

## How the Early Church “Did Church”

A Sermon on Acts 20:1-16

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March 16, 2025 PM

This past summer I was given two recent and unrelated resources which, in different but complimentary ways, critique the institutional church for her philosophy of ministry and claim to present an alternative rooted in a return to the early church’s practice. The first was a book by Dennis Allen entitled “The Disciple Dilemma: Rethinking and Reforming How the Church does Discipleship.”<sup>1</sup> The book argues that the church’s mission and metric of success ought to be “discipleship,” which the author defines narrowly and rigidly as the kind of individualized interaction that happens between mentors and proteges outside of typical church programs and events. In this author’s estimation, the church’s philosophy of ministry ought to be modeled on the format that Jesus employed with The Twelve, and churches who aren’t emphasizing and facilitating this approach are ineffective and unsuccessful according to Biblical criteria.

The second resource was a link to a YouTube video entitled, “Why the Early Church Did Not Have Worship Services.”<sup>2</sup> In this video, Tom Wadsworth, a former pastor of an evangelical church, talks about how his philosophy of ministry changed from a standard evangelical and institutional approach to a model that is, essentially, what I would call a “house church” model.<sup>3</sup>

In that video he explains that, early on in his ministry, he made a pivotal discovery during a sermon series on 1 Corinthians 14: that that the chapter never uses the word “worship” to describe the regular assembly of believers. This disorienting realization led him down a path of theological exploration which eventually led him to the conclusion that the New Testament’s model for Christian assembly is not a formal service of worship but an informal assembly of mutual edification. Wadsworth goes on to argue his position

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<sup>2</sup> Wadsworth, Tom. “Worship #1 Why the Early Church Did Not Have Worship Services-revised.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z84QJzWIRJc>

<sup>3</sup> By “house church” I mean an approach which is 1) decentralized and anti-institutional 2) deemphasizes and/or eliminates the role of officers and pastors 3) anti-liturgical 4) generally suspicious of authority and tradition 5) makes meeting in homes a matter of principle rather than of practicality.

extensively from the New Testament, drawing out implications such as “They Didn’t Preach Sermons in the Early Church.”<sup>4</sup>

While Allen and Wadsworth each have their distinct emphases, they are hardly alone in the more general sentiment that the institutional church has dramatically gotten away from the spirit and practice of the early church, especially wherever she places liturgy and expositional preaching at the center of her ministry. Think, for example, of the evangelical cliché, “we don’t want to do church; we want to be the church.” The implication is that the formal and public ministries of the church (e.g. liturgy, preaching, Sunday school, programs etc) are secondary layers, while the primary thing, the real thing, is something informal, organic, and spontaneous such as friendship, or loving your neighbor, or one on one evangelism, or one-on-one discipleship.

I was reminded of all these ideas this week as I studied our sermon passage for two reasons. 1) It gives us a glimpse at Paul’s philosophy of ministry as we watch him on a farewell tour of the churches he has planted. 2) It is one of the clearest records of a Christian worship service to be found in the book of Acts.

For both of those reasons, this is a text where we could go to evaluate some of these claims about the place of liturgy and expositional preaching in the early church.

So, as we read the text, ponder with me: What was Paul’s philosophy of ministry? Did he believe in worship services and expositional preaching, and if so, were they central to his approach to discipleship?

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<sup>4</sup> “Why They Didn’t Preach Sermons in the Early Church (updated)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CheA3jTRcLc&t=1s>

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep the passage in front of you, and may the Lord help us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

The sermon text illustrates three aspects of corporate worship.

First, it illustrates the importance of worship. I think we can describe that importance here in the sermon text with three words: foundational, central, and climactic. First, foundational. As you look again at verses 7-12, remember what we saw back in Luke's first summary statement in Acts 2:42 about the nascent Christian church of Jerusalem, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." In a sermon on that passage, I made a case that those four disciplines were primarily speaking of a rudimentary liturgy that the earliest Christians followed in the temple, and that this gathered worship spilled over into a culture of hospitality, generosity, and shared piety.

As you look again at our sermon text, especially verses 7-12, notice that all four of those same elements are either named explicitly or implied. In words that are almost identical to Acts 2:42, verses 7 and 11 open and close the meeting at Troas with a description of "breaking the bread," which I take to be a description of the Lord's Supper.

Although neither the word for "apostle" or "teaching" are to be found in these verses, both realities are, nevertheless, present here. One commentator went so far as to summarize this passage as Paul's "ministry of encouragement,"<sup>5</sup> pointing out the three-fold repetition of the Greek word "parakaleo" in verses 1, 2, and 12, (translated as "encouragement" and "comforted" here in the ESV). Note that this is the verb form of the noun used to describe the Holy Spirit in John 14, (the Paraklete), whose ministry is so closely tied to the word of Christ. John 14:26, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." In a similar way, we could note that the Greek words which Paul uses here in Acts 20 to describe Paul's speech ("talked with" (*dialego*) and "speech" (*logos*)) are ones that Luke has consistently used to describe Paul's ministry of reasoning with the Jews in the synagogues from the Scriptures earlier in Acts.

