

Acts 20:1-12**“A Sunday Service in Troas”****August 21, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Paul had remained in Ephesus for about three years, but it was time for him to deliver the financial gift he had been collecting from his Gentile congregations for the poor in Jerusalem, an important effort to cement a sense of brotherhood between Jewish and Gentile Christians. So once the uproar against the Christians had died down in Ephesus, Paul made plans to leave for Jerusalem. Since it was approaching winter, when sailing ceased on the Mediterranean, and since he was concerned to know how the church in Corinth was doing, he went north by land to the top of the Aegean Sea and crossed over into Macedonia. There he would have visited the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea before heading further south to spend the remaining winter months in Corinth.

Text Comment

- v.3 It was from Corinth that winter that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. He would normally have sailed directly from Corinth to the east, perhaps on a ship carrying Jewish pilgrims to the spring feasts of Passover and Pentecost, but having got word of a plot to kill him – further evidence of the immense influence Paul was wielding and the large number of people who had become Christians and the large number of Jews among them – he changed his plans. On board a ship sailing to one of the eastern ports it would have been comparatively easy to kill Paul and dump his body overboard. [Ramsay, *St. Paul*, 287; Stott, 317] Going back north through Macedonia, he crossed the Aegean to Troas on the eastern shore. In other words, he was shaking off his pursuers. Paul’s was a life of high adventure!
- v.4 These men were the representatives of the various churches who were bringing the collection taken up in those churches for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Churches from Galatia, Macedonia, and Asia are named, surely Corinth was represented as well. Paul wanted not just the gift of money but the presence of these men so that the believers in Jerusalem could put faces to the Gentile mission and hear from the converts themselves what Christ was doing across the Mediterranean world.
- Titus, whom we learn in 2 Cor. 8:6 had organized the collection in Corinth, is not mentioned. In fact, he is never mentioned in Acts. One wonders why. William Ramsay, the great classical scholar of Luke’s history, wondered if Titus was Luke’s brother and that his relationship to the author, who likewise never mentions his own name, accounts for his not being mentioned. No one can say for sure. Titus may simply have been engaged in work elsewhere. [Marshall, 324]
- v.5 As you may have noticed, we now enter another of the so-called “we-sections” of the book of Acts. Luke is once again describing events in which he was himself a participant. The last such section had terminated in Philippi where this one apparently begins, suggesting that Luke had stayed behind and Paul had collected him as he passed

through on his way toward Jerusalem. Luke accompanied him on that trip and then remained in the Holy Land for the two years Paul sat in prison in Caesarea. It was during that time that he compiled his material for the Gospel that bears his name, interviewing all the eyewitnesses of the Lord's life and ministry he could find. So the fact that Luke is now part of the entourage will prove to have immense importance. Who knows whether at this time Luke had even thought of writing his gospel? But finding himself in Palestine with nothing else to do, fortunately for us he used his time to write the Gospel and perhaps to begin his second volume, the book of Acts.

- v.6 The chronological note suggests that Paul and Luke had remained in Philippi to celebrate the Christian Passover, that is, Easter, with the believers there. [Marshall, 325] If so, this is the first mention of the Christian celebration of Easter in the Bible.
- v.7 The place of the Sunday Lord's Day as the day of the church's high worship is illustrated here almost as an afterthought. Luke writes as if his readers would of course have understood that Christians worshipped on Sunday. The fact that Paul's party waited seven days in Troas, when they might have been making their way toward Jerusalem, emphasizes that it was a principle that the church should gather for worship on Sunday, which, since the Lord's resurrection, was now the Christian Sabbath day. The church met for worship in the evening probably because many of its members were not free to excuse themselves from work during the day. Certainly, that would have been the case with slaves.

The reference to "breaking bread," though certainly a reference to the Lord's Supper, probably here refers to a meal the believers ate together in the course of which meal the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Waiting a week to "break bread" certainly means more than simply eating for one's nourishment! Paul didn't wait a week to eat! We know that the early Christians often observed the Lord's Supper as part of a larger meal called, at least in some places, the *agape* or *love feast*.

- v.8 A piece of eyewitness recollection!
- v.9 A third story building could suggest either a wealthy host or a tenement apartment, the kind inhabited by the poor, common enough in the Greco-Roman towns of that time. [Bock, 620] Luke was a doctor and would have assured himself that Eutychus was dead. What we have here, then, is another miracle.
- v.11 A sermon that began in the evening and lasted until daybreak is not what Luke has described. The terms used suggest that, besides the interruption occasioned by Eutychus' fall and then the fellowship meal and Lord's Supper, there would have been a probably extensive session of Q and A. [Peterson, 554]

We have here in Acts 20:7-11 the first description of a Christian Sunday service in those early days. Indeed, this is the first unambiguous evidence that it was the practice of Christian congregations to worship on Sunday, what was already known as, or would soon be, as the Lord's Day, though a remark Paul makes in 1 Cor. 16 also certainly suggests the same thing.

