

The Demise of Sunday Night

By Kent Heaton

It is with great trepidation that I step into the spiritual coliseum of tradition and practice but a mist rolls over the hills of today that threaten the roots of the Lord's church in America. We have long held traditions that were created to facilitate a need in allowing folk to worship as a body on numerous occasions during the week. My generation is familiar with the three sessions on Sunday of Bible class, worship followed by an evening worship. A mid-week Bible study usually was engaged on Wednesday night. The practices were edifying for the local church and seemed a good fit for the day. This was not based on a particular pattern of the New Testament church as no indication is given to the form of first day activities in the First Century. Luke alludes to the church in Jerusalem continuing "steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Whether they did that all day long, three sessions or more or less on the first day is not known.

Forward to modern day America. We live in a prosperous nation that has more comforts and ease than most civilizations could imagine since time began. There are more opportunities in America with ease of transportation, comfort of environment, tools to help the declaration of God's word and a host of conveniences afforded in every church building. In the face of all these grandiose achievements a wind blows quietly through the ranks of the Army of God to do less. Sunday evening services are being cancelled, gospel meetings are getting shorter, and interest in extra studies are dwindling.

Let me be quite clear and understood with great clarity. Nothing in scripture demands we meet for Bible class on Sunday morning, have a morning worship followed by an evening worship. This is as much an American invention as anything and it has served a good purpose. The 'Demise of Sunday Night' is not a critical article of churches that have dismissed the Sunday night service for a more favorable work on the first day of the week. A number of places are finding growth and a spiritual awakening in the efforts they are putting forth for Sunday night. But it should also be clear that great effort is being extended to facilitate the work of the church in these places because of leadership and willingness by brethren to make it work. God be thanked for these efforts.

However, there is a trend among congregations that are following the novel idea of having one service on Sunday for the simple reason of enjoying having one service on Sunday. It is not based on evangelism but for personal reasons. There seems to be a mixed-up cry of wanting to be like the New Testament church when in fact the New Testament church would love to be able to have the opportunities we have today. The motto is based upon doing less instead of more.

There are two issues I believe must be recognized at the heart of this new trend. First, we no longer live in a nuclear society where everyone knows everyone. With modern transportation we drive further to worship and often the only time we see our brethren is when we assemble for worship or Bible study. A friend said the one thing she missed about the church she attended dismissing Sunday night services was fellowship with her brethren. The writer of Hebrews wanted to encourage the brethren when he wrote, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25). When we decide to cancel Sunday night services how are we supposed to stir one another up and exhort one another? It is noted that some congregations are doing something to impact this need. But many churches are doing less. It would seem the idea is that we are to grow by seeing one another less. The litmus test should be whether meeting less helps the congregation grow.

The second issue with cancelling Sunday night services is the question of the building. Hundreds of thousands upon thousands of dollars are spent in building fine places to meet but now we want to meet in them less? If we are to be proper stewards of the Lord's money, why do we build these buildings that stand idle most of the week? Would it not be best to sell the building and rent a store front so the money wasted in building an edifice and paying for its upkeep two hours or less a week could be spent for a more profitable use for the Lord? Darkened windows tell the community a message. In reality the building should be used more instead of less! Most places are very comfortable and readily available for more activities of the church to be engaged in evangelism and fellowship. But then that brings up a deeper issue that is often at the heart of the demise of services for worship and Bible study. Life is busy and I don't have more time to invest with my brethren.

Brethren (men) in Nicaragua will gather on a second story walk-way under a single bulb to hear the gospel preached and have no chairs to sit on. The women got to go into the room with chairs. In South Africa brethren conduct lengthy services under trees, tin shacks, rambling buildings with no running water or bathrooms; and no air conditioning. And we complain about what? And we want to do less? Is it time for God to take the gospel away from us and give it back to a people who truly have found the pearl of great price? The psalmist declared, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day ... Consider how I love Your precepts; revive me, O Lord, according to Your loving-kindness. The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever" (Psalms 119:97, 159-160).

We have the greatest opportunities to do more with the gospel than any disciple in two thousand years. And yet we find ourselves on the brink of changing gears to take away more time with one another, less time devoted to singing together as a body of people, praying together as an army of God's Kingdom, engaging in devoted study of the word of God; "that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:14-16).

I will affirm again that having a Sunday night service is not based upon a scriptural pattern of authority as necessary. In reality the issue is not about the demise of Sunday night. It may very well be the demise of the spiritual life that seems to pervade the spirit of the church of Christ in the United States of America. We are soft. Vance Havner said, "The early church did something because it believed something. We are trying to do what they did without believing what they believed." The early disciples gathered "daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). When persecuted they "went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). When Paul was in Troas "on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight" (Acts 20:7). And we call ourselves the New Testament church?

God be thanked for shepherds of local congregations who are seeking to lead their flock into deeper spiritual pastures. Men who understand the needs of the flock of God and feeding them the manna from above endeavoring to build up the church in the most holy faith. How blessed to have hearts of brethren who love to study together, sing together, pray together and bring lost souls to Christ. We need to fall in love with Jesus Christ all over again and not be as the church at Ephesus that lost its first love (Rev. 2:4). A revival of spiritual awakening must rise up in our midst to fulfill the mission of what Jesus died for. "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).