

Sunday on Holiday?



By Rev. Peter H. Holtvliiwer

The summer holidays are just behind us now and it's good to reflect on how we use the spare time the Lord gives us.

We are richly blessed to live in a time and place where more and more of us enjoy increased vacation time. Two weeks per year is usually the starting point but quickly many jobs provide for three, four or more weeks depending on years of service. Some of us use the extra time off to work at a different job for some extra money or to volunteer at camps or retreats while others will use it to get away. It is not uncommon to hear of people having a summer vacation, a winter break and a spring holiday too.

Along with more available time off work, *planning* for holidays is becoming a growing part of our lives. Months in advance we try to book our favourite campsite. It will be longer for a cottage, maybe even a year or two years in advance if we want to book several cottages together. A vacation down south or over-seas or a road-trip most often require months of fore-thought. More and more single young adults plan a tour of Europe, Australia or even the world before settling into a career or married life.

Naturally, all the details will be carefully planned, particularly if we travel with our family or a group of friends. We will work out how much food and clothing to bring along, how much money to take, how much to travel on certain days and which routes to take. We will make arrangements for our home to be looked after, our pets to be cared for and our businesses to run smoothly. But in the midst of all this forethought, do we also remember to plan for worship on the Lord's Day while away? What happens to the Sunday on holiday?

Last on the List

I've had sincere people ask me a couple of days before they leave for vacation if I knew whether there was a true church in the area of their destination. I've done the very same thing myself: pick a good place to holiday, choose the right-sized cabin near a nice beach and then: "*Oh yeah, what about church?*" The point is that thinking about Sunday worship – the special corporate worship of God in His church on the Lord's Day – usually comes last on our list, and that's a shame.

I realize that many people take along CDs or even videos of church services when they know they will not be near a faithful church, and I can only applaud that forethought. But could we not do better? After all, listening to a recording of a worship service is significantly different than being there in person, in the midst of God's people. It is second-best. Ask anyone who's been sick for a few Sundays and listened to CDs at home or who has had to do necessary shift work and could at best hear a sermon on their break. It's not the same as being there, sitting among the people, joining in with the "choir of voices," listening to the Word and having the Spirit make His presence felt in the church by applying the Word to the hearts of all. Listening to a recording is a good option for those who are *prevented* from attending church, but it's only a poor substitute for those who *are able* – with the proper planning – to attend. Why can't we simply plan our holidays so that Sunday worship in Christ's church receives top priority?

Fellowship on the Lord's Day

The opportunity to do so has never been greater. Over the last decade or more, we as a federation of churches have entered into ecclesiastical fellowship with many churches throughout Canada and the United States: the Free Church of Scotland, the United Reformed Churches of North America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in the United States, and L'Église Réformée du Québec (ERQ). We've also had favourable reports about the faithfulness of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Together these churches make up hundreds of congregations all over Canada and the United States. Among them most provinces in Canada are represented as well as nearly every state in the union (even Hawaii!) – surely we can find a campground or cottage near one of them? Can we not first look at a map of where the churches are and then plan our vacation around them? Would that not be more pleasing to the Lord than automatically relying on the default method of worship around a CD player?

We should also consider the great blessing of engaging in fellowship with brothers and sisters in these other true churches. As a family we've had this experience several times now and in each case we were warmly received as visitors. We've had occasion to worship in the Free Church of Scotland, in various United Reformed Churches, and an RCUS congregation and every time the people were genuinely appreciative that we made an effort to join them in worship on the Lord's Day. We ourselves were encouraged by the Word preached and the fellowship of the saints.

Many of these congregations are small or isolated or sometimes both. It is a real boost of encouragement for them when brothers and sisters make it a priority to seek them out for Sunday worship and fellowship. It reminds them that they are not alone in this world, that the church is indeed catholic, universal. It also underlines for them that their commitment to the truth of God's Word sets them apart from other churches which don't share that commitment and that others recognize them as Christ's faithful church in that location. In an age which tolerates everything and lets slip one standard after another, it is most encouraging to find others seeking you out because you (by God's grace alone, to be sure!) are determined to hold to God's Word in everything and follow only the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Not Just Another Church

That brings to mind another trend that seems to be gaining ground: simply going to whatever church is close by without due consideration of its faithfulness to Scripture. In places where there is no sister church, a quick look Sunday morning in the phone book for the nearest protestant church is a growing pattern – Presbyterian, Baptist, Independent, often in that general order. For some, taking along recordings of what they know to be a faithful worship service is not desirable. They prefer to spend time in “real” worship with flesh and blood people in a congregation and so the most “reasonable” church near their vacation spot will do. As such, that desire for in-person church worship is to be commended but then does it not follow that we who know from Scripture what the church of Christ is, what it “looks” like, then also plan ahead and look carefully and diligently for a church which bears those marks?

