

Why Evening Worship?

Since the historic Christian practice of attending worship twice on Sunday has fallen on hard times, the question, “Why an evening worship service?” is often asked by those new to Reformed Christianity. Many people in our culture find it amazing that anyone would actually *want* to go to church both in the morning and evening on Sunday. The idea of attending worship twice seems to be an unnecessary inconvenience that takes up too much of the weekend. Sadly, even many Reformed Christians do not see the great significance in attending church twice on the Lord’s Day and remain uncommitted to the practice. So what gives? Why an evening worship service?

The Rhythm of Morning and Evening

There is a beautiful rhythm to morning and evening worship on the Lord’s Day. 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 as humans in terms of mornings and evenings (Gen. 1-2). Worship in the old covenant was structured around this natural rhythm. 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. Ex. 29.38-39). This is why the psalmist declares in Psalm 92, which is explicitly identified as a psalm for 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*” (vv.1-2; cf. Ps. 134.1).

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to see a pattern of morning and evening carrying 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).

Divine Bookends

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 to more easily 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 Lord’s Day is a mark of God’s covenant community that sets them apart as holy and reminds them 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 prayer, 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 Word, fellowship, sacrament and the prayers? (cf. Acts 2.42)

An Historic and Reformed Norm

Some Christians balk at the practice of attending an evening service because it is not what they are accustomed to. 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 accustomed not 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)

During the Middle Ages, morning worship became known as "lauds" and evening worship "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 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 the 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 have greater opportunity to mature in their understanding.

Through the centuries, this practice continued to be a principal part of Reformed worship as it can be traced in the traditions of the Dutch Reformed churches, English Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism, as well as 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.*

Time to Eat

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.” I sometimes wonder how many Christians really believe that. 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, to be very honest, something interesting on TV?

But if the worship service really is the *Divine* service, that is, the holy event in which God condescends to us and meets us in his preached and visible Gospel, then surely Christians would not want to miss this. If it is true that “*faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Rom. 10.17) and it is “*the preaching of Jesus Christ*” that strengthens us (Rom. 16.25), then the preached Gospel is the lifeline to our sanctification. What other reasonable response is there but to heed God’s call to worship in the evening as well as the morning? It is as if God is announcing to his people, “It’s meal time for your soul!” He calls us to Mount Zion for a family meal twice each Lord’s Day so that we have a foretaste of heaven, our minds renewed, our hope built up, and our discipleship advanced. Why on earth (literally) would we want to miss that?

In the Divine Service, both in the morning and evening, a meal has been prepared for us. We take our seats at the table while he who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10.45) feeds us and nourishes our souls.

More on the Menu

First, we should keep in mind that the evening service 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. By calling two services on the Lord’s Day, the elders have ensured that the menu is broadened. How else is a congregation to hear expository preaching through most of the Bible as well as frequent catechetical sermons on the doctrines of Scripture? Two sermons a week, rather than one, provides more rather than less.

Secondly, by making evening service attendance a norm for our families, our children grow up with a better understanding of the importance of the means of grace and the gathering of the saints in holy assembly. When parents make both services a priority for their families, there is a far greater chance that children will maintain this pattern later in their adult lives. Attending both services is not only good for our families’ souls *now*, but it is also a spiritual investment for the future.

Finally, while there may be legitimate, pastoral reasons why attending the means of grace in the evening is a practical impossibility for a particular family, we must be careful to examine ourselves to see if our aversion to the evening service is in reality 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 we have a beautiful rhythm of worship each Lord’s Day that provides us with

an opportunity both in the morning and the evening to gather together with God's covenant community and receive his good gifts of Word and sacrament from his open hand.

As one charged with the responsibility of feeding the flock of Christ and watching out for their souls, I encourage and exhort you to attend the evening worship service. It is good for your soul. Make use of the spiritual feast prepared for you each week in the morning and evening.

Michael Brown
Pastor, Christ United Reformed Church
Santee, CA
used by permission