Things everyone takes for granted often go un-mentioned. There were churches in Galatia, in Macedonia, in Achaia, and in Asia and, presumably, they all met on the Lord's Day for worship. And presumably when gathered for worship they all did much the same things. Paul would have taught them what worship consisted of and how it ought to be done and so it was that Christian worship was formed around a common outline and based on common principles.

That being so, as so often is the case in reading the book of Acts, we find ourselves wishing Luke had taken the time and space to tell us more. What we are given here is a *vignette*. In literature a vignette is a short composition characterized by delicacy and subtlety. That fits. But the term came originally from art and refers to a picture or illustration with no definite border, shading off gradually at the edges. That is a still better description of what Luke has given us here.

We see only a part of a much larger whole. We are given a picture that by the by describes in a general way the content and character of the Sunday worship of the early church. The borders are indefinite and the picture suggests more than it describes. We gather from the nature of the description we are given that we ought not to conclude from these verses that worship services must always go late into the night or that hymns and offerings and prayers and the reading of Scripture should not be included in Christian worship because they are not mentioned here. We know from other evidence in the New Testament that such things were regularly part of early Christian worship. Nor do we learn that the sermons preached here at Faith are far too short; that an authentic Christian sermon should last hours on end or that the only appropriate time for Sunday worship is at night. *But in the vignette we are given we do learn some very important things, timeless things indeed about Christian worship.* And since worship is the thing that every congregation does together – virtually the only thing that everyone in the congregation does at the same time – since it is the action that defines our common life, since it is this worship that more than anything else conveys to our children and the rising generation the convictions, the interests, and the manners of true Christian living, and since everywhere in the Bible the corporate worship of the church is the great engine of Christian growth in holiness and usefulness, what the Bible has to say about Sunday worship is of immense practical importance.

I. The first thing we learn is that a Christian congregation gathers in its entirety on the Lord's Day.

No doubt these believers met with one another, as they were able, during the week, a few meetings with one another here and there. But they all came together on the Lord's Day. Verse 7 certainly reads as if the normal practice was being described. Indeed, in a very important sense, the impression is that the life of the congregation together was centered on the Lord's Day. Hence Paul's having to wait a week to meet with them all. As the sense of the sacredness of the Lord's Day withers in our time, it is important for us not to lose, but to cherish this vision of the church gathering as one to renew its life together on the Christian Sabbath. Remember, "Lord's Day," is simply another OT name for the Sabbath day. The early church made much of the Lord's Day.

But there is more here than just that. Paul's waiting the full week to be with the saints as they gathered for worship is suggestive of something very important about both worship and the

Christian life. The Christians themselves did not live together – there is no thought of a commune in the New Testament or in early Christianity, or of the monasteries that would later form, though no one could say that the formation of a monastery would necessarily be wrong. Christians lived their lives, the lives they had lived before becoming followers of Jesus Christ, often at the pleasure of others, as would have been the case with slaves especially. They lived at home, they worked at home or outside the home as we do today, making a living, raising their children, eating and sleeping, and enjoying the company of friends. No doubt they also, as Christians, loved and cared for the needy, met one another for fellowship and prayer, and throughout the week shared their faith with friends, neighbors, work-mates, and even casual acquaintances. They served the Lord in their individual stations throughout the week. But they came together on the Lord’s Day; they met as one on Sunday.

The church gathered strength in concert on the Lord’s Day and used that strength for life and ministry throughout the week. Very clearly the people gathered for worship in Troas *were Christians*. It was not a mixture of believers and unbelievers alike. It was a service meant for believers.

For a long time many Christians have thought that the Sunday services are the best way of reaching the unsaved. To that end they have organized those services to be attractive, even entertaining to non-Christians. The Lord’s Supper is hardly ever seen in such services precisely because it is assumed that there are unbelievers present. *But reaching of unbelievers is not here, is nowhere in the Bible the purpose of the gathering of the church on the Lord’s Day.* We are happy, of course, to have unbelievers with us on the Lord’s Day, but the service is meant for us, is designed for us. They may benefit from observing it, but they must do so as outsiders, guests, for only Christians can genuinely participate in a properly ordered Sunday service of a Christian church.

