

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



9 JULY 2017



With barely half of Australians even identifying as Christians in the recent census and church attendance becoming less and less frequent even among “committed” Christians, we could well ask:

Are We Required to Attend Church on Sunday?

White Horse Inn

The very fact that we have to address this question, even in evangelical circles, demonstrates the true measure of the church's worldliness. When the holy day is reabsorbed into the common week, the church is bound to be reabsorbed into the world's bloodstream.

In the Old Testament, the weekly Sabbath is anchored in creation (Exodus 20:8-11) and in God's redemption of Israel from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

The New Testament church met on Sunday, “the first day of the week,” also identified as “the Lord's Day” (John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Rev 1:10).

Martin Luther called each Lord's Day “a little Easter.” For that very reason his Larger Catechism insists upon the regular participation in the weekly assembly.

Calvin saw a threefold purpose for the Sabbath institution:

1. As a sign of the final rest that would come with Christ;
2. To maintain church order, and
3. To offer relief for workers.

Calvin's view is essentially the same as that in the Heidelberg Catechism, which calls us to confess exactly why the Bible summons us to worship and fellowship on Sundays?

First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor.

Second, that every day of my life I may rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath (Q. 103).

The Westminster Confession embraced explicitly the “one-in-seven” principle, anchoring the Christian Sabbath in creation:

to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ was the last day of the week; and from the resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's day, and is to be

continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

There is no list of forbidden activities, but the general requirement to exchange ordinary “worldly employments and recreations [that] are lawful on other days” for “public and private exercises of his worship and in the duties of necessity and mercy” (Ch. 21).

The key to a Christian use of the Lord's Day is not drawing up a list of what can and cannot be done, but to give the *whole day* to basking in God's Word, loading ourselves up with the treasures of Christ.

Churches themselves are making this more difficult, as they trim down the public worship to a single service of an hour or so. Yet even in “rightly ordered” churches, the question has to be asked, especially by pastors and elders: *Are we preparing a feast each week or are we contributing to the trivializing of the Lord's Day and then blaming the people for not taking it seriously enough?*

The Puritans called Sunday “the market-day of the soul.” On this day, we come and buy “wine and meat without cost”. We set aside our ordinary activities and past-times; we are not primarily doers but receivers on this day, although there may still be works of necessity and mercy.

What are we indicating about where our ultimate treasure lies when we give ourselves to sports, shopping and entertainment on this day?

Has nothing changed with Christ's resurrection from the dead?

Is there no new creation and new family to which we belong, with Christ as its first-fruits and head?

Are there no means of grace through which the age to come is breaking into this passing age?

Is there no place on earth today, no time in our weekly routine, in which the Spirit is at work uniting sinners to Christ, justifying and renewing them by his Word?

It has become fashionable to pit “being the church” against “going to church,” but there is no church for us to “be” apart from the assembly that God is erecting in the wilderness by his Word and Spirit. We go to church

to receive the means of grace, precisely so that we can be the church in the world.

There are Ten Commandments, not Nine. The ceremonial and civil laws attached to the moral law are no longer binding, but the moral law itself remains in effect forever. We can no more reject or treat lightly the fourth commandment because of legalistic distortions than we can dismiss the other commandments against murder, adultery, theft, and so forth. Charles Hodge observes, “The fourth commandment is read in all Christian churches, whenever the decalogue is read, and the people are taught to say, ‘Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law’”.

If God has commanded something, it is to be obeyed; abuse of the command doesn't abrogate it. John Murray puts the question well: “Why should insistence upon Sabbath observance be pharisaical or legalistic? The question is this: Is it a divine ordinance? If it is, then adherence to it is

not legalistic any more than adherence to the other commandments of God.”

We should all be able to agree on the following points:

1. The New Testament prescribes the Lord's Day as the weekly gathering of the Lord's people for the means of grace and public worship;
2. The New Testament insists upon the regular attendance upon these public means of grace. We need a whole day to be bathed again in the powers of the age to come in the communion of saints;
3. The carelessness for the Lord's Day is ultimately a carelessness for the means of grace and the communion of saints, which is part and parcel of the defiant and lawless spirit of our age.

As B. B. Warfield expressed the point, “Christ took the Sabbath into the grave with him and brought the Lord's Day out of the grave with him on the resurrection morn.”

The White Horse Inn is a radio program, podcast, and blog dedicated to a modern reformation of the Christian Church.

Trimming down public worship to an hour or so trivializes the Lord's Day.

Edited and condensed from: <https://www.whitehorseinn.org/2011/12/are-we-required-to-attend-church-on-sunday/>

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