worship on Sunday. Worship on this day is a witness to Christ, his resurrection, and the hope of his return. Although assemblies gather for worship on other days, Sunday continues to be the primary day for worship. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's statement on the practices of word and sacrament notes:

Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection and of the appearances to the disciples by the crucified and risen Christ, is the primary day on which Christians gather to worship. Within this assembly, the Word is read and preached and the sacraments are celebrated. (UMG Principle 6)

In other languages, the first day of the week literally means "the Lord's Day." In Spanish, the word is "Domingo;" in Italian it is "Domenica." Our word "Sunday" developed from Old English and literally means "sun's day." Though the word itself lacks an obvious connection to the church, Christians continue to worship on Sunday for two chief reasons:

- The witness of Scripture
Scripture carefully identifies the first day of the week (Sunday, not Saturday—the Sabbath) as the day of resurrection. The women find the tomb empty on the first day of the week (Matthew. 28:1; Mark 16:2; John 20:1); the risen Christ appears first on this day (Mark. 16:9; John 20:19).
- The practice of the very first Christians.
The earliest Christians gathered before dawn on the first day of the week to read from Hebrew scripture and the witness of the apostles and evangelists, and to share in the Lord's supper (Acts 20:7). From its first observance by Christians, Sunday has been a day of worship, not necessarily a day off from work. The Roman emperor Constantine dignified it as a holiday from work because it was already the special day to honor Christ in worship each week. Early sources that record these Sunday gatherings include the first-or-second century Didache and the writings of Justin Martyr. Both descriptions of Christian worship make reference to gathering "On the Lord's day" or "the day called after the Sun."

Consider the title of one of the companion volumes to *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. We have here, side-by-side, Assembly and Sunday. Christians follow the tradition of regularly gathering together as God's people. The Church certainly gathers on many occasions beyond Sunday, whenever "two or three are gathered in my name" (Matt. 18:20). In accord with Biblical witness and the practice of the church for centuries (see above) we gather principally on Sunday, a day set aside to worship God as Trinity, revealed to us in the breaking of the bread.

The relationship of Sunday to Sabbath

In our culture, the tendency for Christians is to equate Sunday with Sabbath. It is important to note that when the first Christians gathered on this day, it was a day of work. Historically, Sunday is not simply a Christian version of the Jewish Sabbath. It is likely that Jewish Christians in the early centuries observed *both* the Sabbath (Saturday) with the Hebrews and the first day of the week—the Lord's Day—with Christians because each day had its own religious significance.

The Sabbath finds its origin in the Ten Commandments: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." The Sabbath recalls creation: "... on the seventh day God rested." Sunday points to the resurrection of Jesus. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* clearly argues that the Christian celebration of Sunday is not a continuation of the Sabbath observance (Augsburg Confession Article 28). Luther also taught that the appropriate behavior for Christians is to focus on the preaching, hearing and learning of God's Word, not on rest from work. (*Small Catechism*: Third Commandment).

Worship on other days flows to and from Sunday

Of course, Sunday is not the only day Christians worship. Daily prayer—morning and evening—by the assembly or in the home; worship on Saturday on days of special devotion, during the seasons of Advent and Lent; worship at funerals and weddings; and prayer before meals and upon retiring and rising are all important. But these additional opportunities for worship do not detract from Sunday's special place in the proclamation of the Christian gospel. (One way that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* encourages daily worship that flows to and from Sunday is through the use of a daily lectionary. (see also, ["Where does the list of readings for Sunday worship come from?"](#))

Considerations in our time

For pastoral reasons, congregations may desire worship at alternate times. Such reasoning often considers those whose work does not allow them to worship Sunday mornings.

Some of these alternative times include:

- Saturday evening. Some Christians regularly gather on Saturday evening. Such a gathering is not unlike other "eve" gatherings of the church, Christmas Eve or the Vigil of Easter.
- Midweek services, especially during the summer, may be a common worship time by assemblies. This follows the pattern, in some parts of North American culture, of having the middle of the week (Wednesday, normally) set aside for church activities. Some assemblies may have worship on this day in conjunction with other activities in the life of the congregation: committee meetings, choir rehearsals, etc. While Evening Prayer would be especially fitting on such evenings,

a service of Holy Communion might be held for those who regularly work on the weekend.

- Sunday evening has also been a time of worship for some assemblies, not unlike the tradition of worship on Easter Evening. On this evening, the Church gathers to hear of Jesus made present in the breaking of the bread. (See Indexes to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*) for the lectionary texts for this service.)

In many ways, the church of the early 21st century finds itself more like the early church, a minority community in the culture. As schools and other organizations no longer “protect” Sunday morning, Christians will have to consider when and how to both be part of the culture and set apart from it. The Lord’s Day promises the beginning of a new era where Christ reigns both in time and beyond it, in life and death yet beyond earthly ways. Assembling for worship on Sunday is a primary way that Christians live out their faith in the one who makes all things new.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ Where does the list of readings for Sunday worship come from?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. See especially pp. 74-75.

[Other Resources](#)

- 📖 Adam, Adolf. [The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy](#), New York: Pueblo, 1981
- 📖 Bass, Dorothy C., [Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time](#), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

- 📖 Marshall, Paul V. *"The Little Easter and the Great Sunday."* from *Liturgy* (1, no. 2). Washington DC: The Liturgical Conference, 1980.
- 📖 Searle, Mark, ed. [*Sunday Morning: A Time for Worship*](#). Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1982.
- 📖 Stookey, Laurence Hull. [*Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*](#). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- 📖 Wilde, James A., ed., [*At That Time: Cycles and Seasons in the Life of a Christian*](#), Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989.

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