

A Rationale for Evening Worship on the Lord's Day By Rev. Roland S. Barnes

Exodus 29:38-46

³⁸Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two one year old lambs each day, continuously. ³⁹The one lamb you shall offer in the morning and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; ⁴⁰and there shall be one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a libation for one lamb. ⁴¹The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, and shall offer as the grain offering of the morning with its libation for a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the Lord. ⁴²It shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the doorway of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. ⁴³And I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory. ⁴⁴And I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me. ⁴⁵And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. ⁴⁶And they shall know that I am the Lord their God [1] who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God.

It is very unusual in these days that churches have evening worship services even in the denomination of which I am a part, the Presbyterian Church of America. In the town in which I grew up, where there are now four or five PCA churches, not one of them has an evening worship service. This is also the case with respect to many other denominations as well. Yet this was not the case throughout the first nineteen and one-half centuries of the Christian Church. It was the normal practice of the churches of the United States to gather for evening worship on the Lord's Day. Is there a Biblical rationale for evening worship on the Lord's Day? Were our forefathers simply perpetuating a tradition which had no Biblical foundation?

I begin rather straightforwardly with a proposition: It is my conviction that God's people, redeemed by His grace through the Lord Jesus Christ, ought to worship Him privately or publicly, morning and evening, each day of the week, and especially on the Lord's Day. Yet attendance in churches that continue to have a Sunday evening service is down. The congregation which I serve probably has an attendance in the evening which is about 50% of that which is present in the morning. That is good when you are comparing it to other churches that have evening services, from whatever denomination. Yet, it is also a sad fact that there are many, many churches that have discontinued their evening worship services altogether. With the advent of television, other media, sports, and all else that takes place on Sunday, worship in the evening is on the way out. For many, worship on the Lord's Day has become a matter of getting the perfunctory hour of worship out of the way so one can go about doing whatever he would like for the remainder of his day, not to be disturbed again until the next Sunday morning. For the first nineteen and one-half centuries of the Christian Church it was not like this. As far as can be determined, for nineteen hundred and fifty years (more or less) the Church accepted the reality of morning and evening worship on the Lord's Day as a recommended practice based upon a solid Biblical foundation. It was thought, "Surely that is what we ought to do on the Lord's Day." No one even questioned it. When I was a boy growing up in Georgia, as far as I know, every church of every denomination worshipped on the Lord's Day, morning and evening. Even as an unbeliever, I grew up in the church worshipping on the Lord's Day, morning and evening. Our family was in attendance. Why did we do that? Why was that the practice of the Church for over nineteen-hundred years? Was this only a well established tradition with no Biblical foundation? Was this a practice imposed upon the Church by medieval theologians who could think of nothing better to do on Sunday? Did they required the people of God to worship twice on the Lord's Day, morning and evening, with no more solid basis than an arbitrary assertion of will? What is the rationale for having a Sunday evening service on the Lord's Day? It might seem strange to some even to raise such a question, but the realities of our day require that we consider it. I am sure that even those who are regular attenders of evening services of worship have battled with members of their own households about whether they should return again to worship on Sunday evening. In this paper I would like to present some suggested reasons why Christians ought to worship on the Lord's Day, morning and evening.

The Practice of Israel

The first part of the rationale is simply this, evening worship on the Lord's Day, and for that matter on every day of the week, was the practice of Israel as required by their God. In Exodus 29:38-46 it was required of the people of Israel (especially the priests who were governing the worship of God's people) that every day, in the morning and also on the arrival of the evening, they offer up sacrifices at the altar of burnt offerings just outside of the tabernacle. The tabernacle was established when God formalized the worship practice of His people. When He gave His Law on Mount Sinai He required them to establish the tabernacle as the place of worship according to His decree. All the details concerning the construction of the tabernacle, including even the material out of which the tabernacle was to be made, were set forth by God Himself in His law. Even the manner in which the priests were to serve at God's house, all of that is set forth in the ceremonial law. The tabernacle was erected in the middle of the encampment of Israel with all of the tribes gathered around it, and arranged in a particular manner so that all might see the place where God had pitched his tent in their midst. He was dwelling among them and manifesting His presence in their midst, by pillar of cloud in the day, and by pillar of fire at night. The only way that a holy God could dwell in the midst of a sinful people was by the offering of a continual sacrifice, holding off the wrath of God and securing His mercy. Thus every morning and every evening, publicly for all the people of Israel to see, sacrifice was offered unto God. It was a public assembly, a public event to be witnessed by God's people. Exodus 29:43 states,

And I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory.

And verse 45 states,

And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God.

There was not only this public act of worship every morning and every evening, but there was also the promised presence of almighty God. There on each day God would manifest His presence, and there he would speak to His people. Andrew Bonar, in his commentary on a related portion of Scripture from Leviticus 6, makes this observation.

