



# “The Lord’s Day, Mount Vernon, and Sunday Evening”

by Aaron Menikoff

**I received** some good counsel a few weeks before I got married. I was told that before a couple married, they are like two circles that rarely overlap. In many ways their lives are still quite separate. Marriage changes all that. After the ceremony two become one. Now the two circles do (and should) overlap quite a bit. Spouses may have different interests, and they cannot spend all their time together but, generally speaking, those two circles need to overlap. Work and hobbies have a tendency to keep even married couples separate, but a husband and wife need to spend time together. Therefore, I was encouraged to make sure our lives did in fact overlap.

A similar observation could be made about a local church. The author of Hebrews exhorts Christians to “not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.” Our lives are to overlap on the Lord’s Day. However, the text goes on to explain what should take place during this time, “and let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”<sup>1</sup>

With every Christian, I have had to wrestle with what this means. How am I supposed to be faithful to this as well as the Fourth Commandment?

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.<sup>2</sup>

Lives are full. We are saddled with numerous obligations. God calls many of us to work throughout the week in the home or the workplace. We want to be faithful stewards of these responsibilities. We want to be faithful to our immediate and extended families. As the father of young children, hardly a day goes by that I don’t hear someone say, “Enjoy these years—you’ll never get them back.” I agree. We want to be faithful to our family, to our friends, within and outside the church. We are to be salt and light to others and that means spending time *in* the world. Between family, friends, work, and play, our lives are full.

What part does the church play in the drama of our lives? Christians often take one of the most basic answers to this question for granted: we are to assemble as the church to worship God. We are supposed to trust that God’s command to “remember the Sabbath” is both wise and good for us. The local church is central to our understanding of the Lord’s Day. In a few moments, I want to suggest that a Sunday evening service—though not biblically required—may be a very helpful means for us as a local congregation “to encourage one another” on a weekly basis. First, let me pull back and consider a larger theme: the Lord’s Day as a whole.

## A Biblical Understanding of the Lord’s Day

Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word *sabbath* which literally means “to cease” or “to desist.” With the Fourth Commandment, God’s people received a divine mandate to stop working on the seventh day. God rooted this mandate in creation for it was God Himself who rested after His work.<sup>3</sup> Even before Moses gave the Israelites God’s Law, they knew that the seventh day was something special. During their wilderness wanderings, God demanded they gather extra bread on the sixth day of the week to allow for rest on the seventh.<sup>4</sup> God required them to take the Sabbath seriously.

Just how seriously? When an Israelite was caught collecting wood on the Sabbath, he received capital punishment.<sup>5</sup> Remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy was integral to being a holy nation, a nation that reflected God's character.

As with all of God's Law, it is our responsibility to interpret the Fourth Commandment through Jesus Christ, His life, ministry, and teaching. For example, Jesus identified himself as Lord of the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup> In so doing He clarified what it ought to look like to "remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Because of Jesus, we better understand how the Sabbath is to be observed. Christians have often noted how Jesus commended acts of necessity, piety, and mercy. When he and his disciples came under fire for picking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus pointed out it was now sin for David to eat consecrated bread; necessity required it. Jesus' point: sometimes it is necessary to work on the Sabbath. Jesus taught on the Sabbath day in the synagogue, evidence that such acts of piety were appropriate labor on the Sabbath.<sup>7</sup> More than once, Jesus extended a healing hand on the Sabbath day.<sup>8</sup> Acts of mercy are appropriate every day of the week. Through the Fourth Commandment and Sabbath-Lord himself, we come to understand the Sabbath as a day that remains set apart from the rest of the week. In 1692 the Puritan, Thomas Watson, put it well:

The Sabbath-day is for our interest; it promotes holiness in us. The business of week-days makes us forgetful of God and our souls: the Sabbath brings him back to our remembrance. When the falling dust of the world has clogged the wheels of our affections, that they can scarce move towards God, the Sabbath comes, and oils the wheels of our affections, and they move swiftly on. God has appointed the Sabbath for this end. On this day the thoughts rise to heaven, the tongue speaks of God, and is as the pen of a ready writer; the eyes drop tears, and the soul burns in love. The heart, which all the week was frozen, on the Sabbath melts with a word. The Sabbath is a friend to religion; it files off the rust of our graces;

it is a spiritual jubilee, wherein the soul is set to converse with its Maker.<sup>9</sup>

Many of us are accustomed to referring to the Sabbath as the Lord's Day. This represents the fact that the earliest Christians rightly came to observe as a day of rest the first instead of the last day of the week. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead that day.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is not surprising that Christians came to observe the Sabbath on Sunday.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, these Christians referred to Sunday as the Lord's Day.<sup>12</sup> This has largely been the practice of Christians from the early church to the present.

## **The Lord's Day and Mount Vernon Baptist Church**

What does this mean for a local church? Central to observing the Lord's Day is gathering together as a congregation. This is what Christians have done both in the early church and throughout history. Gathering together on Sunday morning is more than simply sitting and listening to a sermon. The Philadelphia Confession of Faith, for many years the most popular distillation of doctrine in Baptist life, put it this way:

The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism and the Lord's supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to Him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear; moreover solemn humiliation, with fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner.<sup>13</sup>

We observe the Lord's Day not merely by attending church on Sunday morning but by disciplining our hearts to approach God "with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear." It's just as Samuel told Saul, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."<sup>14</sup> God wants more than our attendance, he wants our hearts committed to Him. Moreover, the purpose of observing the Lord's Day together

at a public service is not simply so that we will learn—though we will learn, it is not only to glorify God—though God is glorified as He is made the subject of our praise—it is to encourage one another. This brings us back to Hebrews, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” In that sense, the service on Sunday morning is not a spectator sport. It demands participation. We are to link arms with each other and spur one another on in love.

