

Alternative Times for Worship? The Importance of Saying No

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The symbolic reasons for Sunday as a Christian day of worship have not been confronted by a better idea. Sunday has been the Lord's Day from the church's beginnings (Acts 20:7; Rev 1:10; *Didache* 14:1). Then, as now, by gathering to worship on the "first day of the week," when the tomb of Jesus was discovered empty, we are performing the Easter story and basking in its light. As Christ's resurrection signifies the dawn of the new creation, this time set apart on the first day has an eschatological thrust: we are being brought out of captivity to time into the "eighth day," as Christian worship was sometimes called in the patristic era.

Could a case could be made for Eucharistic worship on the night of the Last Supper, the night in which he was betrayed? Or for Friday afternoon, as a people of the cross gathering to hear nothing but Christ, and him crucified? Or for Saturday, every Christian worship an expression of our living between cross and resurrection? Yes, probably. But, of course, no one is asking us for a different worship time on symbolic or narrative grounds. The demand is for a way of being church that fits into our overstuffed schedules, to treat worship like one more activity among many.

To a church facing *this* particular form of idolatry, the question becomes what worship practice is most likely to engender a faith that actually reorients our lives and rightly orders our allegiances. In youth ministry scholar Kenda Creasy Dean's incisive terminology, what will help stem the tide of "benign whateverism" so prevalent in the spirituality of younger generations and replace it with a "consequential" faith—a faith that makes a difference in life?¹

Just as the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath, so too the gift character of the Lord's Day for the purpose of human flourishing must remain front and center. When we stake our claim on a set time and stick to it, so that our other commitments fall in order behind it, we are learning through repetition how to put first things first. Just as a discipline of first fruits giving can help free us from the worship of money, giving to God the first fruits of our time in a routine of Sunday worship can liberate us from worship of the clock.

Being a Christian is vague or irrelevant until we say yes or say no to some-

¹See Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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Alternative Times for Worship? It's the Why That Matters

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We've all been in *that* meeting: someone laments that Sunday attendance is not what it used to be, that we can no longer expect members to show up faithfully weekly on Sunday morning. Problem-solving begins. Somebody notes that the Roman Catholic Church has a lot of people attending Saturday evening mass. Someone has read about emerging churches that prefer Sunday evenings. Another notes that some churches accommodate their “cabin people” who are gone on weekends with a Monday or midweek service. And someone will suggest that technology solves the problem of simultaneous worship: we could “just” stream the services or podcast the sermons. Church staff in these conversations shift uncomfortably in our chairs, mostly at the thought of who will implement these ideas but also out of discomfort at the perhaps unspoken ideas at work.

All of these ideas can come from a place of compassion and desire to share the gospel. They also can come from anxiety about decline. Sunday morning is not “reserved” any more for worship. Sports leagues schedule Sunday events that pull entire families out of town, and stores see the whole weekend as prime shopping time. If people are busy on Sundays, maybe we need to think about other times to gather.

We approach the problem from this direction because we live in a consumer culture. We assume that more choices are good and the only reason *not* to offer more choice might be the limitations of our resources—staff, money, or technical savvy. But offering “choice” emerges from the assumption that communal worship is about offering a service that others will consume based on their interests, schedules, and preferences. The assumption implies the answer. We should look closely at that assumption. What if observing Sabbath is not only about selecting one worship opportunity among many?

Martin Luther's explanation of the third commandment offers both guidance and an odd omission: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.” For Luther “remembering the Sabbath day” was about honoring the word of God and its preaching with our time. He made no mention of Sunday; strangely, he also made no reference to the commandment to *rest* on the Sabbath.

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thing and answer that we did so or did not do so “because I am a Christian.” This goes back to the renunciations and the confession of the Triune God that accompany baptism. By contrast, a *modus operandi* that is stuck on accommodation, even in the name of grace, stands in significant tension with this pattern. We may come off as empathetic and understanding, we may be commended for our backbreaking effort to provide all things at all times, but without the no to accompany the yes, it will not actually be God’s grace we are conferring. Our calling is to hand over the whole Christ, and if we are unwilling to hold the line on something so deep in our ecclesial bones as Sunday morning worship, then the people we serve may never truly encounter the Jesus who told “large crowds” to count the cost of following him (Luke 14:28–29) and admonished even the man who wished first to go and bury his father to “let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt 8:21–22).

A powerful example of the positive relationship between consecrating a certain time of the week for religious devotion and the successful transmission of faith across generations can be found in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. According to a landmark longitudinal study conducted by Vern Bengtson and his associates, Mormons surpass mainline Protestants in the percentage of parents whose young adult children have the same religious tradition three times over (85 percent to 26 percent).² Why? Most significant of all, this research indicates, is the vital role the family plays in Mormon devotional life, and one of the chief ways this is expressed is by the setting aside as sacred not one but two times a week, for which other activities must give way—Sunday morning services and Family Home Evening (an intergenerational gathering for prayer and Scripture study typically held on Monday nights). This habit of honoring sacred time is not enough by itself if divorced from the experience of affection in the faith community and the caring example of parents, but where love and affirmation are combined with discipline, a potent formula for passing on faith emerges.

As Christians in North America become less and less part of the mainstream, we can learn a great deal from Mormons, Jews, Muslims, and others who know what it takes to form and preserve religious identity without receiving special favor from the surrounding culture. Reserving a certain time of the week as special has proven to be a key ingredient in that. As the church returns to an old situation, an old wisdom is called for—we belong to the Day and so on the first day of the week, we break bread. ⊕

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²Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 58.

In twenty-first-century North America, there is no rest from striving. Sports leagues demand hours of travel. Advertisements tell us that the latest fashion or gadget is a “must-have.” Even our homes, we hear, should be viewed as never-ending improvement projects that we must complete to preserve their value.

It is not enough, though, to moralize about the skewed values of our culture, because on the flip side of every sports program, every department store blowout, every home megastore, are people whose very survival depends on this consumer economy. Yes, changes in Sunday come from people choosing to shop, or travel, or play instead of worship; but for some, the economic reality of *not* working on Sundays is a nonstarter. And those who lack the choice, who work Sundays because their boss says they must, sometimes with very little notice, are the very people whom the church frets about reaching: immigrants, young adults, and the working poor.

So what should we do? Church leaders must listen to our communities and respond in our planning, but we should resist the premise that worship is yet one more product to be improved rather than the gathering of God’s people around a gracious word of life. A knee-jerk response of offering more options for service times might ignore the real needs of believers for *holy* time.

Worship is not an obligation to check off, or content to be delivered, or a “re-charge” whose purpose is to put us back on the treadmill of striving. Worship is coming to who we truly are in relationship to God—the needy, the lost, the ones who are weary and in need of rest. That includes church staff too, who might need to be freed from the assumption that growing attendance is the same as growing in grace.

Should we hold the line on Sundays? Maybe, maybe not. The answer is less important than the journey to our decisions. More than sixty years ago Abraham Heschel wrote that Sabbath is “the art of surpassing civilization.” His words are no less true today—perhaps more so when we are inclined to think of Sunday church as a remnant of Christian civil hegemony. There is no going back. Going forward requires us to ask how “civilization” pulls us away from the revolutionary freedom and rest offered by the gospel. If we start by asking how we can fit into any remaining unclaimed spaces, we’re probably starting with the wrong question. If we start a conversation by listening to the burdens of our communities, and declaring wholeheartedly the invitation of Jesus, “come to me *all* you who are weary...” then that conversation will be living out the gospel. Both ways might produce a Sunday 6:00 p.m. service. But the route to it will affect how *all* participants experience that worship. ⊕

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