There is no excuse in our day and age with access to the Internet and information available on virtually any church in any town to not make ourselves aware of the nature of a particular church *before* we attend it Sunday morning. If the Internet does not give enough information, a phone call can almost always be made. What does this church stand for? What are its beliefs? What are its commitments? What we should want to know is: is this church intent on governing itself according to the pure Word of God alone?

Now, sometimes those who do their “investigation” just by showing up at the local church found in the phone book that morning speak about the sermon heard as being “good,” by which I take them to mean, “Scriptural.” This is fine. A message that does not contradict Scripture and appears to be in agreement with it is in itself encouraging. But is that all there is to being church? And is a single sermon sufficient to assess whether that assembly is Christ’s *faithful* church or whether it is sectarian or even false? After all, even a Roman Catholic priest can speak a message that is Scripturally sound!

For a pastor to speak a message that is in accord with the Bible is one thing (again, a positive), but from one sermon alone one cannot judge the faithfulness of a church to the Lord of the church. What we need to know is: does this church strive to obey its Lord across the board, for example, in administering the sacraments given by Christ according to the Scriptures? Does this church obey its Lord in disciplining its members according to the command of Jesus in Matthew 18? Does this church appoint elders and deacons for this task according to the command of Christ’s Apostle in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? In short, does this congregation submit itself entirely to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regard Jesus Christ as the only head of the church (Belgic Confession Art. 29)? If not, should a Christian who himself wishes to obey His Lord and Saviour join such an assembly for worship when he has choices? Particularly when he is able to plan otherwise in advance?

Not every assembly that calls itself “church” is worthy of the name and we are called to be discerning. Particularly in our worship of God on the Lord’s Day we should strive to find an assembly which is faithful to the Lord and wants in every way to worship and serve Him according to His Word alone. The easy thing is to go to whatever church we can find, perhaps

choosing the best of the lot according to our judgment. But the catholic church of Christ is not just another church listed in the phone book – it is His One church gathered in many assemblies *which bear the marks of faithfulness to Him*. The better thing, more honouring to the Lord, is to plan ahead and worship with believers in those assemblies.

Worship a Nuisance?

A different issue for some is that going to church while on holiday appears to be somewhat of a nuisance or a bother. It's not unheard of for people to camp within an hour's driving distance of a faithful church but attend only one service or none at all. What is the attitude and thinking behind these choices? Do these decisions reflect a desire to please the Lord or please ourselves? Do we think God rejoices when we take a vacation from church? Are we growing so weary with two worship services each Sunday that we welcome the break? We need to do some soul searching here: what is the thought of my heart that leads me to stay away from regular church worship and how does the Lord look upon my thinking?

Occasionally the response heard is that worship is done at the beach or in the cottage or at the campground and so the need to go to church is not felt. A meditation around the campfire is sufficient during a holiday, some feel. Now, family worship is good. Worshipping with friends is also commendable. And let us have many meditations and discussions of God's Word around the campfire! But let's not confuse this with worshipping in and with the church, the *ecclesia* of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The worship of the church is the official gathering of God's covenant people, under the authority of the elders appointed by Christ (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Tim 3:15), to praise the Lord and hear His Word. It is a special, unique gathering of the saints in an assembly that Scripture describes as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16) and the precious Bride of Christ (Revelation 21:2,9). Unlike our worship with family or with friends, in that assembly alone God has His Word *officially* proclaimed by His servants and gives His sacraments to be used. Therefore God's people are called to be in *that* assembly Lord's Day after Lord's Day as much as they possibly can (Hebrews 10:25).

Call the Sabbath a Delight!

And it is a joy for God's people to go to church – at least, it should be! Psalm 122:1 sings it loud and clear, “*How glad I was when unto me / They said, ‘Let us with one accord / Go to the temple of the LORD, / There to adore His majesty’*” (*Book of Praise*). Psalm 100 echoes the same sentiments, “*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*”

Let's remind ourselves that to be among the faithful people of God is a rich privilege – there we hear the tidings of the complete forgiveness of all our sins in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ! There we meet with our covenant God who issues us peace and blessings of grace upon grace! There we meet and commune with our brothers and sisters in Christ, singing and praying together, later speaking together and encouraging one another. In church we may hear the LORD speak to us, instruct us, encourage us, reproof us, direct us and comfort us – who would want to miss that? There in the “workshop of the Holy Spirit” we are “worked on” by the Spirit, spiritually sharpened and shaped into God's image – we can't afford to miss that!

In the faithful assembly we may – sometimes even on vacation in a sister church – eat of the Lord's Supper for the strengthening of our faith – what a breath-taking benefit! No wonder the LORD commands us in Isaiah 58:13 to “*call the Sabbath a delight*” for whether in the old covenant worship in the temple of stone or in the new covenant's worship in the temple of flesh (the church), God's blessings are poured out bountifully upon His people. How can God's people ever need (or want!) a holiday from that?