

What time should churches meet on Sunday?

Introduction

It seems to be set in stone that modern churches meet twice on Sunday. There is a morning service starting at about 10.30am and an evening service beginning at about 6.30pm. In most Baptist and Independent churches the evening service is designated as a 'Gospel meeting' while the morning service is called 'family worship'. There are also some denominations that have earlier meetings, say 7.30am, often for 'Communion' – which prevents young families from ever celebrating the Lord's Supper.

The family service is extremely odd since it puts a great deal of unnecessary stress upon young families. For young parents with infant children, getting up early on the only free day of the week (many people work on Saturdays today) in order to prepare infants, have breakfast, get the Sunday roast prepared, put the meal in a slow oven and hope nothing goes wrong (leaving an appliance on unattended is never safe), then travel on public transport (perhaps several miles) is not the best way to prepare to worship God.

I can remember going through this. Despite working 11-12-hour days Monday to Friday, and also starting early on Saturday morning until 1pm, and being extremely tired (I was also rebuilding my house, of necessity, from top to bottom and had church responsibilities), I had to wake early on Sunday. This was necessary in order to get three children ready (two were infants or babies), have breakfast (in fact I often had no time for this), help prepare the Sunday lunch (which was my main meal of the week), then run half a mile for an infrequent bus in order to get to a church several miles from home.

I was young and used to stress but I now realise that all this put a lot of unnecessary pressure on my wife. Even getting on a bus was stressful, sorting out babies and folding up pushchairs and trying to find a space to stow them, then perhaps standing up for half an hour.

Sunday is supposed to be a day of rest, a time to rejuvenate from a stressful working week, a time to peacefully meditate on God and a time for family; but for me Sunday was the busiest day of my week for decades.

I now believe that all of this is wrong. It is unbiblical and does not please God.

So what time do we meet together on Sunday?

Preparatory factors

Without any explanation or analysis (I have done this many times) I must first demonstrate certain principal issues regarding church life.

- The church gathers on Sunday for fellowship.
- The primary focus of the meeting is the Lord's Supper.
- The character of the meeting is koinonia: mutual edification, mutual encouragement, and one-anothering.
- Children are present in this meeting (though very young babies may need to have a crèche if noisy).

- All are encouraged to participate in whatever way God leads: singing, encouraging, praying, exhorting, admonishing, or teaching.
- The church meets in a house and nowhere else.
- The local church is small in congregational numbers.
- The church is led by a small team of equal elders who act like fathers to the church, which is a family. There is no senior leader.
- Teaching is paramount and governed by elders but is not sermonic.
- There is no instrumental music; singing is unaccompanied.
- If possible, a communal meal should be an introduction to the meeting.

Historical developments

Throughout history churches have adopted a wide range of meeting times.

Some early Church Fathers speak about evening meetings for prayer, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Tertullian, often following Jewish practices.

For many churches, Sunday morning was either the prime, or the only, meeting. In rural areas it was often very difficult for people to get to church, perhaps walking several miles, and this could usually only be done once on Sunday, especially if farm chores needing attendance as well. These morning services usually started about 11am to enable farm workers to milk cows etc.

Protestant traditions, and especially Reformed traditions, have a long history of two services on Sunday to enable people to hear as much preaching as possible. Some Reformed churches have a tradition of expository preaching on Sunday morning and doctrinally preaching through a catechism on Sunday night.¹ Calvin preached twice on Sunday (as well as during the week) in the Genevan cathedral. Puritans often (not always) held two services on Sunday; however, there is some evidence that the second service was in the afternoon due to light conditions. Remember that travelling in the dark in these times was dangerous.²

There is historical evidence for American Puritan churches having evening meetings in the 1600s.³ Yet some Puritans also had an afternoon service for more topical preaching while it was still light. In the late 1800s and early 1900s some Dutch Reformed churches in Canada and perhaps in America held two Dutch services plus a third service in English. Spurgeon had two Sunday meetings at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, but that was because of the massive demand to hear his preaching; most people only went to one service.

Evening meetings also became popular during times of revival, such as the Welsh Revival of 1904-05. There are records of English Anglican churches having a second afternoon service in the 1600s as well.

One Danish Lutheran church in Maine in the 1800s went from having only afternoon meetings to having a morning and evening service with alternating languages used.

¹ Usually the Heidelberg Catechism.

