

[← Back to Home](#) · [Browse All Pieces](#)

Genesis and Evolution of Church Worship

Reflections [Covenant and Doctrine](#) 18 September 2026

[Acts 3:1](#)

[Deuteronomy 6:13](#)

[Exodus 33:10](#)

[Luke 4:16-30](#)

We know that the Church was established by the Apostles, with Paul playing a vital role, in the first century AD. It is clear that corporate worship in churches must have become established thereafter. The genesis of communal worship, however, goes back much further in Christian history. The earliest Christians were Jewish converts, and so, to understand the evolution of Christian worship, one needs to examine the Jewish form of worship. In the book of Acts we read, "Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1). This was the Jewish hour of worship, and the order of worship would have followed Jewish tradition.

After the Israelites were liberated and brought out of Egypt, God gave them the Law through Moses and instructed them to construct the Tabernacle, a portable dwelling place for the Divine presence, according to His own specification. They carried it with them wherever they went during their years of wandering. In Deuteronomy we read, "Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name" (Deuteronomy 6:13) — an unambiguous instruction as to whom to worship. We further read, "And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door" (Exodus 33:10). Though they did not gather in one place, they worshipped at the same time. Exodus and Leviticus set out, in detail, the manner in which this worship was to be conducted.

It was after Solomon built the first Temple that the Jews began corporate worship there. The focus of worship was sacrifice and the singing of praises to God, with music both vocal and instrumental, and a variety of instruments in use. Gifted people took part in the singing of the choir. Numerous references to music are found throughout the Old

Testament.

The Jews returned to Jerusalem in 539 BC from their exile in Babylon, after Solomon's Temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Repairs were carried out, and worship was conducted once more in the Second Temple (the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah give the details of the repairs and the worship). As the work of construction went on, the Jews worshipped with trumpets and cymbals, as King David had directed, offering up songs of praise and thanksgiving. Worship in the Second Temple placed still greater emphasis upon the variety of instruments employed. Worship through music formed part of the morning sacrifice, offered after the priests had recited a benediction, the Ten Commandments, and the Shema, the great affirmation of Judaism and of faith in the one God.

A change in the place of worship, from Temple to synagogue, took place during the exile in Babylon. Without a Temple, the Jews began to congregate in synagogues, much as Christians now gather in churches. In the synagogues, the people listened to the elders speak of God, received instruction in spiritual matters, and worshipped Him. This form of worship became still further established as time went on, and by the time the Second Temple was built, synagogue worship was already well established, with many synagogues built by the time Jesus carried out His ministry.

During these services, moral and spiritual teaching, grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures, was given. One passage from the Law and one from the Prophets were read in the original tongue, followed by a commentary in the vernacular, whether Aramaic or Greek. A benediction, and the people's "Amen," closed the service.

We know from Luke 4:16-30 that Jesus observed the common Jewish custom of attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. It is recorded that, on one such occasion, Jesus stood up, signifying His wish to read from the Scriptures and to preach to those gathered. He read from Isaiah, and then expounded upon what He had read. It appears that He was permitted to teach in the synagogues on many occasions, and was often well received, although some did not approve of the direction in which He pointed them.

The early Christian worship naturally continued to follow the order of worship found in the Jewish synagogues, and to observe Jewish tradition, including the observance of the Sabbath. There was nothing unusual, still less unchristian, in this, since they worshipped the very same and the only God. The writings of the Old Testament were used

extensively by the Apostles, for they pointed to Jesus as the Messiah.

The most significant change to Jewish worship, in its Christian form — and its greatest addition — was its focus upon Jesus Christ, together with the introduction of the Eucharist. Jesus had desired that the Lord's Supper be celebrated as often as possible, in remembrance of Him. This, however, did not fit easily within the Jewish tradition of worship in the synagogues. The earliest Christians, therefore, while continuing to worship in the synagogues, celebrated Holy Communion at a separate time and place. While worship in the synagogue was conducted on the Sabbath, the Christians resolved to celebrate Holy Communion on the first day of the week, Sunday, in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As time went on, the separation between Judaism and Christianity became complete, even as the number of Christians rapidly increased.

Before long, Gentiles too were converted to the Christian faith, and worship in the synagogue ceased to be an option for them. Though the Jewish Christians wished the new converts to follow Jewish tradition, the Apostles, led by the Holy Spirit, resolved to retain only the minimum of such tradition, bringing about a harmonious coexistence between Jewish and Gentile believers. As the number of Gentile Christians grew rapidly, the observance of the Sabbath found fewer and fewer takers, and worship shifted to Sunday.

In our own time, Christians are found to adopt many different forms and orders of worship. Yet the basic elements of worship — the glorifying of the Triune God, the singing of praises, the reading of both the Old and New Testaments, the preaching of the Word of God, the affirmation of faith, confession, the celebration of Holy Communion, and the benediction pronounced by the presiding priest — are practised, in some measure or other, by all.

[Download as PDF](#)

[← Back to Home](#) · [Browse All Pieces](#)