

In previous columns, in discussing the worship we offer to God we have primarily considered questions about the contents, the order, and the ceremonial regulation of the morning worship service. But what of the evening service and all the more in our day when the evening service is rapidly disappearing from the Sunday schedule of the Christian Church? This is a great change and, in my view, a most unfortunate one.

A 1985 survey of the favorite hymns of British church-goers placed several evening hymns in the top ten (including *The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, is Ended* [No. 1], and *Abide with Me* [No. 7]). It is painful to contemplate generations of Christians growing up and not learning to sing these superb hymns so beloved of generations of the saints. But if there are no evening services, it is unlikely that these hymns will retain a place in the church's mind and heart. The number of the elect who were summoned to faith and life in Christ by preaching in Sunday evening services must be very large. But now there are half as many services in which a man or woman, boy or girl, might hear the words of life.

Are there reasons for the church to meet twice on the Lord's Day? Well, there must be, for the church has done so virtually without exception throughout her history. At Faith Presbyterian Church we love to sing *Hail! Gladdening Light*, one of the earliest Christian hymns extant, dating from at least the 3rd century and perhaps earlier. It was a hymn for the evening service of the early Christian church. The arguments for a second Lord's Day service, that is, an evening service, include these:

*First*, provision was made in the liturgical regulation of the tabernacle and temple for both morning and evening sacrifices and these were explicitly required to be continued on the Sabbath day (Numbers 28:1-10). *Second*, Psalm 92, which is explicitly identified as a psalm "For the Sabbath Day," reads, "It is good...to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night" (cf. Ps. 134:1). *Third*, in the New Testament we have record of evening worship on the Christian Sabbath, that is Sunday (Acts 20:7) and we have it in a book that very clearly intends to set before us facts representative of the life of early Christianity. Interestingly, what might be called the first Sunday "service" of the new epoch took place at night when the Lord on Easter evening met his disciples gathered in a room in Jerusalem. *Fourth*, just as morning has a special significance in the history of salvation (e.g. our Savior rose from the dead in the morning), so many events have sanctified the evening (e.g. the Savior's birth, the transfiguration, the struggle in Gethsemane, etc.). There is something appropriate in the church worshipping at the time that recollects such sacred and important events. *Fifth*, there is the consistent witness of the Christian tradition, from early Christianity, to English Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism's "afternoon" service, to Anglican evensong. *Sixth*, there are a variety of practical considerations that, together, strongly recommend the practice of an evening worship service on the Sabbath Day.

For example, such a service provides another opportunity for ministers to preach and teach the Word of God. All the more in our day, when the church is not as biblically literate as it once was, reducing the number of times Christians hear the Word read and taught is hardly a recipe for spiritual prosperity or renewal. I give my own testimony as a preacher that, were it not for the evening service – a well attended evening service for which I am very grateful – there are a many

parts of the Bible the congregation would never have had taught to it and many biblical themes that would never have been taught so comprehensively were I limited to a single sermon each week. A long series on the Bible's doctrine of affliction, or biblical ethics, or nearly two years in Samuel would be impossible to justify were only the Sunday morning sermon available to the preacher.

Further, the evening service provides a helpful structure to support the sanctification of the Lord's Day. Christians universally find it much easier to keep the Lord's Day holy and make proper use of its time if the hours following the morning worship are an interval between two services. Then there is a limited amount of time in the middle of the day to put to proper use before it is time to return to church. The definite structure of the day lends itself to obedience and to a wise use of the day.

In those churches where the Christian family is home from church at 11:00 a.m. or 1:00 p.m., with the remainder of the day to its end stretching before them and with no occasion to return to church, the sanctification of the day is provided no support and now depends entirely on the determined exercise of the will. We are finding in American evangelicalism that this is a recipe for disaster so far as the holiness of the Sabbath day is concerned. But, if keeping the Sabbath holy is one of the great engines of Christian faith, holiness and joy, as the Bible teaches that it is, the loss of the Sabbath in the evangelical church is no small thing.

Furthermore, there is a character to the evening that lends to worship a particular character. Generations of Christians have known this from hallowed experience. The English poet, Meredith, has a line, "the largeness of the evening earth." G.K. Chesterton, commenting on that line, wrote, "The sensation that the cosmos has all its windows open is very characteristic of evening..." The special character of evening hymns bears witness to the particular set of holy thoughts that crowd the soul in the evening hours. Christian worship on the Lord's Day evening gains a special character from the hour.

God's people through the ages have prized the second service. Christian children growing up with Sunday evenings at church remember them with a special fondness. Most Christians, I suppose, have the memory of a special spiritual atmosphere that attached to evening worship. We are, after all, talking about only another hour or two out of the entire week. Surely we should have a good reason, a very good reason, why we would not make a special effort to be in God's house, to sing his praise and hear his Word, twice on the Lord's holy Day. A day devoted to his worship and to the refreshment of our souls in him, surely is very naturally a day that begins and ends in God's house, among God's people, with his Word in our ears and his praise in our hearts.