And this explains why the speech of Paul dominates the scenes here, especially in verses 7-12. Paul wasn't just a loudmouth who rambled and shot the breeze all night long;

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<sup>5</sup> I have forgotten which one!

he was speaking in his capacity as an apostle on his farewell tour, giving these infant churches as much instruction and encouragement as he possibly could in these last visits.

The Breaking of the Bread. The Apostles' Teaching. Prayer.

Although prayer is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, I think it's safe to assume that it was part of these gatherings, especially the one in Troas. Think of how Paul associated eating, the word of God, and prayer in 1 Tim 4:3-5. Think of how Luke will connect Paul's farewells and prayer later in Acts 20 and 21 at the churches of Trye and Ephesus. Remember how prayer was associated with the disciples gathering in upper rooms (John 17, Acts 1).

And Christian fellowship is present here, not only in a general way as Paul travels from church to church on his farewell tour, and as Paul brings 7 of his disciples, the fruit of his ministry, with him, but in its most concentrated form, corporate worship, as these Christians listen to Apostolic teaching, pray, and celebrate the Lord's Supper in the context of a fellowship meal. Along these lines, notice in verse 7 that these Christians are gathered on the first day of the week, the day on which Christ rose from the dead, the day which quickly became the Christian day of worship.

The repetition of these four elements here in Acts 20 is another proof that Acts 2:42 was presenting us with a normative pattern for Christian worship, and that such worship is foundational for church life.

Worship was, and is, foundational for the church.

But we could also get at the importance of worship here by describing it as central. On a practical level, just consider the simple fact that Paul and his companions stayed for seven days in Troas, even though Paul was, according to verse 16, "hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost."

Why spend seven days in one place when you are in hurry? The most likely explanation is that Paul wanted to be present for their weekly worship service.<sup>6</sup> Notice that he left as soon as the meeting ended (verse 11). It's almost certain that Paul spent much of the previous 6 days meeting with individual members of the church at Troas,

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Dr Rayburn for this insight. "A Sunday Sermon in Troas." A Sermon on Acts 20:1-12. August 21, 2016  
<https://www.faithtacoma.org/acts2/a-sunday-sermon-in-troas-acts-201-12>

nevertheless, he still felt it was so important to be there for their weekly worship service that he delayed his return voyage.

On a literary level, look at this passage and notice that it has chiastic structure. Verses 1-6 and verses 13-16 are, essentially, a travelogue. In between those two, verses 7-12 zoom in to describe an extraordinary worship service.

Although the worship service at Troas represents only a few hours of the many months of travel described in verses 1-16, Luke is clearly highlighting this as the defining event of Paul's journey. That's because it represented the fruit of Paul's labors and prayers, the realization of many of his hopes and dreams.

And that leads me to the third way in which we can describe the importance of worship here in Acts 20: climactic. Zoom out from this passage and think about it in the wider context of Acts. After chapter 20, most of Acts will be taken up with Paul's imprisonment and defense. This is one of the last scenes of Paul as a freeman, ministering in the ways he would choose. It's also Paul's last, and greatest, miracle as a freeman.

In that sense, the worship service at Troas was something of a climactic moment for Paul: accompanied by 7 men who represent the fruit of his ministry, carrying the collection he had gathered from the Gentile churches on his way to Jerusalem, worshipping with a church that probably included numerous converts from his ministry, and there, in the middle of his preaching, a resurrection from the dead.

Acts 20 reminds us of the importance of worship for the church and for the Christian life. The church is built upon a foundation of worship, for it is in worship that we are reminded, instructed, and encouraged in our faith. The church's life is centered upon worship because it is in worship that our fellowship is most clearly expressed and reinforced as we sing together, pray together, and commune together with the Lord Jesus. And worship is the church's destiny as we look forward to the resurrection, when we will gather with all the saints around the throne of Jesus, worshipping Him face to face.

The importance of worship.

Secondly, our passage shows us a pattern for worship. We've already seen how this passage highlights the first day of the week as the day of Christian worship, so notice, as well, the emphasis on a larger liturgical calendar in verses 6 and 16. Bracketing the mention of first day worship is Paul's participation in the feast of Unleavened Bread and Pentecost.

Look again at verses 5-6 and notice that, once again, it seems that Paul delayed his hurried travel schedule in order to participate in Christian worship on a holy day. In this case, however, it was not the first day of the week (i.e. the Lord's Day) that delayed Paul, but the days of Unleavened Bread. Remember that this was the festival immediately following Passover, and, thus, the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. In other words, this was the time of year that we would call Easter.

