

What Were Early Church Gatherings Like?

Based on the following texts, imagine what an early church gathering might look like. What structures, elements, practices, etc. marked early church worship services?

Acts 20:7-11 (approx 60 AD in Troas, English Standard Version):

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.

1 Corinthians 14:23-30 (approx 55 AD, ESV):

If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.

1 Corinthians 16:1-3 (ESV):

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

Philippians 1:1 (approx 60 AD, ESV):

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.

Hebrews 13:7, 17 (approx 60 AD, ESV):

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith...Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch

over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

*The Didache XIV, XV (approx 100 AD):

And on the Lord's Day, come together, and break bread, and give thanks, having before confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. Let no one who has a dispute with his fellow come together with you until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: "In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great King, saith the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the Gentiles."

Elect therefore for yourselves Bishops and Deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful, and approved; for they too minister to you the ministry of the Prophets and Teachers. Therefore despise them not, for they are those that are the honored [men] among you with the Prophets and Teachers. And reprove one another not in wrath, but in peace, as ye have [it] in the gospel; and with every one that transgresses against another let no one speak, nor let him hear [a word] from you until he repents. But so do your prayers and alms and all your actions as ye have [it] in the gospel of our Lord.

Didascalia Apostolorum 12 (approx 230 AD):

Let the men sit in another part of the house, toward the east.... If anyone be found sitting out of his place, let the deacon who is within reprove him and make him to rise up and sit in a place that is appropriate for him.... Let the children stand on one side, or let their fathers and mothers take them to them and let them stand up. Let the young girls also sit apart; but if there be no room, let them stand up behind the women. Let the young women who are married and have children stand apart, and the aged women and widows sit apart.... Let the deacon also see that no one whispers, or falls asleep, or laughs, or makes gestures. For so it should be, that with decency and decorum they watch in the Church, with ears attentive to the word of the Lord.

* Note well: The following two quotes do not come from inspired Scripture and should not be considered the Word of God. They do, however, give us insight into what early church gatherings were like.