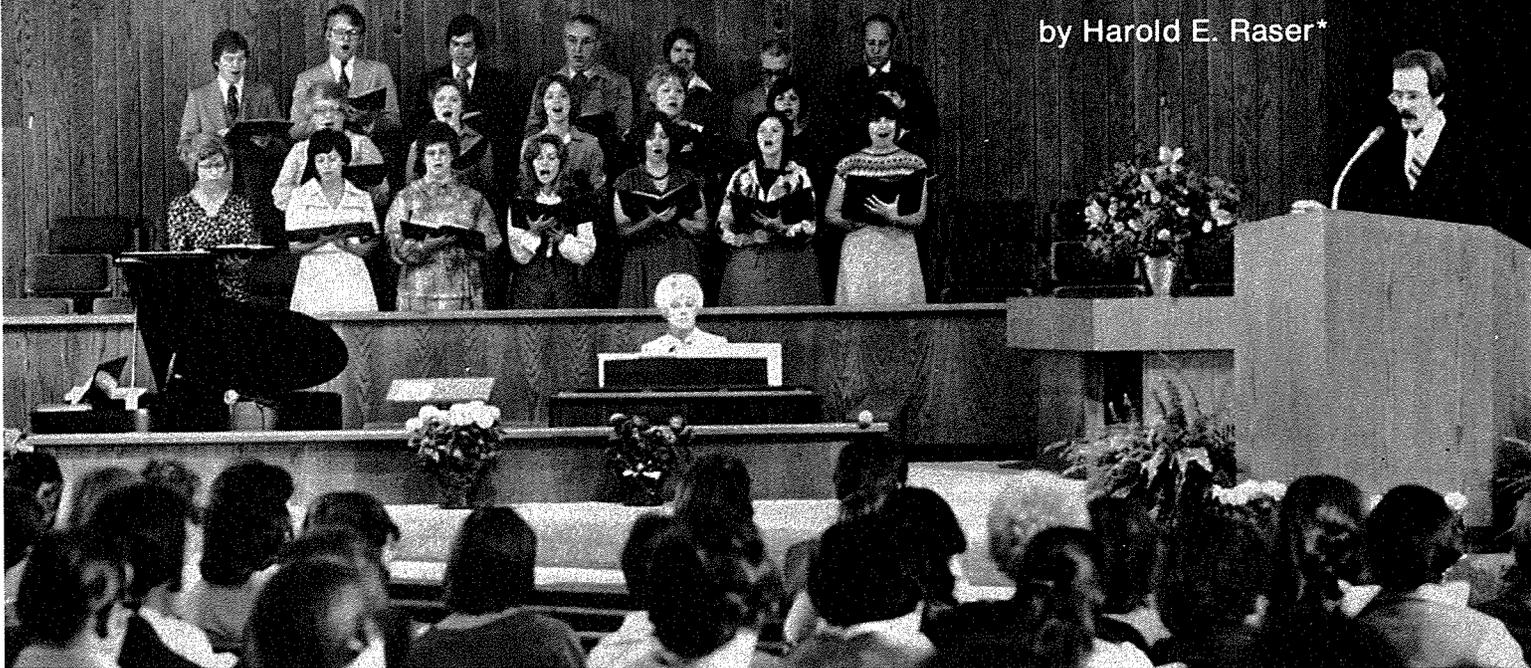


# THE SUNDAY NIGHT SERVICE— WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

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**T**he Sunday night service has not always been the “poor kid on the block” of Christian worship which it sometimes seems to be today. A survey of the historical development of worship reveals that, quite to the contrary, evening worship may well have been the original form of worship practiced by Christians. It appears from the few references we have in Scripture and other documents from the earliest period of the Church that an evening “breaking of bread” on the first day of the week formed the basis of the first distinctively Christian worship service. For some time the first Christians frequented the synagogue, maintaining their connection with Judaism, but this practice was supplemented and eventually replaced by specifically Christian gatherings where Jesus was honored as Lord and prayers and praise were offered in His name.

Acts 20:7-11 describes a typical gathering of Christians on what they came to call “The Lord’s Day”—typical except for the fact that the meeting lasted until daybreak and one of the congregation was fatally afflicted by the long-winded sermon. Yet the hour and nature of the meeting seem to reflect the common custom of the time. At the heart of this

evening’s gathering was the “breaking of bread” which commemorated the disciples’ “last supper” with Jesus on the eve of His crucifixion and probably also grew out of His fellowship with them on the evening of His resurrection (see John 20:19 ff. and Luke 24:36 ff.). Following these examples, Christians met together in private homes for fellowship with one another and with the risen Lord on the evening of the first day of the week, continuing a practice that went back to the evening of Easter itself.

## ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENTS

If Christian worship did begin in this way as an evening celebration on the first day of the week, it might well be asked how and why the morning eventually came to predominate as the appointed hour for worship. No certain answer can be given since evidence is so scarce from the first few centuries. A reasonable guess would be that the shift began to take place when evening gatherings of Christians were proscribed by the Roman imperial authorities sometime in the second century A.D. Pointing in this direction is a letter from Pliny “the younger” (A.D. 62?-113), Roman governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, to the emperor Trajan (reigned A.D. 98-117). Pliny declares that Christians in his province have ceased to gather at the time of the evening meal in response to his command implementing the emperor’s edict forbidding “seditious gatherings.” He relates that they now meet on their “fixed day” before daybreak.<sup>1</sup> It is quite probable that the imperial edict did not



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apply to Asia Minor alone, so that Christians throughout the empire were compelled to change their traditional hour of worship.

By the time of Justin (A.D. 100-165) morning worship had become the norm. In his mid second century *Apology* Justin gives us the earliest detailed description of Christian worship written by a Christian. He describes it as a Sunday morning gathering, beginning sometimes with baptism, followed by reading and expounding of the Old Testament or the writings of the apostles, prayer, and the taking up of an offering. The service ends with the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, which had been the heart of the original evening gathering.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of the second century, then, a shift had been made from a Sunday evening table fellowship to a morning service which had its conclusion in the Eucharist.

Several other developments in the ancient and medieval period also affected the time and nature of Christian worship. One of these was the increasing elaboration of the worship service. What began as an essentially informal, spontaneous, and free celebration of the Lordship of Jesus, over time acquired an elaborate structure of ritual, climaxing in the grand Mass of the Medieval Church. In the third and fourth centuries, Communion was celebrated in secrecy, only after catechumens ("Probationary Christians") and nonbelievers had been dismissed. This gave rise to a "Liturgy of the Word," which was a prayer and scriptural exhortation service for all, and a separate "Liturgy of the Upper Room," which involved Communion for only the fully initiated. The Church once again emerged into the open under the patronage of the emperor Constantine (A.D. 288?-377); its worship fully public and greatly changed. Some would say it had been enriched, while others contend it had been encumbered. Whichever the case, it is possible to see the influence of the ceremonialism of both the old Temple worship of Judaism and the popular mystery religions of the time in the changes which took place.<sup>3</sup> The result was a worship service which by the fifth century clearly subordinated all else to the Mass centered in the Lord's Supper; which was by then conceived as an act of sacrifice presided over by a "priest." This Mass more and more took on the characteristics of a spectacle, with worshippers the spectators. This meant that corporate worship came to be increasingly focused on the one great weekly celebration of the Mass and that worshippers were at the same time progressively cut off from meaningful participation in it.

Also significant was the edict of Constantine in 321 which proclaimed Sunday a general day of rest. This gave legal sanction for Christians to "clear the calendar" of secular concerns on the "Lord's Day," which they did. They also soon filled up the time through proliferation of public services, not all of them involving the Mass.

Finally, monasticism contributed to the development of Christian worship in this period. Committed to lives of utter devotion to God, undistracted by "secular" involvement, the monastics developed a disciplined daily regimen organized around eight

mandatory hours of prayer, called "offices," to be observed corporately throughout the day, commencing at midnight and concluding just prior to going to bed. Standardized prayers, scripture lessons, and instructions for their use at the various appointed hours were developed and collected into books called "breviaries." These "breviaries" gradually found their way into the Church at large and in some places became the basis of a daily schedule of public services which imitated the hours of prayer in the monasteries. In this way evening, along with midday and afternoon, worship services not connected with the Lord's Supper and more fully involving the laity became part of Christian practice.

## REFORMATION DEVELOPMENTS

The profound upheaval of Christianity brought about by the Protestant Reformation certainly did not bypass worship practices. Some scholars have, in fact, seen dissatisfaction with the state of worship in the medieval Church as being a primary cause of the Reformation. Each of the major reformers did change in significant ways the manner in which worship was carried out, though some reformed worship more drastically than others.

All the reformers agreed in principle that the focus of worship in general, and the Sunday morning service in particular, ought to be proclamation of the Word rather than the sacrament. Still, the Eucharist retained a very significant place in worship, with Luther and Calvin urging its celebration weekly. Zwingli's view that a complete worship experience could be had without Communion, however, was the one that finally predominated within Protestantism. As a movement asserting the authority of the Word (by which was meant not only the written, but also the spoken and living Word of God) over against other kinds of authority in the Church, the Reformation naturally elevated proclamation of that Word to preeminence in the worship experience that underlay the average Christian's understanding and practice of Christian faith. So, the Protestant worship service tended to become a preaching service.

