

Changing Sunday Practices

BY JACK MARCUM

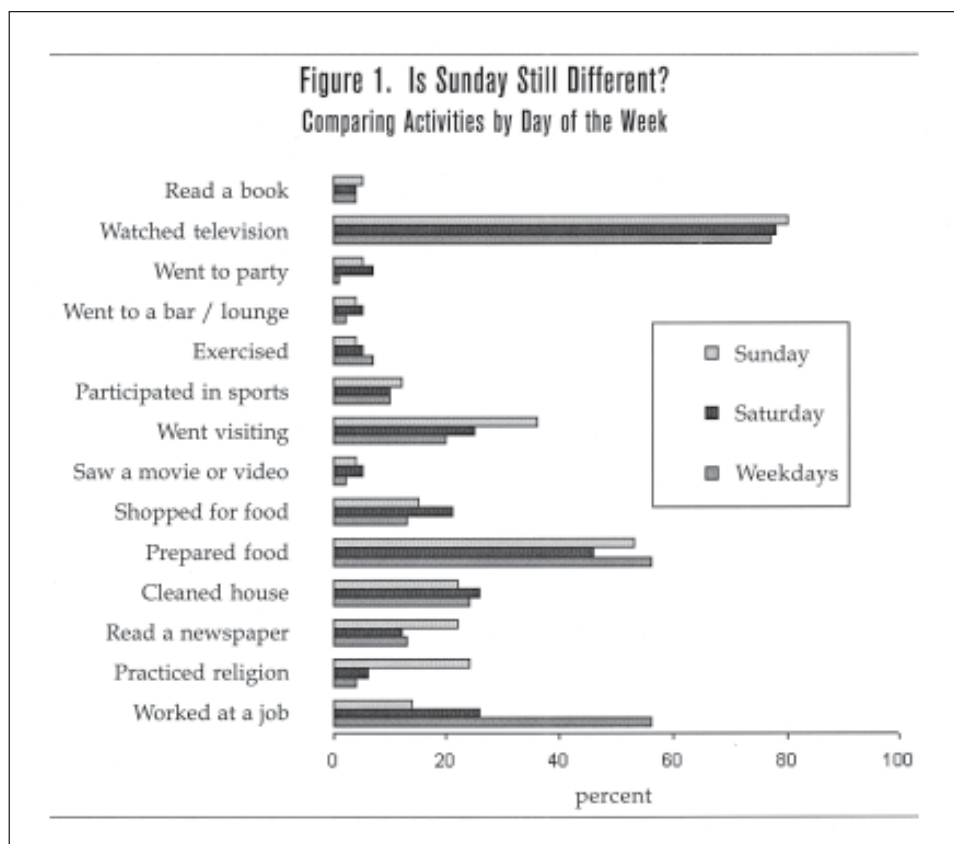
Profound cultural changes have transformed our Sundays to resemble other days of the week. We spend less time, in Calvin's words, "resting from our work so God can do God's work in us." The cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared and sabbath keeping is no longer a 'default' mode of behavior. How we will treat Sunday depends upon individual Christians and congregations.

Those North American colonists who regarded Sunday as a Christian sabbath, a day of worship and rest, would suffer culture shock if they revisited us today and witnessed the radical changes in Sunday practices. Over the last two hundred years Sunday has gradually evolved into a day when many other activities, often initially controversial, are accepted as suitable behavior for the Lord's Day. Though the course of change was far from uniform, a central theme was a broadening sense of what counts as "rest." From 1850 to 1930 the broadening scope of rest came to embrace a number of cultural, educational, and leisure pursuits, including use of libraries, visiting museums, family time and other socializing, amusements, spectator sports, and other entertainment. In more recent decades, most remaining Sunday restrictions were lifted, including the ban on commercial activities, as many states have rescinded Sunday "blue laws."

SUNDAY ACTIVITIES TODAY

As a result, Sunday has lost much of its distinctiveness. A survey of U.S. adults conducted in the 1990s reveals that the percentage of the population engaging in various activities differs little between Sunday and other