² In Britain rural areas had brigands, footpads, highwaymen and miscellaneous robbing gangs in some areas and certain time periods. In cities, robbery and mugging has always been a problem.

³ Dictionary of Christianity in America.

Another Lutheran church in Indiana was holding morning and afternoon services at this same time.

In the 19th century American South, many Methodist revivalist and Holiness churches would have extended morning services with a lunch lasting well into the afternoon, especially in the summer. In very rural areas some churches would only gather when a circuit preacher (e.g. Methodist churches in the US frontier) was available, perhaps two or three times a month.

More evening services developed in the 19th century when gas lamps arrived, thus some afternoon services became evening services. This trend for evening services began in England in the late 1700s, principally in cities, and then crossed to America in the early 1800s.⁴ Some churches narrowed the scope of the evening meeting to Bible study, Gospel preaching or young people's training. Some of these developed into the Baptist Young People's Union. Often it was felt that an evening service was necessary to distract parishioners from the temptations of growing alternative secular options in the evening, opened up by better transport and gas lights.

The popularity of Sunday evening worship meetings in modern British churches are generally traced to World War II when manufacturing businesses initiated a seven-day, 24-hour, shift system for the war effort. In order to help people meet, two services on Sunday were initiated when previously there had only been one morning service.

In summary, historical data shows occasional references to second services in the 1700s and before, to a steady increase in the 1800s, peaking in the 1930s and 1940s with a gradual decline to today. When necessary, many modern churches hold two separate Sunday morning meetings rather than a separate evening meeting.⁵

So, the idea that having a morning plus an evening service is the only orthodox option is nonsense.

In fact, the determiner for the time of the local church meeting is down to the elders of the church in consensus with the people and their practical needs.

Background issues

The OT Jewish background should give us illustrations about gathering but must not provide hard and fast rules, as the Old Covenant system is not like the New Covenant system at all.

For example, the Old Covenant was based upon substitutionary animal sacrifices and a mediatorial form of priesthood in a dedicated temple building. All of these features have been cancelled; being subsumed in the cross of Christ, which was the fulfilment of all that these types pictured. All the aspects of the Mosaic system have gone, including: vestments, formal leadership titles, salaried priests, hordes of musical instruments, blood offerings, dedicated religious buildings, annual festivals, and so on.

Leaving all that aside, we see certain times of religious gathering.

⁴ Gas lighting was not generally available until the early 1800s. The first public street lighting with gas was demonstrated in Pall Mall, London, in January 1807.

⁵ Lion Tracks, (Bibleistrue.com) Brent MacDonald, 'How many times and when to meet?', (2007/9).

Times of prayer

Jews prayed three times a day and there are Biblical texts which mention these three prayer times of morning, noon and evening. That is, when rising, before lunch and late afternoon.

Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice.
Ps 55:17

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. Dan 6:10

Morning and evening sacrifice

Now this *is* what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. With the one lamb shall be one-tenth *of an ephah* of flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of pressed oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine *as* a drink offering. And the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; and you shall offer with it the grain offering and the drink offering, as in the morning, for a sweet aroma, an offering made by fire to the LORD. *This shall be* a continual burnt offering throughout your generations *at* the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you. Ex 29:38-42

On the great *new* altar burn the morning burnt offering, the evening grain offering, the king's burnt sacrifice, and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, their grain offering, and their drink offerings; and sprinkle on it all the blood of the burnt offering and all the blood of the sacrifice. 2 Kg 16:15

From both the advent of Israel's history and many generations later we see that the morning and evening sacrifices continued. Thus the beginning of the day and the end of the day were occasioned by recognition of God's sovereignty in thankfulness.

Twilight, in astronomy, is the time when it is neither light nor dark; the two periods, in the morning and the evening, when the Sun is set, but the centre of its disc is less than 18 degrees below the horizon.

Twilight (morning) is around dawn; twilight (evening) is as the sun is setting and thus varies in the time of year.

If we were to take this as a guide for church gatherings, it would indicate services at dawn and evening. There is no basis for a 10.30 am gathering at all.

Apostolic precedent

We must first admit that there is no command in Scripture regarding the time that we gather together. This is to allow for necessary local problems (see 'exceptions'). So no one can say that someone is sinning in meeting at a certain time. However, we can determine what is the best time to meet, what is most sensibly agreeable and also what is most supported by Scripture.

