

Reflections on the Second Service

As I observe the second service attendance in our own, and in other churches, I start to wonder about the future. Will there be a second service? This is a realistic question.

In the nineteenth century the Lord's Day was strictly kept in Canada. It was still called the Sabbath. On Saturday wood was cut, food was prepared, and the children bathed. No unnecessary labor was left for the Sabbath day. And among the very strict Reformed Presbyterians some would not even visit. The church was faithfully attended. In the beginning of this century the traditional Sunday came under pressure. But street cars were still not allowed to run on Sundays. All the stores were closed. Both church services were well attended. As a matter of fact, the second service was very popular during the early decades of urbanization in Canada.

How times have changed! Today stores are open in defiance of the law! Church membership has dropped. In many churches (denominations) there is no longer a second service. Some Churches even close during the summer holidays. These developments did not come overnight. Slowly and imperceptibly the erosion of faith took place.

Our current crisis of the spirit, for that is what it is, has come through choices people make: choice by choice, thought by thought. Sunday has become secularized. I am deeply concerned that this secularization process will also overtake us if we don't watch out and be vigilant in word and deed.

Os Guinness once wrote. "Faith is not torn up, it is merely frayed. It is not eaten up suddenly but nibbled at the corners. It is not hit by a bolt of lightning. It is the victim of the slow erosion of many winters." Recent history has proven Os Guinness right. In our age of cultural and religious decline, this drifting away from the Lord is more common than ever. And this is the heart of my concern.

During some of our consistory meetings we have struggled with the changing attitudes towards the Lord's Day. Where are we going? What is happening to the Sunday? The second service fits into the framework of the latter question.

When the Rev. Mr. R.T. Kuiper travelled from The Netherlands to Graafschap, Michigan in 1879 with seven motherless children, he waited in Passaic, New Jersey, to catch the train on Monday, since "the trains do not run on Sunday in America." He adds that he was glad "to rest on the Lord's Day according to the commandment." More than one hundred years later few passenger trains are running in North America, but freight trains are and cars certainly are. Our highways are busy on Sunday. Even more and more trucks are on the road.

Times are changing. This is a well worn out but true saying. A generation ago, in many places, the Christian Reformed Church still had three worship services

each Lord's Day. Dr. John J. Timmerman recalls in an article that ministers delivered three sermons before his often critical sheep, dressed in a somber Prince Albert, sweating it out on August afternoons without air-conditioning before the whirl of variegated hand-propelled fans. Gradually the church went from three to two services on Sunday.

Whether a third service was necessary is not the point of discussion at the moment. But, why the increased tendency to worship only once? Some say, "We are so busy during the week, we need extra time at home." Others feel that two sermons in one day is a bit much. I wonder about those reasons. The past generation had no 40-hour work-week. They had much less leisure time as compared to our generation. The sermons were much longer. I am grateful that times have become much easier. But should not this welcome change make it easier to attend the second service? I believe it does. Is our consensus on Sunday behavior on the wane? For generations the thought was that God made the Sabbath for man to ensure his rest and spiritual growth, not for him to do what he wanted. As a church we believe that the Lord's Day should be kept, not as a matter of convenience or tradition, but by the commandment of God. And we confess that it is both our duty and privilege "on the day of rest (to) diligently attend the church of God, to learn God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord and to give Christian alms" (Heidelberg Catechism. Q. 103).

But why two services and not just one as is the practice of some other denominations? There are basically two reasons. Sunday is not our day but the Lord's Day. This day is set aside for worship.

Rev. Martin Monsma wrote in the *New Revised Church Order Commentary*. "Those who hold two services each Sunday do so. not only because they feel this is proper and to the welfare of God's believing people, in order that they may be the more built up in the faith, but also because they believe that the fourth commandment is still in force as to its essence and core, and that therefore Christians should consecrate the whole day to His special service, and hold, if at all possible at least two services each Lord's Day. The day is not for picnics and parties, for business activities, for recreational purposes or for traveling." Rev. Monza's explanation is to the point. Those who are persuaded that the special observance of the Lord's Day is tied in with the fourth commandment have attempted to make this day special.

Historically the Reformed Churches have made a distinction between the two worship services. The morning service was devoted to a "free" topic; the choice of the text was up to the minister. The afternoon or evening service had the catechism as its basis. Of course both were worship services, the meeting of God with His people. Yet they were of a different character. The second service has been confessional in nature. Ministers usually preach from the Heidelberg Catechism. Exceptions have been made with the approval of the consistory. In

our congregation we have gone through the Belgic Confession once, and twice through the Canons of Dort. At the moment we are studying the Book of Revelation. Why this type of preaching? The Catechism provides the church with a systematic survey of the key teachings of Scripture. The Belgic Concession is a summary of Christian doctrine, with an additional emphasis on the nature and authority of Scriptures. The Canons of Dort highlight the sovereignty of God in salvation. Systematic instruction in Scripture has always been the strength of the Church. We need to know the Word and its content, especially in our bewildering and confusing times.

As I conclude these brief reflections on the second worship service, it is my earnest prayer that we will gather twice on the Lord's Day for worship and instruction from the Word. We need this more than ever before. As we watch the developments in our society, the increasing secularization and lowering of moral standards, we need to stand together as God's people, encouraging one another in the faith.

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