

Preserve Evening Worship Services!

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‘Why do you go to church *twice* on Sunday? Isn’t once enough?’ Since the practice of attending worship twice on Sunday has fallen on hard times this is a question that I often get asked as a Reformed Christian. Many people in our culture find it amazing that anyone would actually *want* to go to church both in the morning *and* in the evening on Sunday. Others find the idea of attending worship twice to be an inconvenience that takes up too much of their weekend. Sadly, even many Reformed Christians do not see the great significance of attending church twice on the Lord’s Day and, therefore, remain uncommitted to the practice. If you have ever wondered about the purpose of having two services on the Sabbath, let me encourage you to think carefully about the following:

1. Evening Worship is Rooted in Scripture

While there is no explicit command in the New Testament to have two worship services instead of one, there is, nevertheless, a clear pattern in Scripture of ‘morning and evening’. This is seen in the order of creation as God structured time for us humans in terms of mornings and evenings (*Gen.* 1-2). This pattern was also evident in Old Covenant worship as God commanded the daily offerings in the tabernacle to be made once in the morning and then again at twilight (*Num.* 28:1-10, cf. *Exod.* 29:38-39). This is why the psalmist declares in Psalm 92, which is explicitly identified as a psalm of the Sabbath, ‘*It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night*’ (verses 1-2; cf. *Psa.* 134:1).

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to believe that this pattern of morning and evening carries over into New Covenant worship, especially since the New Testament gives evidence of worship services that took place on the evening of the first day of the week (see *Acts* 20:7).

2. Evening Worship Helps Us To Sanctify the Lord’s Day

One great practical benefit of having both morning and evening worship is that it provides an excellent structure to help families sanctify the Lord’s Day. The two worship services become like bookends on the Sabbath, allowing the Christian more easily to keep the day holy as we are commanded, rather than merely sanctifying a couple of hours in the morning! (Despite what is popular in our culture, it is still ‘the Lord’s *Day*’ and not ‘the Lord’s *Morning*’.)

Since the keeping of his day is a mark of God’s covenant community that sets it apart as holy and reminds its members that they are pilgrims on the way to the eternal Sabbath, evening worship provides a beautiful rhythm for the Lord’s Day. For centuries thousands upon thousands of

Christians have found the interval between the morning and evening worship services the perfect time for food, fellowship, devotional reading, family prayers, acts of mercy or - by no means the least important - a good nap! Freed up from all the craziness of the week, Christians are able to enjoy a day of worship and rest. What better way to end the holy day than by gathering together with the covenant community for the Word, fellowship, sacrament and the prayers (cf. *Acts* 2:42)?

3. Evening Worship, Like Morning Worship, Is a Means of Grace

Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 65 asks, ‘*Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, from where comes this faith?*’ It answers: ‘*The Holy Spirit works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.*’ One of the main reasons why the evening worship service has been greatly neglected in our day is because of a generally low view of preaching and the sacraments. Who wants to sit through another boring sermon when one can get a bigger ‘blessing’ in a small-group Bible study, personal devotions or some other program?

But if preaching and the sacraments are truly God’s primary means of grace for our sanctification, then surely Christians would not want to miss a worship service. Indeed, as Dr. W. Robert Godfrey has half-seriously pointed out, the question isn’t, “Why two worship services on Sunday?” The question more rightly should be, “Why not three or four?” If God nourishes our faith by the preaching of the gospel, why *wouldn’t* we want to hear the gospel preached more than once on Sunday? Since “*faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ*” (*Rom.* 10:17) and it is the “*the preaching of Jesus Christ*” that strengthens us (*Rom.* 16:25), we must realize that the evening worship service provides another opportunity for our faith to be built up and our knowledge of Christ to grow. It provides a broader scope of preaching on the whole counsel of God, allowing the pastor to take his congregation through more of Scripture than only one service would allow.

It is for this reason that the elders call the congregation to worship twice each Lord’s Day. As those to whom Christ has given the high calling of “*keeping watch over [our] souls*” (*Heb.* 13:17), they call us to worship not only so that we may serve the Lord twice on his holy day, but also so that we may benefit from God’s ordained means of grace. As God’s Word commands us to obey and to submit to our elders (again, see *Heb.* 13:17), we should respond to the call to worship as a joyful act of obedience to the Lord.

4. Evening Worship Gives Us Continuity with the Historic Christian Church

Oftentimes Christians balk at the practice of attending the evening worship service because it is not a part of their custom. What they must understand, however, is that if what they are accustomed to is only one service on the Lord’s Day, then they are not accustomed to the practice of the historic Christian church but to a modern novelty.

As we look at the history of the church, we see that morning and evening worship on the Lord's Day was the norm. In the early fourth century, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea described what he understood to be the universal practice of the church: "*For it is surely no small sign of God's power that throughout the whole world in the churches of God **at the morning rising of the sun and at the evening hours**, hymns, praises, and truly divine delights are offered to God. God's delights are indeed the hymns sent up everywhere on earth in his Church **at the times of morning and evening.***" (emphasis mine)¹

During the Middle Ages, morning worship became known as 'lauds' and evening worship as 'vespers'. Attending both lauds and vespers was standard practice for Christians.

At the time of the Reformation, the custom of morning and evening worship continued, as is evidenced in the liturgies of the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century. Typically the evening (or, in many cases, afternoon) service was devoted to an exposition of Reformed doctrine and was more catechetical in nature. So important was this second service to the life of the Reformed churches, that when it was threatened by the protests of the Remonstrants (Arminians), the matter was brought to the Synod of Dort (1618-19) and discussed at great length. The overwhelming testimony at the Synod by delegates from countries all over Europe was that the second service was something to be guarded and cherished in order that the Reformed faith might continue to flourish and Christians to have greater opportunity to mature in their understanding.

Through the centuries this practice continued to be a principal part of Reformed worship, as can be traced in the traditions of the Dutch Reformed churches, English Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism, as well as in Anglicanism and early Lutheranism. *Thus it must be understood that Protestant churches that have dropped the evening worship service altogether have sharply departed from what has historically been a normal practice of Christ's church.*

As one charged with the responsibility of feeding the flock of Christ and watching out for their souls, let me encourage you to attend the evening worship service. It is good for your soul! Indeed, some families have legitimate, pastoral reasons why attending the evening worship service is not merely an inconvenience, but a practical impossibility. But often those who do not attend evening worship do so merely out of an attitude that asks, 'What is the least that is required of me?' Let us lay aside such ungrateful thinking and be reminded that we are pilgrims on the way to our heavenly home. Just as our lives are marked with the beautiful sabbatical rhythm of six-and-one that was established in creation and looks forward to the consummation, so also we have a beautiful rhythm of worship each Lord's Day that provides an opportunity both in the morning and the evening to gather together with God's covenant community, to serve him in worship, and to receive from his open hand his good gifts of Word and sacrament.

¹ Eusebius, *Commentary on Psalm 64*, as quoted from *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.60.