

Historical Emphasis on a Serious Lord's Day Worship

Christian tradition has long insisted that Sunday (the Lord's Day) be entered **reverently** and **somberly**, not casually. From the earliest centuries believers treated the gathered assembly as a solemn encounter with God. In one 4th-century liturgical manual (the *Apostolic Constitutions*) the deacon would announce "Let none of the hearers...stay; and silence being made" before prayers began ¹ – in other words, all must be still and ready. Likewise, Reformed writers note that Scripture portrays meeting God as anything *but* casual: Moses removed his sandals and Israel trembled at God's presence, Isaiah "quaked" in awe, and John the Apostle fell prostrate when God appeared ². As one modern Reformed pastor summarizes, "Casual worship...doesn't exist. There is a **seriousness** that must mark it, a solemnity and honor that must attend it, a gravity that must saturate it" ³. In short, worship was (and is) to be approached with intent, attention, and awe.

Early and Medieval Western Practice

In the early Church, Sunday was already treated as a sacred feast ("the *Lord's Day*" in Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2). Liturgical rubrics and letters from the Fathers encourage quiet preparation before the service. For example, long before the Reformation Christians were expected to pray in silence upon entering the church and to enter humbly. By the medieval era, Catholic custom was to keep the sanctuary hushed. As one longtime Catholic priest recalls, "*One would enter [Mass], find their pew, genuflect, and then kneel for private prayer before Mass began...then leave quietly, not talking until in the vestibule or outside the church.*" ⁴. Even confession guides in the 19th/20th centuries listed "talking in church" as a sin to be avoided. In short, the **external demeanor** was restrained: no chitchat, no casual movement, and a posture of humility (kneeling or standing respectfully) before God's presence.

Reformation and Post-Reformation Traditions

Lutheran and Anglican

The Lutheran Reformation preserved much of the traditional liturgy and its solemn character. Lutheran worship continued the emphasis on reverence: congregants stood, knelt, sang hymns and psalms without secular distractions, and approached Communion with "fear and reverence" (as Luther's own catechism exhorts). Similarly, the Anglican (Church of England) tradition carried forward medieval liturgical solemnity. The **Book of Common Prayer** and its later adaptations assumed that worshippers would remove hats, dress modestly, and be attentive in church. Though explicit rules are rare, the ethos was that one *enters God's house as one would enter a holy temple* – quietly and respectfully (analogous to Jewish custom in the Temple). The Reformation did remove many medieval "ornaments," but it did **not** discard the need for reverence. In fact, John Calvin (in Geneva) argued that worship must display proper "decorum and dignity" appropriate to meeting God, so that the congregation in worship truly **reverences God as Father** ⁵. Luther and Calvin alike insisted on orderly services – with no irreverent noise or behavior – even as they simplified ceremonies.

Puritan and Westminster Emphasis

In the 17th century, the English Puritans and other Reformed groups codified this seriousness. The Westminster Directory for Public Worship (1644) instructs that *“Let all enter the assembly, not irreverently, but in a grave and seemly manner, taking their seats...without adoration, or bowing themselves towards one place or other”* ⁶. In other words, arriving worshippers must be solemn and humble – they should not make a show of bowing (superstitiously) but should take their places quietly. The Directory goes on to say that *when the minister opens worship, the people acknowledge “the incomprehensible greatness and majesty of the Lord (in whose presence they do then in a special manner appear), and their own vileness and unworthiness to approach so near him”* ⁶. This language makes clear that Puritans saw worship as drawing near to God with the deepest reverence. Such attitudes carried over into Baptist life: 17th-century Baptist and Congregationalist confessions (e.g. the Savoy Declaration) echo the Westminster Confession in requiring that Christians *“prepare their hearts”* and occupy the Lord’s Day entirely in **public and private exercises of worship** ⁷. This preparation implied coming to church with prayerful silence, putting aside secular cares (as John Owen famously taught), and conducting oneself with upright deportment.

Baptist and Later Reformed Traditions

English and American Baptists, emerging from these Puritan roots, similarly treated Sunday as sacred. For example, the 1689 London Baptist Confession (like the Savoy and Westminster) says the Sabbath (Lord’s Day) is kept holy when believers take up *“the whole time in the public and private exercises of His worship”* ⁷. Though the Confession speaks of actions (rest from work, preaching, family worship), the implication was that one’s bodily posture and manner should match the day’s holiness: worshippers should not come slovenly, chattering or distracted, but expect to **sit, stand, kneel, and praise God in an orderly way**. In all these Reformed churches the focus was on God’s Word and sacraments, with *nothing* trifling or common in the worship space – echoing the biblical imagery that Israel *fell silent* at Sinai (Ex. 20) and Isaiah covered his face (Isa. 6) in God’s presence.

Conclusion: Continuity and Change

Across Western Christian history, then, there is a clear continuity: the Lord’s Day was to be entered with sobriety and respect. Believers were taught to **prepare** themselves (by silence or prayer at home), to **dress and behave solemnly** in church, and to **watch and worship attentively**. As one Reformed commentator puts it, even angels aren’t *casual* in worship, so neither should we be ⁸. In modern times many Christians have lamented a loss of this seriousness. The example of older generations (e.g. Catholic practice of strict silence) and of historic confessions and liturgies provides a sharp contrast to today’s more informal styles. But the historic testimony remains: meeting God on the Lord’s Day is **“meeting with the living, true, holy, sovereign God”**, and thus *“just doesn’t exist...casual”* ⁸. Both Reformed and other traditions thus insist that outward gestures – silence on entering, reverent posture, focused attention – should testify to the inward reverence of faith in the Lord’s Day worship.

Sources: Historical liturgies and confessions; Church Fathers; Reformation and Puritan writings; and recent reflections on worship decorum ¹ ⁶ ⁵ ⁸ ⁴, which consistently emphasize reverence and gravity in approaching Sunday worship.

1 CHURCH FATHERS: Apostolic Constitutions, Book VIII

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/07158.htm>

2 3 8 Seriousness in Worship by Jason Helopoulos

<https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/seriousness-worship>

4 Pastoral Perspectives on Silence in Church - Community in Mission

<https://blog.adw.org/2013/09/pastoral-perspectives-on-silence-in-church/>

5 Calvin and the Worship of God - Westminster Seminary California

<https://www.wscal.edu/resource/calvin-and-the-worship-of-god/>

6 Reverence and Emotion in Reformed Worship Part 2

<https://theaquilareport.com/reverence-and-emotion-in-reformed-worship-part-2/>

7 "How to Observe the Lord's Day" by John Owen | Reformed Baptist Fellowship

<https://reformedbaptistfellowship.wordpress.com/2013/03/22/how-to-observe-the-lords-day-by-john-owen/>