In my view this is to meet in the late afternoon / early evening of Sunday. There is evidence that the apostles considered this an important time to meet from the beginning, especially as it coincided with the time of evening sacrifice and evening prayers.

Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth *hour*.
Acts 3:1

Before the church was established and the disciples fully understood the principles of gathering the apostles met up in the temple, particularly at the ninth hour, or about 3pm. [At the Equinox it would be 3pm but when daylight was longer it could be as late as 4.30pm.]

Now 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

Clearly Paul met with the saints at Troas in the evening for a fellowship gathering (where they broke bread; i.e. the Lord's Supper) and had so much to teach them that he continued his instruction until midnight.

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.
Acts 2:46-47

It is clear that the early church involved a communal meal with the fellowship of the gathered church. This was called an 'Agape'. Paul alludes to this in 1 Cor 11:21-22.

Now this is unlikely to be a breakfast since the morning prayers were very early. Neither is it likely to be lunch since many ordinary workers did not have proper lunch breaks or places to eat if they were working in the fields, with flocks, or even in towns, or if they were slaves. It is much more likely to be the main meal of the day, which was shared in fellowship. Thus it would have been the evening dinner that is in view.

Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.
1 Cor 11:20

In criticising the Corinthians for their corruption of the Lord's Supper, Paul castigates them saying that they are not eating the Lord's Supper. Thus the implication is that when you come together properly it IS to eat the Lord's Supper.

The word 'supper' is *deipnon*, which means a main evening meal or a formal banquet. Thus the Lord's Supper was held in the evening. This makes sense since the origin of this meal was an evening meal celebrated by Jesus.⁶

From this we learn:

- There is no apostolic example of a church meeting on Sunday morning.
- There is no mention of a 'Gospel meeting'. The early church witnessed to Christ all the time and went out of the church to evangelise.
- The earliest mention of the apostles gathering for religious duties is in the early evening.
- The example of Paul at Troas is an evening church gathering which was prolonged unusually.
- The Lord's Supper is an evening meal.

⁶ Matt 26:20, 26, 'When evening had come, He sat down with the twelve. ... And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body"'.

Conclusion

We are left with no other conclusion than the church should gather for fellowship on Sunday afternoon into early evening, say 3 or 4pm.

There is no indication of later evening meetings being normal (i.e. starting at 6.30pm and continuing till after 9pm).⁷

This is eminently sensible. It does not put pressure upon families to rush to get ready in the morning. Neither does it put pressure on families by staying up late into the night, enabling young children to be put to bed on time. [However, there is no problem with people wishing to continue meeting informally after the main meeting has finished. It depends on the householder where the meeting is held.]

A late afternoon meeting is absolutely sensible and Biblical.

Exceptions

Many people in the early church were slaves. Since some masters were also Christians then there would be no problem for their slaves to attend church meetings at any time. However, many Christians were slaves of non-believers. This meant that they could not attend meetings until their prolonged duties were finished for the day.

Thus there are historical records showing that some meetings were held at either midnight or dawn enabling slaves to attend church (but not get any sleep). For example:

They [Christians] were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively⁸ a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath ... When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food.⁹

Furthermore, during times of persecution it made sense for Christians to meet at extreme times to help evade capture.¹⁰

Just because we have records of churches meeting at dawn or midnight does not mean that these are precedents in any way. They are necessary exceptions.

Since there is no Biblical hard and fast rule for the time on which to gather, leaders can adjust times for the necessities of the time and location.

Conclusion

Traditions set by men are always slippery slopes. The idea of a 10.30 morning meeting and a 6.30 evening Gospel meeting is virtually set in stone for many evangelicals – yet there is no Biblical basis for either.

What is important is to determine the time to gather on the basis of Biblical precedent, common sense, practical matters and what is best for the families that attend.

⁷ I have known some modern church evening meetings regularly continue until after 10pm. When there are members that have to rise for work at 4.30am (e.g. postmen, doctors, police officers) this is unfair and unwise. Also some towns have no bus services running that late. My suburban (not rural) area has no bus service after 8pm.

⁸ That is, call and response.

⁹ Letter of Pliny to Emperor Trajan. Pliny was a Roman civil servant who served as governor of Bithynia (in northern modern Turkey) from 111-113 AD.

¹⁰ Pliny persecuted Christians after examination and sometimes torture.

My contention is that these criteria are best fulfilled in a late afternoon Sunday meeting alone, preferably including a communal meal as a preparation. I know of no church that does this.

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