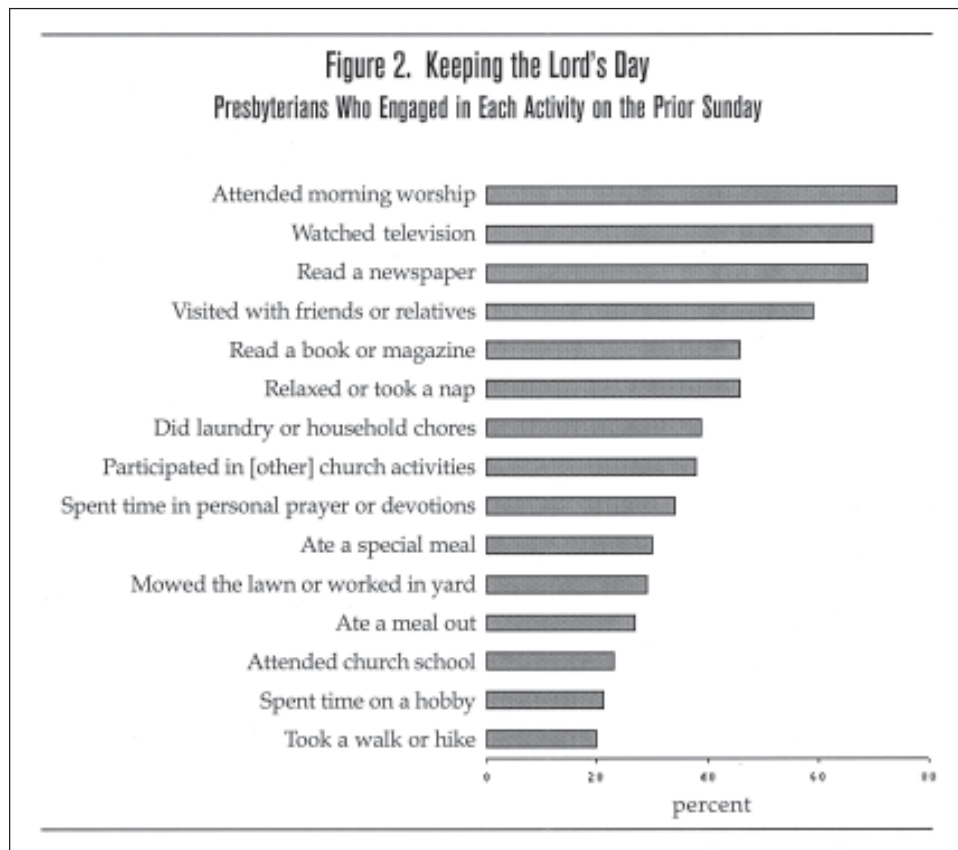
days of the week (see Figure 1, "Is Sunday Still Different?"). Yes, we still work less (where the Sunday rate is half that of Saturday and a quarter that of weekdays) and still worship more (with a rate four times that of Saturday and six times that of weekdays). Other less dramatic differences are that we read the newspaper and visit a bit more, but wash our clothes less. Notice that, in some ways, it is Saturday rather than Sunday that stands out as distinctive, with increased rates of clothes shopping, grocery shopping, and visiting bars. However, for many other activities, including



many not shown in the figure (e.g., hobbies, recreational travel, using the library, attending sporting events, going to the theater, engaging in outdoor recreation, and running errands), Sunday looks much like any other day of the week.

The lack of Sunday distinctiveness shows up in another way in this survey. Most behavioral choices look a lot alike for churchgoers and for the rest of the population. When we compare those who reported religious practices on Sunday and those who did not, there are few differences of

more than 1% or 2% in involvement rates for any of the other activities listed in Figure 1. (This comparison is not presented in a table or figure.) The only major difference is found for employment, with half as many of those who practiced religion on Sunday reporting work for pay on that day (23%) as among the remainder of the respondents (47%). Even this one exception of employment, however, may be artificial, since worship times often conflict with working opportunities.



A different survey shows in greater detail how members in one Christian denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), spent a recent Sunday (see Figure 2, "Keeping the Lord's Day").¹ A majority attended worship, and many others went to church (Sunday) school or other church-related events. Sizable minorities spent time in private devotions, visiting with friends or family, or just relaxing. In short, most Presbyterians spent part of their Sunday doing things that were typical of Sundays in the nineteenth century. What distinguishes current-day Presbyterians from their Calvinist forebears is the list of other activities that many of them now engage in,

from yard work to household chores. Even reading a newspaper likely would have offended church leaders in the late 1800s, when many clergymen roundly denounced increasingly available Sunday editions.

CHANGE THROUGH THE GENERATIONS

No poll like that shown in Figure 2 exists for earlier decades. We can get some sense of how much Sunday behavior has changed among Presbyterians, however, by comparing retrospective reports of childhood Sunday activities from younger and older respondents to the same 1999 survey (see Table 1, “Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday” on page 97 of this issue). For most Presbyterians born before 1930, childhood Sunday activities included morning worship *every week*, and for a majority of the rest, *most weeks*. Most participated in children’s activities at church, enjoyed a special noon or evening meal, and took part in fun activities with family *most or every week*. A large minority visited family or friends (43%) or attended evening worship (36%) either *every week* or *most weeks*. At the same time, a large majority would *never* have gone shopping, and about half would have *never* attended a sporting event or worked in the yard. Sundays in the 1920s and 1930s were very focused on church and family. Participation in commerce was rare. Mowing lawns and watching sports were activities shunned by many and infrequently taken up by the rest.