His eternal justice flaming forth against all iniquity is declared to Israel in the fire of the altar. The fire is never to be extinguished. It burns all night long – an emblem of the sleeplessness of Hell. It is indicative of the wrath of the God that consumes the sacrifice that those for whom it is substituted might go free. [\[2\]](#)

He then references Revelation 14 verses 10 and 18 that speak of the judgment of God. He writes,

The smoke of their torment ascends up forever and ever, tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. [\[3\]](#)

The offering of the burnt offering, the consuming of the sacrifice, was indicative of the wrath of God from which they had escaped, securing God's holy presence in the midst of a sinful people. There they could look upon the sacrifice, morning and evening, and be reminded at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day of the grace of God secured for them. Andrew Bonar goes on to say that the whole camp saw this fire burning in the open court all night long, and then he makes this comment.

'So shall you perish,' might a father say to his children taking them to his tent door and pointing them in the gloom and silence of the night to the altar. 'So you shall perish and be forever in the flames unless you repent.' [\[4\]](#)

So the sacrifices, morning and evening, were continually speaking to them of the gospel. They spoke of the danger of God's judgment, of the substituted sacrifice, and pointed them to the need for the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Bonar states that it also exhibited to them the way of escape.

See there is a victim on the altar on which these flames feed. Here is Christ in our room, his suffering seen and accepted by the Father was held forth continually to the face of Israel night and day. ^[5]

This practice of morning and evening sacrifice preached the gospel to them every morning and every evening, every day of the week. This was established in Israel.

Not only was this the practice of the people of Israel collectively, but it appears to have been the pattern for the practice of personal piety as well.

Terry Johnson observes in his work entitled *The Family Worship Book*,

David based his devotional practice upon that of the temple. The morning and evening sacrifices provided the pattern for his prayers, which he offered morning and evening, and to which he even applied the language of sacrifice (Pss. 5:3 and 141:2; cf Ps 51:16,17). We continue this worship pattern in the New Testament, like David, substituting animals with “a sacrifice of praise...the fruit of our lips” (Heb. 13:15). It is our Christian duty to worship God daily. ^[6]

The Practice of the Early Church

Secondly, evening worship was the well-established practice of the early church as the new Israel. It has been noted by many Bible scholars that the nation of Israel served some peculiar purposes in the redemptive plan of God. One of those purposes was to be the crucible in which God deposited his covenant promises of a coming Messiah. It was out of Israel that the Messiah would come. Therefore, beginning with Abraham, all the way down to the establishment of the twelve tribes of Israel, and continuing all the way to the birth of the Messiah, Israel occupied this peculiar place and role in redemptive history. Thus there is much about Israel that is foundational for us as believers in Christ. There are principles that are well established in the life of God’s people Israel that carry over into the life of the Church. The Church is not a completely new institution, never foreseen by God, never spoken of in the Old Testament. It does not simply appear out of the air with no context. There is essential continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church. We know the practice of Israel was to be an example for us. In 1 Corinthians 10:6 the Apostle Paul states,

Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved.

Although Paul speaks here of Israel as a negative example, showing us what we ought to avoid, yet there is a positive side as well. There is much that is well established for our benefit and blessing in the life and practice of Israel: patterns of thought, well established principles of worship, the need for a mediator, the need for a sacrifice, the shedding of blood. All of these are well established principles which are not interrupted by the coming of Christ, but rather are embraced and come to their fruition in Christ. That which was in seed form comes to its fullness in the New Testament, in the life and ministry of Jesus. The New Testament does not interrupt God’s plan for the Jews, but rather completes it and fulfills it. The Church is, in fact, distinctly Jewish in nature, of course without ceremony or sacrifice because ceremony and sacrifice have been brought to an end. But all of that which is well established and revealed to the “Church” of the Old Testament, the people of Israel, is affirmed in the New Testament by the Church of our day. Those who advocated evening worship as the practice of the early church did not do so in a vacuum. It was not an idea they came up with one day out of the blue: “*Oh, let us do this. It will be novel.*” It would not be novel at all. They were not innovating at all. In fact, they were not initiating a practice foreign to the people of God. It was the well established principle and practice of God’s people throughout the centuries. Thus early Christians, rather than going to the temple to see evening sacrifices offered, offered up the sacrifices of praise and adoration unto their Sacrifice and their High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is clearly the case in the thinking of the early church fathers. Chrysostom (c. 347-407), in his work Exodus 29:38, makes this observation,

That God must be worshipped daily when the day begins and when it ends, and every day must be a kind of holy day thus it was commanded under the Law and certainly we Christians are as much at least obliged to God as the Jews were. Our grace is greater, our promises clearer, and therefore our

righteousness should every way exceed theirs. Our homage to almighty God should be paid as frequently at least, morning and evening to be sure. God expects from us as well as from the Jews a public worship, a sweet savor or savor of rest as it is in the Hebrew without which God Almighty will not rest satisfied. [\[7\]](#)

He also writes in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:1-4,

It means in the daily Service; and the initiated know how this is done every day both in the evening and the morning, how we offer prayers for the whole world . . . [\[8\]](#)

And on Hebrews 8:1-2 he comments,

Therefore we have need of prayer early and by night. [\[9\]](#)

The early church fathers saw this without straining or without twisting the Scripture, without pressing something novel upon the church. It was the clear application of a Biblical principle which had been well established throughout the centuries in the life of the church.