The Reformation also modified the calendar of worship which was observed in Catholicism. Again, differences among the various reforming leaders, groups, and geographical localities are evident, though the trend was steadily in the direction of limiting the number of worship gatherings by, among other things, eliminating many of the festivals and celebrations in honor of saints. In England Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) carried out a revision of the Book of Common Prayer which "protestantized" worship in the English church, and in doing so created "offices" of Morning and Evening Prayer out of the old multiple "offices" of the monasteries. He did this by combining materials from the "breviaries" for several of the early prayer hours to form one service of Morning Prayer and material from several evening "offices" to form one service of Evening Prayer. Neither of these services included Communion as an integral part, though it could be celebrated in connection

with them. The orders of service for morning and evening were almost identical, though the prayers, recitations, and scripture readings used were different. This arrangement of morning and evening worship services set the pattern for the standard Sunday worship of the English-speaking world.

As Cranmer designed it, the pattern of Morning and Evening Prayer could be followed daily, not only on Sunday. The Reformation tendency to limit the number of corporate worship gatherings, however, worked out in practice to restrict the two standard services to certain days of the week, commonly Wednesday and Friday along with Sunday. It was left to the English Puritans to develop this into a Sunday-only practice. Among the most radical of the "Protestantizers" in English Christianity, the Puritan party wanted to do away with every vestige of what it considered Catholic "superstition." In the case of the worship calendar this meant that for the Puritans there could be only one "red letter day" and that was Sunday. All other festivals and "holy days" were subsumed under the "Lord's Day," which was to be honored scrupulously (it was the Puritans who drew up the first "Blue Laws" compelling cessation of business and recreation activities on Sunday). In this process Anglican Morning and Evening Prayer quite naturally became the heart of the Puritans' conscientious "Sabbath" observance.<sup>4</sup>

Puritan Sunday services were "Morning and Evening Prayer" with a difference, however. Not only did the Puritans eschew the traditional Church calendar, but ritual and ceremonialism as well. Their worship services thus became informal and were characterized by extemporaneous rather than standardized prayers, little, if any, recitation of traditional creeds, absence of clerical vestments, and often lengthy sermons as the heart of the worship experience.

## AMERICAN DEVELOPMENTS

English Puritans, of course, contributed much to the development of religious life in America. In establishing strict Sunday observance in their New England settlements they raised a standard that was followed by American Christianity in general. Sometimes Puritan Sunday worship included three gatherings rather than the typical two. In addition to a morning and late afternoon preaching service (corresponding to Morning and Evening Prayer) there might also be an informal evening gathering where the sermons of the day could be discussed and elaborated upon.<sup>5</sup> As noted, for the Puritans, Sunday was *the* day of Christian worship and scheduling several meetings for preaching and prayer and spiritual edification on that day was seen by them as the best way of making it above all others the "Lord's Day." So the practice of holding at least two relatively unstructured preaching services on Sunday came to America with the Puritan colonists.

Along with a basically Sunday calendar of worship the Puritans also brought with them their aversion to liturgical and formal worship. The plain

worship style they embraced came to typify almost all of the American Protestant churches. It was particularly adaptable to the circumstances of the nation in its formative days when the population was moving ever westward and there was often a shortage of trained clergymen, and established churches in which to worship. Frontier conditions did much to help the plain style prevail.

These conditions also contributed to preaching becoming primarily evangelistic in thrust. Under frontier conditions there was often great spiritual need and yet little time for the generally itinerant preacher to be with his people. Of necessity he stressed what was most important so that the sermon came to be nearly exclusively a call to repent and receive salvation, and the preaching service almost by definition an evangelistic service. This was also helped along by the country's numerous seasons of national revival. A series of "Great Awakenings" has stamped an indelible mark on American Christianity: the style of the camp meeting, the evangelistic appeal, and the individual conversion experience have colored many American Christians' understanding and expectations of the worship event.

For decades the Sunday evening service in this country was an integral part of "Sabbath keeping" for most Christians. In its informality, stress on preaching, and evangelistic thrust it was largely at one with the Sunday morning service in the bulk of the churches. In more recent times, as observance of the "Lord's Day" has declined in society, affecting the churches as well, as many denominations have discontinued the Sunday night service, focusing all of their resources on Sunday morning worship. Others have maintained it, but as clearly subordinate to the morning service. Some few have attempted to treat it as an equal partner with Sunday morning worship.

It can be seen from our brief survey that these developments are all, in some way, consistent with the checkered past of Sunday night worship. As the original form of Christian worship, it was abandoned through governmental pressure. As morning worship became ritualized and exclusively centered in the Eucharist, the Sunday night service made a comeback, particularly through the influence of the monasteries, but subordinate to the Mass. Over time Sunday night worship became an integral part of the pattern of worship in the Reformation churches as a preaching service, and took on its informal and evangelistic flavor through Puritan influence and the American revival experience. 

## NOTES

1. Cited in Paul King Jewett, *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 69-70.

2. Justin Martyr, *Apology*, chapters 65-67.

3. See Iliou T. Jones, *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), pp. 94-98. Also J. V. Bartlett, "Christian Worship as Reflected in Ancient Liturgies" in *Christian Worship: Studies in Its History and Meaning*, edited by Nathaniel Micklem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 91-94.

4. A. G. Matthews, "The Puritans," in Micklem, loc. cit., pp. 172-73.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.