This snapshot of Sunday practices before 1930 includes the respondents’ memories of which specific activities they avoided. (These responses are not shown tabularly.) Many not only shunned watching sports, but also playing sports: 45% *always avoided* playing competitive sports, and another 27% *usually avoided* them. Attending movies was *always avoided* by 48% and *usually avoided* by another 22%. Even eating out was *always avoided* by 35% and *usually avoided* by 26%. On the other hand, these oldest Presbyterians rarely shunned playing a musical instrument (28%), playing recorded music (26%), traveling (21%), doing schoolwork (19%), listening to the radio (15%), playing games (12%), and cooking meals (10%) on Sundays during their childhood. (These numbers include the combined percentage who *always* or *usually avoided* them.)

In contrast, the younger Presbyterians born 40 or more years later (after 1960) remember much higher rates of Sunday participation in a variety of leisure, labor, and commercial activities. For example, the percentage who “went shopping” at least once in a while on Sunday during their childhood grows from 23% among the oldest group to 85% among the youngest.² Similarly, the percentage who “mowed the lawn or did other yard work” on Sundays during childhood increases from 50% in the oldest group to 86% in the youngest. The proportion “attending sporting events” also increases, from 48% to 77%.

Their responses also show declines by generation in the frequency of church participation and other, more traditional Sunday behaviors. The

sharpest difference between oldest and youngest groups occurs for Sunday evening worship attendance. Among Presbyterians born before 1930, 77% attended church on Sunday evenings at least some weeks during childhood. The corresponding figure in the generation born after 1960 is 42%.³ Sunday morning worship shows little change over this period when the comparison is between attending at all and never attending, since at least 96% in every generation attended morning worship at some point during childhood. Instead, the differences are found in the relative frequency of attendance among those who did participate. In the oldest group, 62% report attending morning worship *every week*, compared to 51% in the youngest group.

In this generational comparison we can see a trend toward greater freedom of choice and wider participation in a variety of once-shunned Sunday activities. In their childhood, Presbyterians born after 1960 still went to church on Sunday, but mainly to the morning service and less to evening worship and other church activities. They spent the resulting free time in leisure, household, and commercial activities. Fewer of them avoided those activities formerly shunned on Sunday, whether they participated in them regularly or not.

OPTIONS AND OPINIONS

Only in recent decades has the church acquiesced to the cultural transformation of Sunday. As late as the 1930s, Presbyterian general assemblies regularly issued statements lamenting the pattern of change and calling on the faithful to return to more traditional sabbath observance. Resistance faded noticeably in the 1940s, however. In the two largest Presbyterian denominations, general assembly actions concerning Sunday behavior became more rare after 1950 and disappeared entirely by the early 1960s. By 1969, the Presbyterian Church in the United States was conducting regular business on Sunday during its annual General Assembly meeting.

Not until the late 1990s was the subject of Sunday activities again addressed by Presbyterians at the national level. The Workgroup on Sabbath Keeping, funded with a rediscovered endowment established in 1933 to provide "income for program on the nature of the Sabbath and the importance of its observance," issued a report that was approved by the 2000 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Among its recommendations is an "invitation to . . . restore, at all levels of our common life, the practice of keeping every seventh day as the Lord's Day, a Sabbath holy to God." However, it immediately acknowledges, "in our present context, this will not be easy."

But perhaps it will not be impossible. Despite the documented changes in Sunday behavior, almost all Presbyterians (92%) had spent some time during the week prior to the 1999 survey in sabbath keeping activities, defined on the survey as "...resting from our work so God can do God's

work in us' (John Calvin). It involves those practices through which we provide God the time and space necessary to restore our souls. These include corporate worship, private devotions, and deep enjoyment of other persons and the world around us."

These Christians, on average, had spent five hours on sabbath-keeping activities in the preceding week. And here's the encouraging note: more than half were either *very interested* (20%) or *generally interested* (36%) in increasing the time they spend on sabbath keeping. More either *strongly favor* (40%) or *favor* (33%) "the church's encouraging people of faith to spend more time" in sabbath-keeping activities.

Will these good intentions translate into action? Presbyterians themselves are pessimistic. When asked whether twenty-five years from now Sundays will be *more* a time of sabbath keeping, *less* a time of sabbath keeping, or there will be *no change*, few opted for the *more* response. Only 10% indicated that they expect *more* sabbath keeping on Sunday a quarter-century from now "in the United States generally," although the percentages are a bit higher when the reference is to "Presbyterians in the U.S., generally" (18%) and "Christians in the U.S., generally" (22%). More notably, only 29% expect Sunday to be *more* a time of sabbath keeping in their own families 25 years from now.