Notice as well that Paul stayed for this celebration in Philippi, a city where Paul had essentially planted a church back in Acts 16 (remember Lydia and the Philippian jailer). Although Luke does not explicitly tell us that this was a Christian celebration of Easter, (*the fulfillment of Passover and Unleavened Bread*) it's very hard to imagine that it could have been anything else. Paul himself calls Christ "our Passover lamb" in 1 Corinthians 5, and he calls us to "celebrate the festival...with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." The idea that Paul would delay his hurried travel plans in city where he had planted a church in order to participate in a purely Jewish festival where Christ was not acknowledged seems quite unlikely.

Similarly, consider the significance of Paul's intention to make it to Jerusalem by Pentecost. Remember that the Mosaic backdrop of Pentecost was a harvest of first fruits. Of course, in Acts 2 we saw that the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, thus empowering the church for the task of worldwide witness. Look again at verse 4 here and notice that Paul has 7 companions, each of whom represents the fruit of his missionary journeys among Gentile lands. Moreover, as virtually all commentators agree, this company was most likely carrying the financial collection from the Gentile churches that Paul speaks of repeatedly in his epistles, meant for the relief of the Jerusalem church in a time of famine.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Paul was bringing in the harvest of the Gentiles at Pentecost, symbolized both by these 7 converts from the Gentile world, and by the funds donated by their home churches.

Again, it's hard to imagine that Paul's intention could have been anything less than a Christian celebration of Pentecost as a holy day with the church in Jerusalem.

So, put these things together: 1<sup>st</sup> day worship, Easter, and Pentecost. We have the rudiments of a Christian liturgical calendar.

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But the pattern of worship seen here not only has to do with a calendar, but with the basic elements of a worship service. Of course, Luke's account here is not exhaustive. We might well wonder: did they also sing psalms, contribute towards the collection going to Jerusalem, pray, recite a creed, baptize a new convert, hear a testimony? Certainly they would have had the time for it, given that this service seems to have gone from sundown to sunup. Nor is Luke's account meant to be prescriptive in every detail. I don't think we can argue from this story that sermons ought to go for hours on end anymore than we can argue that the Lord's Supper should ordinarily be held at midnight or be preceded by resurrections. Clearly there were some unique circumstances here.

Nevertheless, it is instructive to note the emphasis on word and sacrament. Although the Lord did visit them with the miraculous and with physical healing, that was not their expectation nor their purpose in gathering. Neither was it to speak in tongues or have some ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit. Neither was it to invite unbelievers to an evangelistic event.

Their purpose was to receive apostolic instruction in the scriptures and to commemorate the death of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

In that sense, Acts 20 is a reminder to us that a liturgy of word and sacrament, the gathered fellowship of the saints in worship, the commemoration of redemptive history in the church calendar, and Lord's Day worship are not icing on the cake of Christian discipleship; they are essential ingredients in the recipe. These aren't secondary or tertiary layers of tradition that were added onto the true core of Christian discipleship by later generations. These spiritual disciplines and practices were present from the very beginning, from the time of Paul planting churches and recorded for us here in Acts.

Of course, Christian discipleship and church health consist of far more than Lord's Day worship, a liturgy of word and sacrament, and commemorating the great events of redemptive history. But Christian discipleship and church health aren't less than these, and so we need to push back against the suggestion that these practices and disciplines are, therefore, dispensable, secondary, or later add-ons. These are among the basic building blocks of church life, and you don't improve your building by monkeying with the foundation.

So, as we participate in these basic practices of church life, it's good to remember that the earliest Christians did too. We are walking the same path trod by those who went before.

I especially want to encourage the youth who have grown up at this church, or maybe a similar one, to be thankful for these basics of Christian worship that you have grown up with. It's been my observation as a youth pastor that sometimes those who grow up in a certain theological tradition are the least likely to appreciate it. Sometimes there can be a temptation among Christian youth to despise the church, denomination, or tradition of your youth, to dismiss it as "my parents' church" or "the Boomer church," or "the old folks' church," and go out in search of something different, something novel. Maybe that means looking for something more exciting, more fun... a place with cooler music and a hip atmosphere. Maybe that means something more "radical" or "hardcore," or maybe it means something more "casual" or "relevant." Or maybe it just means finding the church where all the younger people are.

Youth, my exhortation for you as you come into adulthood, as you think about the churches you'll attend when you go off to college or move to new places, is to make a principled decision about where you will attend church. Of course, there are many criteria you should consider as you select a church, but, at least one of them ought to be the things we are considering this evening: a commitment to the Lord's Day and the memory of the great events of redemptive history, prioritizing the means of grace, the centrality of worship in the Christian life and the life of the church.

