

**Welcome, Sweet Day of Rest***Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Welcome, sweet day of rest,  
That saw the Lord arise;  
Welcome to this reviving breast  
And these rejoicing eyes.

The King Himself comes near,  
And feasts His saints to-day;  
Here may we sit, and see Him here,  
And love and praise and pray.

One day within the place  
Where Christ, my Lord, has been,  
Is sweeter than ten thousand days  
Within the tents of sin.

My willing soul would stay  
In such a frame as this,  
Till called to rise and soar away  
To everlasting bliss.

**ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ***In the Nick of Time***No Church on Sunday? Part 1***Jeff Straub*

Recently, no less a public figure than J. D. Greear, the current president of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of The Summit of Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, announced to his nine Summit campuses that there would be no weekend services at any of its locations. People were tired after a busy holiday season and they were encouraged to worship at home. A worship resource page was posted on the church's website to facilitate the home worship experience that weekend.

Come again? All the services at a church were cancelled because people were tired? Home worship was the chosen alternative? It is not uncommon for churches in the North to struggle with deciding to cancel services when the weather is bad. After all, it is the North: the weather is often bad here. You cannot close the church every time there is a bit of snow coming down. But when the blizzard or ice storm hits, the safety of the congregation may be imperiled by having the church doors open. Still, churches are *reluctant* to cancel services. But cancelling services because people are tired? This is an interesting decision.

If it is genuinely acceptable to cancel services for congregational fatigue, why on just one Sunday during the year? Maybe we could give folks every fifth Sunday off or one Sunday a month so that the saints can get plenty of rest. If fatigue is a reason for cancelling church, in our fast-paced world, I can see lots of opportunities to stay home. Or maybe the church has been too busy doing the wrong things so that there is little energy left to do the right things. I once heard a pastor brag in his sermon about staying up the previous night into the wee hours of the morning playing games with friends. I always thought that Saturday was the one night to ensure a good rest so that I could be ready to minister on the Lord's Day. For that matter, shouldn't we encourage our church to *prepare* themselves for the day of worship?

Moreover, we live in a technologically connected world. Why *go* to church at all, if home worship is a suitable alternative? Why use only fatigue as a reason to stay home? It seems that there are any number of good reasons to cancel church if fatigue is a sufficient reason, and with technology we can do church another way. Is this a trend that will likely increase—cancelling



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services in favor of home worship? The brother who did so carries significant influence in the evangelical world. If he can recommend this course of action to his church, why shouldn't ordinary pastors do the same? Aren't their people tired, too?

There are several questions to be considered in evaluating this interesting bit of church news. First, is it *ever* acceptable for a church to close on Sunday, even for weather? Or we could ask this from another direction: why worship on Sunday at all? Why not Thursday afternoon or Monday morning or sometime convenient to all concerned? Why worship on Sunday, *ever*? I would like to address these questions over the next couple of weeks.

Christians worship on Sundays in the post-Resurrection era for important reasons. First, the disciples discovered that Jesus had arisen on "the first day of the week" (Jn. 20:21), so the early church, insofar as the Bible reveals, indicates that believers gathered together to commemorate the Resurrection "on the first day of the week." Therefore, the first day of the week became a day for the "breaking of bread" (Acts 20:7) and for collecting money for the saints (1 Cor. 16:2). In both of these verses, the writer is speaking as though the reader would understand the significance of that particular day over another day during the week. Meeting on the first day of the week seems to have become the New Testament practice with enough regularity so that when John penned the Apocalypse he could speak of being in the Spirit on "the Lord's day." What day might that be if not the Resurrection day—the first day of the week?

The Christian practice of meeting on the first day of the week was an interesting practice since most of the early believers were Jewish and would have ordinarily considered the Sabbath (day seven) as the day of worship. Admittedly, this is anecdotal and not prescriptive in the New Testament, but the practice does seem to be consistent throughout the history of the Christian era. True, there have been a few Sabbath-worshipping Christian groups (Seventh Day Baptists and the Seventh Day Adventists), but these are the exceptions. The majority of Christendom has followed the biblical pattern of worshipping on the first day of the week.

Does this mean that we *must* worship on Sunday? The Decalogue required Israel to worship on the Sabbath, but can Christians worship on another day of their choosing? It would be hard to determine what John was referring to if by the end of the apostolic era (John was the last living apostle) he couldn't refer to "the Lord's day" and communicate clearly to his audience what he meant. The recipients of the last Johannine letter would likely have inferred or been accustomed to calling the Christian day of worship "the Lord's day" (a third argument for Sunday worship). This has been the nearly universal position of the Christian church, irrespective of theological

orientation. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Baptists, just to name a few across the theological spectrum, all worship on Sundays.

Someone might argue based on Romans 14:5 that the day of worship is inconsequential and only weak believers esteem one day above another—any day works for worship! This interpretation has not been widely held in the history of Christianity. So the question of worship and Sunday seems pretty clear. By the way, we are talking about *gathered* worship. Of course, individual believers are free to worship God and indeed should worship God everywhere. But the church is a *gathered* assembly who meet *together* for worship, and this takes place on Sunday, the Lord's day. The writer of Hebrews even encourages believers to not forsake the regular gathering together (Heb. 10:25), which refers to the corporate assembly of believers.

On this point the New Testament seems clear—the church (the disciples of Jesus) regularly gathered together for a time of exhortation, breaking of bread and collections on *the first day of the week*. And so should we. Next week I will address home worship as an alternative to corporate worship.



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This essay is by Jeff Straub, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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