II. The second thing we learn about Christian worship here is that it is offered and experienced by the ordinary run of folk.

No doubt, as we know was the case in other of the earliest churches, think of those in Galatia or Macedonia or Asia, there was in the church in Troas a cross-section of the local population. There were slaves and slave owners, the wealthy and the poor; there were merchants and shop-keepers, government officials and soldiers, people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, and so on. There were also folk of different ages, old folk and young. Eutychus was a boy. The word used to describe him, translated “young man” in the ESV, ordinarily refers to an adolescent, someone between eight and fourteen years of age. He was no doubt there with his parents. Imagine them heart-broken, kneeling beside the body of their dead son as Paul reached him and took the corpse in his arms. But he was there, in the middle of the night, because on Sunday the church came together as a whole, parents and children together.

And how ordinary these people were. Divine grace did not isolate them from the ordinary run of human experience. Eutychus grew tired, understandably enough, in that torch-lit room, as Paul went later into the night. The room was heated both by the torches and the people crowded together and the rising temperature made staying awake still more difficult. He was sitting on the window sill where he could get some fresh air. No doubt for a time he struggled to stay awake,

but finally his tiredness overcame him. As a lad, Eutychus probably didn't appreciate, as the adults did, that he was listening to one of the greatest men ever to live on the earth! We have all struggled to stay awake during a sermon and a good many of us, at one time or another, have fallen asleep. Some of my most embarrassing moments were when I fell asleep while someone was speaking to whom I should have been paying attention! But, then, that was how ordinary Christian folk were, even when the preacher was no one less than Paul the Apostle! I love the human touch we are given here, and, for that matter, throughout the New Testament.

The New Testament church, even in its heady, glorious, and extraordinary early days, was a collection of people as ordinary as you and I: frail, weak, given to doing foolish things. It was *they* who gathered on Sunday. *And still the church marched on!*

III. The third thing we learn about early Christian worship here is that a very important part of it was instruction.

Paul may have preached a longer sermon than usual and then answered questions, but the expectation is, confirmed in many different ways in the materials of both the New Testament and the early church, in his preaching, in his explaining the gospel, as no doubt he did that night in Troas, he was joining himself to the already existing pattern of the Lord's Day service. This was a time every week for the people of God to receive instruction in the Word of God. Paul was, in effect, a guest preacher at the Troas Sunday service that Lord's Day evening.

The church in our modern western world has seemed to lose confidence in the power of the Word of God. Christians no longer seem to feel that they need, they very much need, regular heavy doses of instruction in the teaching of the Bible; that they then need to hear that teaching again and again. The death of the evening service is but one indication of this loss of confidence in the Word and the preaching of the Word. Christians seem to think there are other things they need just as much, from more time off for themselves, to small groups and special seminars, all of which, of course, may be valuable in their own right. But take a striking lesson from our text.

Eutychus fell from a third story window and was killed. Paul, in front of the congregation, raised the boy back to life. They had, of course heard of Elijah doing such a thing and Jesus himself, but they had never seen anything like this. Stunning! Imagine their reaction in the immediate aftermath of Eutychus' opening his eyes and standing up. Amazed, thrilled, full of joy for Eutychus and his parents, but also for themselves, here was the proof, if proof were needed, that the gospel they had embraced for themselves was truly the power of God!

What do you suppose became of Eutychus? Was he ever thereafter known as the boy who had fallen asleep during Paul's sermon? Was he compelled to tell his story every time he met another Christian for the first time?

But what did this congregation do? We might have thought that having witnessed a miracle there would be no further need for a sermon. But they went back upstairs for the Lord's Supper and for the continuation of Paul's sermon. He picked up where he had left off. You can almost hear the great man say, "Now, where was I?" If you remember the same point was made early in the gospels. Jesus had begun his healing miracles and had caused an immense stir. Crowds were

gathering from every direction. His disciples were thrilled. They were looking forward to another day of the miraculous. But he said to them that he needed to move on from there to preach the gospel in other places. His great work was not healing the sick, but preaching the Word of God. A person's illness might be overcome while his or her heart remained spiritually dead. Only preaching the gospel could fix the deeper problem. Don't ever underestimate either the power of the Word of God or its absolute necessity. Isn't it remarkable the way this reads? There's been a debate through the years about whether a miracle was actually performed here because so little detail is provided. It's all about the preaching. The miracle is mentioned, but what an odd way to mention it. How little is said, and then they go upstairs and listen to Paul for hours more. No wonder the reading and preaching of that Word has dominated Christian worship from the very beginning.