The importance of worship. the Pattern of worship. Lastly, the glory of worship.

Here in this passage, Luke provides several details that point towards the glory that is associated with the church's worship. Look again at verse 8 and notice the mention of "many lamps" in an "upper room." If this was a novel, where descriptions of settings are ubiquitous, perhaps there wouldn't be much significance to these details. But these are oddly specific for Acts, a book so selective and terse at most points.

Most commentators suggest that these details are meant to explain why Eutychus sat by the window and how he fell asleep. The many torches in this house caused the upper room to become warm and stuffy. So Eutychus choose a window seat. But the warmth and lack of oxygen caused him to fall asleep anyway.

But I don't find that to be a compelling explanation of these details. For one thing, it does not make much sense to argue that torches could have kept a room warm and oxygen-deprived when the room also had an open window so large that a middle schooler could have fallen out of it. For another thing, the explanation is completely unnecessary. The most likely reason that Eutychus fell asleep is because it was late at night, not

because it was warm and oxygen deprived. Note that the supposed warmth and low-oxygen didn't cause everyone else to fall asleep.

But most importantly, to suggest such an interpretation is to ignore the Bible's own symbolism. Remember that it was in an upper room that we find the Bible's first recorded story of a prophet raising someone from the dead: Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. Remember that it was in an upper room that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and gave his parting instructions to The 12 Disciples. Remember that it was in an upper room where the Apostle's met for prayer, and it's likely in an Upper Room that the Holy Spirit came upon them like tongues of fire. And remember that it was in an Upper Room that Peter raised Dorcas to life.

And the Biblical symbolism of lamps is far richer. The word of God is called a "lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path." Jesus called the church "the light of the world" and then immediately adds in Matthew that "nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house." Jesus calls himself the "light of the world" in Revelation, which also says in chapter 21 that "the lamp" of the city of God "is the Lamb." At Pentecost the apostles themselves become human lamps as the Holy Spirit descends upon them like tongues of fire.<sup>8</sup> Revelation 1 describes the seven churches of Asia as lampstands and describes the Lord Jesus as standing in their midst.

Throughout the Bible, light is associated with creation<sup>9</sup>, life<sup>10</sup>, resurrection<sup>11</sup>, conversion<sup>12</sup>, daytime<sup>13</sup>, wakefulness<sup>14</sup>, wisdom<sup>15</sup>, truth<sup>16</sup>, understanding<sup>17</sup>, purity<sup>18</sup>, and the glory of God.<sup>19</sup>

And think how many of those meanings are implied in this scene. Throughout Acts we have the creation of the church through the apostolic word, and here in Acts 20 we have an infant church gathering on the first day (*when light was created by God's word*) to hear the apostolic word. Here we have a group of Christians who are being enlightened in

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Alistair Roberts for this insight- Acts 20: Eutychus Raised from the Dead." Theopolis Podcast

<sup>9</sup> Gen 1:3

<sup>10</sup> Eccl 11:7-8

<sup>11</sup> Eph 5:14

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor 3:14ff

<sup>13</sup> Gen 1:5

<sup>14</sup> 1 Thess 5:5-8

<sup>15</sup> Prov 4:18-19

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 119:105

<sup>17</sup> Eph 1:18

<sup>18</sup> 1 John 1:5ff

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 104:1-2

the knowledge and wisdom of Christ. Here in Acts 20 we have a vibrant church, and in the middle of their worship, a resurrection. Here in Acts 20 we have an illustration of Christians literally doing what Paul metaphorically exhorts the Thessalonians to do in chapter 5: “not to sleep as others do, but to stay awake and be sober” and to “put on the breastplate of faith and love” and the “helmet of salvation” since we are “children of light, children of day.” We also have an illustration of the 5 wise virgins from Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25, who stay awake and ready at midnight with oil in their lamps.

In all of these ways, this scene at Troas is showing us the glory of the church’s worship: that the Lord was with these believers imparting spiritual life to them, favoring them with the light of his countenance, blessing them with joy and peace, equipping them in the truth, shining the light of the gospel, transforming them into the image of Christ.

Christian, this is the glory of our worship: that wherever we are gathered in His name, He is with us. He is with us by His word and Spirit, He is with us in his ministers speaking and acting in His name, He is with us in the fellowship of His people, He is made known to us in the breaking of the bread, His spirit fills us as we praise and thank Him in song.

Is this your vision for Lord’s Day worship? Is this your longing, your prayer, your expectation? To meet with the Lord Jesus? To receive more of his grace, blessing, wisdom, life, holiness, and comfort? May His Spirit bless us with the same holy appetite of these early believers, who spent all night feasting on the means of grace and went away “not a little comforted.” Amen!

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