This principle continued to regulate the public worship of God's people throughout the history of the church. The Medieval Church developed a practice of observing a daily mass based upon the principle of daily morning and evening worship; which principle was established by the Lord Himself in the instructions given concerning the practice of offering daily sacrifices, morning and evening.

Mr. Johnson observes,

While the Medieval church held daily mass based upon the preceding principle, Protestants moved daily worship into the home, where godly fathers served as "priests" in their homes. Thus the pattern in the best Protestant homes became that of daily private (personal) devotions and daily family worship. [\[10\]](#)

The practice of family prayers, morning and evening was a regular practice of protestant piety for centuries. When the Lord's Day arrived, these families gathered together with the understanding that they should practice their faith publicly in the same manner as they practiced it privately in their homes. Thus they gathered on the Lord's Day in the morning and again in the evening to worship the Lord.

The Practice of the Reformed Tradition

Morning and evening worship has been the norm of the Reformed church for nearly 500 years. This can be seen in the application of our text, Exodus 29, by the prince of Presbyterian expositors, Matthew Henry (1662-1714). We may take his comments on this same passage as typical of Reformed understanding and practice.

This teaches us to offer up to God the spiritual sacrifices of prayer and praise every day, morning and evening, in humble acknowledgment of our dependence upon him and our obligations to him. [\[11\]](#)

If it can be established that we ought to worship our God privately and in families Monday through Saturday, morning and evening, then it can be clearly established that when we worship publicly on the Lord's Day, on the Sabbath, we ought to be doubly careful to worship him both in the morning and the evening. In addition, Numbers 28:9-10 states that on the Sabbath there were additional lambs sacrificed in the morning and in the evening.

⁹Then on the Sabbath day two male lambs one year old without defect, and two-tenths of a measure of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering, and its libation. ¹⁰The burnt offering of every Sabbath is in addition to the continual burnt offering and its libation."

The fact that additional sacrifices were offered on the Sabbath would seem to establish an added weight to the

observance of the tabernacle worship that was practiced on that holy day. Every ordinary day, evening worship at the tabernacle was the regular practice of Israel as required by God. As the offering of the sacrifice was publicly displayed, the smoke of the sacrifice indicated to them that their God was in their midst. It told them that He was dwelling among them, that they were His people, and He was their God. On the Sabbath Day, the holy day of Israel, there was an extra sacrifice to be offered morning and evening.

Thus, the observance of evening worship on the Lord's Day is first established upon the practice of worshipping the Lord on every evening of every day, every day of the week, Sunday through Monday. Clearly on the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath, there is to be a special observance of worship in keeping with the Fourth Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." How are we to sanctify the Lord's Day? How do we observe the Lord's Day in such a manner as to keep it holy? One can hardly imagine that it would be appropriate to omit public worship on the Lord's Day. And if it is appropriate to worship the Lord in the morning on the Lord's Day, it would hardly be appropriate to omit evening worship. There was a pattern established in the morning and evening sacrifices. How could evening worship on the Lord's Day be omitted if it was required of us to worship our God in the evening on the other six non-holy days of the week? It could hardly be established that one ought to worship God every evening of the week, Monday through Saturday, and then not worship God on the evening of the Lord's Day. It seems to be even more compelling that one ought to gather with God's people on the evening of the Lord's Day to worship. Therefore the observance of evening worship or *prayers* was the well established application made to the Church taken from the practice of evening sacrifice. Many Reformed expositors have made this application, Matthew Henry being just one example.

