

THE SOUL IS UNBOUND AFTER SUPPER

This Thinksheet is a meditation, from personal experience & observation, on the abandonment of Sunday evening as a factor in the decline of the mainline churches. If it's not feasible to recapture Sunday evening--or is it?--how supply what was lost?

1 Josef Göbbels convinced Adolf Hitler to make his major speeches after supper, the time of day when (1) rational censoring-control is least energetic & (2) the emotions are more manipulable, being closer to the surface than at any other time of day. Listening after supper to many of his same-day rebroadcast speeches, I can testify to their power at that time of day even though I was not psychopolitically available to his rhetoric.

2 Till Hitler came to power, I'd not gone to church Sunday evenings. Then I did for about a score of years, till I joined a mainline no-Sunday-evening-church denomination. Before I comment what I lost, I'll take a diary entry (it could be any one during that score of years & happens to be the one $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago last Sunday, the weekdays of '44 & '94 being the same) so you can get the flavor of it. (*The church? Woodlawn Baptist [Chicago], of which I was assistant pastor.*)

Spoke [at 6.30] at Adult Fellowship on "The Ethics of Jesus." We decided tonight to make the Fellowship a leadership-training effort, & to start with a course in Baptist history....[At the 7.30 worship,] Sang in the choir. Excellent service. Negro octet from Great Lakes Navy Training School. The group sings over the radio Sunday afternoon[s], & their singing is technically & enthusiastically excellent. Rev. Robert Williams of Borneo spoke on his work among the Dyaks. I met 2 girls who go to Bolivia in March under the Lost Tribes Mission, under which were 5 missionaries who have been in the news the last week as missing. Rev. Williams phoned the American Embassy at La Paz this afternoon, & the Embassy denied the American news story that the bodies have been found: an abandoned camp is the last trace so far.... Many conversations in the Lord. If my only purpose in being a Christian was meeting interesting people, it would be worth it.

3 Not much competition for Sunday evening till after WWII? Depends where you were living. Rural, maybe. But by the mid-'30s, radio had rich offerings in entertainment (culture high & low), education, religion, sports. As for the cities, competition for people's Sunday evening was keen by the late-'30s, but my Chicago church was up to it: it was mainline (not fundamentalist), with solid worship-&-education programming (including a wide variety of U.S.-&-foreign participants [we were close to the U. of Chicago]), & "family" (a joyful community, people after the morning activities saying "See you this evening!").

Nostalgia trip? Not only. Some resulting reflections: (1) The primary Sunday-evening pull to church was, I believe, **alternative community** over against (a) "the [non-Christian & secular] world," (b) the family (which at that time in that place was not much less dysfunctional than urban families today), (c) the neighborhood (forever a +/- mix), & (d) the work-worlds. (2) The church's Sunday evening was warmer, more congenial & relaxed, the soul being unbound after supper. (3) Too late for a church-sociological survey, but it might be instructive to know how those Sunday-evening folk would have answered the question, "If you weren't here this evening, what would you have been doing?" (4) I'd like to know, of a mainline church today, answers to such questions as "How did you spend last Sunday evening?" "What do you think would be the best way for you to spend your Sunday evenings?" "Might your church figure in that best way?"

4 Downside? Yes: The Sunday-evening church can be escapist & narcissistic. But that danger always exists in nurturing communities & is no argument against their existence. Another danger: "us"-against-"them" paranoia. But joy casts out fear, & joy was the dominant note those Sunday evenings. And another: introverted neglect of "us"-for-"them" mission to the general community surrounding the church building, & the wider world. My response to this danger:

5 A church that is itself a joyful community will have the vision & energy to engage in mission, evangelism, social action. That Chicago church was, in various ways, so engaged, though not as much as I would have liked.

6 I'd like to see a study done correlating church vitality with the presence/absence of Sunday-evening church. Would it help explain why Southern Baptists have far outdistanced, in statistics, all churches in the U.S.A. except the Roman Catholic? And another study correlating Sunday evening with youth-retention, "holding our young people." My current research: mainly, noticing what's on VISN network, especially ACTS (the Southern Baptist affiliate).

7 In his THE CHURCH CONFIDENT (Abingdon/93), Leander Keck doesn't mention Sunday evening as a potential time-slot for increasing the church's confidence. But facing his titlepage he quotes Chas. Clayton Morrison, whom I knew as a confident Christian (from conversations I had with him over many years): "Christianity can repent, but it must not whimper." Is surrendering Sunday evening to "the world" an instance of whimpering? If we are to engage "the principalities & powers," should we be conceding Sunday evenings to them?

8 The call to look at Sunday evening has at least the value of adding weight to the question, What here-&-now would getting serious about the Faith mean? The mainline-church's situation is, in the negative (declining stats) sense, serious. Analyses based on defeatist thinking are (in a third sense) just not serious. They come down to the same squabble a political party out of power descends to: are things bad because we became (1) **too like** them (too conformist) or (2) **not enough like** them (too out of touch)? The mainline churches' "them" is not the conservative churches but "the world," the spirit of the age with its professedly righteous causes.

9 "No longer was the aim of society the service of God in Christian love, but national prosperity for the middle class" (p.114, Jn. Herman Randall's THE MAKING OF THE MODERN MIND [HM/26]; underlinings mine). While this pregnant sentence describes the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, it serves as well to suggest the con-/trans-formation (Ro.12.2) tension serious Christians face today. **Strenuous** work for Sunday evenings?