IV. The fourth thing we learn about Christian worship here is that it included, as a matter of course, the Lord's Supper.

From the very beginning Christian worship was a liturgy of Word and sacrament, as worship had been in the OT. Already in Exodus 24, the first description of a corporate worship service that we have in the Bible, the pattern of word and sacrament had been established and so it would continue throughout Israel's history. That pattern was maintained in the New Testament and carried over into Christian worship in the early church – where sermon and sacrament were likewise the heartbeat of the congregation's worship on the Lord's Day. That pattern was corrupted and largely lost in medieval western Christianity but was recovered and purified at the Reformation. It was lost again to a great degree, we regret to have to say, once again in Reformed circles for four centuries. We have only now begun to restore it to its rightful place in our circles by making the Lord's Supper a regular part of our Sunday worship. And no wonder.

In that Supper, taken together, many fabulously important things are accomplished at once. The Lord's people participate afresh in the Lord's death and resurrection and in so participating are renewed in faith, hope, and love. As Christ, by his Spirit, ministers to them, they remember the Lord and what he has done for them and they give thanks to him. Gratitude of that kind purifies the heart, all the more when the Lord himself is present by his Holy Spirit as he is when the congregation gathers.

But the Supper also serves to unite the believers to one another, as they all – different as they are – are there to partake of the same bread and the same wine, and publicly to confess their need of the same Savior and their commitment to the same life of love for him and for one another.

I was reminded, in an unexpected way, this last week of how powerfully the Supper serves to unify the body of Christ and to remind believers of their family relationship to and responsibility for one another. In reading Bruce Gordon's "biography" of Calvin's *Institutes*, in this new series by Princeton University Press called *Lives of Great Religious Books*, I learned something I had not known. The birth of *apartheid*, the formal, institutional, and legal separation of the races in South Africa, originated in the middle 19th century because Afrikaners, the whites, found themselves increasingly uncomfortable sharing the Lord's Table with blacks.

The white settlers of South Africa were largely Christian and, as they should have done, they evangelized the native population. But when many of them became believers, the question of Christian unity and equality was forced upon the privileged white population in a particularly profound way. And that question was most sharply focused by the Lord's Supper. Would they share – white and black – the same bread and wine? Would they commune at the same table? The Supper is a powerful thing, and even the whites instinctively appreciated how radical an action it would be to commune in the same service, black and white together. All distinctions would be obliterated except the one that mattered, that which separated Christian believers from unbelievers. [Bruce Gordon, *John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 168] It is very sad that the whites chose precisely the wrong course of action, the one that could not be justified from the Word of God. But it is at least, however tragic, a powerful witness to the authority, the explanatory power, and the spiritual witness of the Lord's Supper. When we take that supper together, in ways both subtle and overt, we as much as declare that we share our very lives as the followers of Jesus Christ. We are a family; we are the people of God.

As Calvin himself had put it in his *Institutes* (IV, xx, 32):

“We shall benefit very much from the sacrament if this thought is impressed and engraved on our minds: that none of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any kind offended by us, without at the same time injuring, abusing, and despising Christ by the wrongs we do: that we cannot disagree with our brethren without at the same time disagreeing with Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brethren.” [Cited by Gordon, 180]

So it was a Lord's Day gathering of the Christians in the town, all of them, however ordinary, however sophisticated or simple they were, for instruction in the Word of God and for communion with the Lord and with one another at his Table. And what was the result of that service.

“They went home not a little comforted.”

They had witnessed a great miracle, of course. But what did it mean? Only this: that their faith was *real*. That faith that ordinarily was sustained Lord's Day by Lord's Day in the worship service of the church, in Word and in sacrament, was the true knowledge of things of immense importance and great joy. By that worship they laid hold of God himself and his divine presence and power. Indeed, it is not clear in the text that these believers were not as much comforted by Paul's preaching and by their taking the Supper together as they were by the miracle. All the emphasis falls on the former and not the latter.

Most of the time, virtually all of the time, they had to live as we do, by faith and not by sight. At least they had all their lives the memory of Paul's visit and what had happened to sustain them. We do not have even that. But we have the same Word and the same Lord's Supper. Who are the Christians? Just ordinary people who know that the gospel is true, that Christ is Lord of life and death, who build their daily lives on those facts, and come to church of a Lord's Day to be renewed in that confidence! Go home, brothers and sisters, rejoicing in the comfort of the Lord!