A Logical Response to Creation and Redemption

Fourthly, the practice of worship, morning and evening, is a logical response to creation and redemption. Remember the creation story in Genesis 1. The phrase "*evening and morning*" is repeated in verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31; evening and morning the first day, evening and morning the second day, etc. Here is a pattern for life. Evening and morning together frame the passing of time. They are the bookends of each segment of our lives, each day that passes, each day that God sovereignly gives us by His grace and mercy. Thus it is fitting that the last thing you do before you go to bed at night is to worship your God; to pause, to pray and give thanks unto your God who has created you and redeemed you. It makes perfect sense, does it not, that upon waking in the morning the first thing you would do is to give thanks unto your God and to lift up your soul unto him in praise and prayer? It is perfectly logical to worship Him again in the evening for having given you another day in which to live and to serve Him? Such worship is assumed to be part of the daily life of one who knows God as His Lord and Creator. The Psalms are full of references to morning and evening prayers. Here are just a few examples:

In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice; in the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.
Psalm 5:3

But I, O Lord, have cried out to You for help, and in the morning my prayer comes before you.
Psalm 88:13

Behold, bless the Lord, all servants of the Lord, Who serve by night in the house of the Lord! ²Lift up you hands to the sanctuary and bless the Lord. ³May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth.
Psalm 134:1

May my prayer be counted as incense before You, the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.
Psalm 141:2

Do you really have to be persuaded that this is right? Is there not a *prima facie* persuasiveness to it? That is, on the face of it does it not seem right? Is it not compelling that you as a creature made in the image of God, given your life by almighty God as a gift, and also redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ, ought to, every night before you go to bed, give thanks unto God for the life given to you? And is it not also compelling that the first thing you should do when

you open your eyes in the morning is to worship him yet again. Thus on the Lord's Day when we gather together publicly to worship, would it not be compelling that we would gather in the morning and also again in the evening? That is what the church did for nineteen and one-half centuries.

Spiritual Benefits

Finally, the practice of evening worship promotes the practice of godliness. This is a practical argument. There is a practical order and rhythm given to the worshipping of God which is produced when God's people gather to worship Him in the morning and again in the evening on the Lord's Day. It frames the Lord's Day, especially if you begin the night before in your home and prepare your heart for public worship. The Lord's Day is well observed when God's people come together in the morning on the Lord's Day to sing the praises of their God, and then finally gather again in the evening to close out the observance of the Lord's Day. This observance of morning and evening worship promotes a practical godliness and helps to structure our lives for the pursuit of piety. The fourth commandment tells us "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." It is a day; it is not the Sabbath hour or the Sabbath minute. It is the Sabbath day; it is twenty-four hours in duration just like the other six. There is a practical framing of the Lord's Day when we begin to prepare ourselves as individuals and families for the coming of the Lord's Day the night before, worship together in the morning as a congregation, and then worship again on the Lord's Day evening with God's people, bringing the whole observance to a close. The observance of Sunday evening worship is a great aid to those who genuinely try to keep the *Sabbath* holy. There is so much that is distracting in our day and culture that it is very difficult, even for those who are seeking to observe the *Sabbath*, to devote a full twenty-four period of time to acts of worship, service, mercy, and rest. If there is no evening worship service it is easier to dismiss the Lord's Day and succumb to the appeal of the world and its many entertainments. However, when there is a worship service awaiting you in the evening of the Lord's Day it is easier to keep your focus on those things that are in keeping with an earnest observance of the Lord's Day.

Besides the practical benefit of helping to structure the *Sabbath* observance of God's people, the practice of evening worship when faithfully observed will double the public opportunities that God's people have provided for them to grow spiritually and serve the Lord. They will have twice the opportunities to pray together, to sing God's praises together, to hear the reading and preaching of the Scriptures together, and to fellowship together. This cannot help but strengthen the Church.

Paul Alexander, in his little pamphlet entitled "Let's Keep our Sunday Evening Worship," makes this observation:

Experience also supports this point. Please forgive me for being just a little autobiographical at this point, but 37 years in one pastorate has given me a somewhat unusual perspective. I have been able to watch people in my congregation grow up, get married, raise children, and finish careers. In short, live out large parts of their lives during that lengthy tenure. My generalizations about my parishioners may seem too narrow a database to satisfy all the demands of contemporary scholarship, and I am sure that I am lacking in total objectivity. At the same time I am confident of one conclusion: Those who regularly participate in morning and evening worship over a period of years are the most stable and productive Christians. They are furthermore the most joyful and effective. Our present membership is 300. Over the years, more than a thousand have come and gone largely because of the nature of employment in Huntsville. Among those who have come to church twice on Sunday there is a remarkable record of family stability and spiritual productivity. Of course there have been exceptions, but from these families have flowed a constant stream of children who have grown to maturity honoring the Lord, marrying in Christ, and following the Lord in their vocations. This is what it is all about. Another interesting fact is that in all those years there have been only three divorces among those who have been regular in our morning and evening worship. I have been reluctant in the past to tell such a statistic in public for fear that the devil would attack more of our marriages just to embarrass us. Confident that we can trust the Lord to protect our people, I tell it now in order to give praise to the Lord and to the means of grace he has given us to make us strong in him. Participation in Sunday morning and evening worship is a proven means of helping God's people to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. It is certainly not the only thing we need, but it is an important source of strength and blessing to those who have used it. [\[12\]](#)