The Sunday morning service at Mount Vernon is our main service. At its core, being here regularly on Sunday morning is what it means to “not give up meeting together.” We certainly have Christian freedom to gather during other days of the week (and we do on Wednesdays, for example) but the Sunday morning service is our main meeting. We gather as God’s people to hear and respond to God’s Word through prayer, song, and the reading and preaching of Scripture.

Just as we have the Christian freedom to meet other days of the week, we have the freedom to meet more than once on Sunday. So, Mount Vernon employs Sunday school prior to the main service in order to meet in smaller groups for specific studies. This is a wonderful opportunity for the body to minister to the body, as many teachers—who are not full-time staff—lead the church by teaching the Bible and leading in studies central to the Christian faith. Just as we have the freedom to meet before the Sunday morning service we have the freedom to meet after the Sunday morning service. Thus, I proposed and the deacons recently voted to recommend to the congregation that Mount Vernon add a Sunday evening service to our schedule. This service would start in September. The congregation will consider this matter at our August 17 church-in-conference.

### **Why a Sunday Evening Service?**

Is it out of biblical necessity that we should gather on Sunday evenings? I don’t think so. Our main service is, I believe, the fundamental way we observe the Lord’s Day. Nonetheless, there are

certain advantages to a Sunday evening service worth considering.

First, it could build community. This might happen in a number of different ways. For example, adding another meeting of the entire church allows our lives to overlap. Older members can sit with younger members. Rich discussion can take place after the service in an informal environment. We can connect and encourage one another before we begin a “full” week. It is just another means for our lives to be intertwined. This can happen all sorts of ways and any day of the week. But to the extent that we can and should devote a day to our souls, we would be wise to spend another hour in the evening sharing that which we prize above all else, the gospel.

Second, it could encourage prayer. After a brief time of congregational singing, I envision us spending the majority of our time together sharing prayer requests and praying. I love leading the congregation in prayer on Sunday morning, but it is also appropriate that we, as a congregation, pray for one another. Many members do this throughout the week. Moreover, I am aware that a group has faithfully committed itself to praying on Sunday evenings for some time now. I share this desire for corporate prayer and want to encourage it. Being together and praying together builds the kind of community every church needs. Our Father loves to give good gifts to those who ask him. We would be wise to seek Him together.

Third, it could raise teachers. Though I love to teach, I don’t think it is necessary nor particularly helpful for the congregation to only hear from me or even a select few during our corporate meetings. Though I am called to do the majority of teaching, the church ought to provide other men an opportunity to study Scripture for the purpose of teaching publicly. A Sunday evening service is well suited to making this happen. Every Sunday evening a male member of the church could give a brief devotion to explain a particular text and how that text applies to us as individuals and as a church. This will not fit every man’s gifts nor every man’s inclinations, but we should be a church full of men who are both humble and eager to share God’s Word. This way, the

congregation will grow as a reflection not merely of me, the senior pastor, but of us, the body of Christ.

Fourth, it could foster encouragement. We ought to conspire for ways to encourage one another. That's a significant purpose of all our meetings and a Sunday evening service would be no different. The last thing we need is simply another meeting on our calendar. What we all need, however, is each other. An evening service is particularly useful for building one another up because it would likely be smaller than the morning service, more intimate, and less formal. Most importantly, it offers another opportunity for us to know, love, and encourage one another.

It will be difficult for every member of Mount Vernon to attend a Sunday evening service. Many of us live quite far from the church, making coming in to town twice on one day difficult. I understand and am thankful for our current communal life wherever it takes place, whether that is the Sunday morning service, Sunday school or, perhaps, in a small group during the week. This is why I want to make it very clear that one can be a member in good standing by coming on Sunday morning alone. However, I know from my own experience at other churches and even my brief experience here at Mount Vernon that limiting one's commitment to the Sunday morning service will likely leave one feeling disconnected from the church. Moreover, Sunday school and home groups—as wonderful as they are—tend to narrow the definition of community to a small group within the church that already shares common interests and experiences. A Sunday evening service, on the other hand, has the potential to build community on a larger scale.

We have been given the Lord's Day as a gift, not to keep us from doing what we want to do but to free us up to rest and to rest in Christ. Please pray that we would have wisdom as a church to know how best to use this day. Pray that we would have wisdom as Christians to know how best to invest in our own souls. Pray that we would be a church marked by an eagerness to encourage one another in the faith.

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:25

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:8-11

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:2

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 16:21-23

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 15:32-36

<sup>6</sup> Mark 2:28

<sup>7</sup> Luke 4:1-21

<sup>8</sup> John 5:1-15; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-4

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:1-2; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1)

<sup>11</sup> Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 1:10

<sup>13</sup> "Chapter 22: Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day," *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (1742). Timothy and Denise George, eds. *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 81.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Samuel 15:22b