One promising option to increase sabbath-keeping activity is to decouple the practice from Sunday. Already, 72% of Presbyterians who practice sabbath keeping (as defined above) do some of those activities on days other than Sunday. Nevertheless, when directly asked about the possibility, fewer than

one-third of Presbyterians indicated they would be either *very comfortable* or *generally comfortable* with "the idea of separating the concept of Sabbath keeping from Sunday or any other particular day of the week." Still, only a minority are *uncomfortable* with the idea—with most of

those people being *generally* (25%) rather than *very uncomfortable* (16%)—and another sizable share are *neither comfortable nor uncomfortable* (26%) or have *no opinion* (4%).

Despite these mixed opinions, proponents of increasing the time spent on sabbath keeping may find it easier to convince people to carve out small segments of time throughout the week than to persuade them to return to more traditional Sunday behavior. That's because the best explanation for

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why Sundays have come to resemble other days of the week is that people wanted it that way. As opportunities to take part in other activities besides worship and rest have proliferated, people, including many in the church, have embraced them. Like many other aspects of contemporary Christianity in our culture, sabbath keeping has become

less an institutional affair, observed weekly, and more a private matter left to personal choice.

The decision on how to treat Sunday rests with individual Christians and congregations. The social and cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared and sabbath keeping is no longer a 'default' mode of behavior.

CONCLUSION

Profound cultural changes over the last two centuries have transformed Sunday in the United States so that it is no longer a day set aside for worship and rest. Sunday retains some of its earlier distinctiveness

(in the relative concentration of religious services and absence of paid employment), but most people engage in other activities on Sunday, from household chores to playing sports, at the same rates as they do on Saturdays or weekdays. Moreover, except for church participation, this same lack of behavioral distinctiveness holds even among those people who practice their faith on Sunday.

When we trace these changes within one Christian denomination, by comparing childhood Sunday activities between older and younger generations of Presbyterians, we see that much blurring in Sunday's unique identity has occurred since the 1930s, when the last concentrated efforts among Presbyterian bodies to stem the erosion of Sunday's traditional role took place. By the 1960s, Presbyterians, both individually and denominationally, had accepted, if not embraced, the shift in Sunday's role.

The shift away from a day of worship and rest to one with greater freedom and flexibility is one example of the broader trend toward greater individuality and choice in American religious life. As the church's authority over Sunday behavior eroded, most people, even those who continue to worship regularly on that day, opted to spend more of their Sundays in various other activities.

In this context, Christians can encourage a return to more traditional Sunday activities, and even facilitate them, by articulating the need for a time of rest and worship, and by providing practical guidance. But the decision on how to treat Sunday, more than at any time in our culture, rests with individual Christians and congregations. The social and cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared and sabbath keeping is no longer a 'default' mode of behavior. Any return to a more traditional Sun-

day profile will occur because individuals and congregations *choose* to devote a larger part of their lives to sabbath practices.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Cornell University Press, 2000), traces three centuries of change in sabbath practices in America. For more information on the Presbyterian experience of sabbath keeping, consult Benton Johnson, "On Dropping the Subject: Presbyterians and Sabbath Observance in the Twentieth Century," in Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Presbyterian Predicament: Six Perspectives* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990); "An Invitation to Sabbath," a report to the 212th General Assembly by the Work Group on Sabbath Keeping, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2000; and *Sabbath Keeping: Report of the May 1999 Presbyterian Panel Survey* (Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2000). An interesting snapshot of "What did you do yesterday?" is in the "EPA Time Usage Survey 1992-1994," available as a publicly accessible database at the University of Maryland Survey Research Center (www.webuse.umd.edu).

NOTES

1 These results are from a 1999 survey, "Sabbath Keeping," administered through the Presbyterian Panel, a national, quarterly poll of representative samples of members, elders (lay leaders), and ministers affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This survey was funded by the Frances A. Strong Fund and by general mission contributions to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I limit the discussion here to the responses of members, for convenience referring to them simply as "Presbyterians."

2 For reasons of space, only the responses of the oldest and youngest respondents are shown. In all cases presented here, however, the transition in values from oldest to youngest follows a gradual rather than a discontinuous pattern. For example, for the shopping question, the percentage participating went from 23% among those born before 1930, to 40% among those born between 1930 and 1944, to 58% among those born between 1945 and 1959, and to 85% among those born in 1960 or later.

3 The 42% is higher than might be expected, since few Presbyterian congregations have evening services. It may be that some individuals responded with reference to youth group participation, since youth groups often meet on Sunday evenings.



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**Table 1. Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday
(referenced in "Changing Sunday Practices" on p. 61)**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Year of Birth</i>		<i>difference</i>
		<i>Born before 1930</i>	<i>Born after 1960</i>	
Sunday morning worship	every week	62%	51%	-11
	most weeks	22%	38%	16
	some weeks	14%	10%	-4
	never	2%	1%	-1
Sunday evening worship	every week	23%	5%	-18
	most weeks	13%	8%	-5
	some weeks	41%	28%	-13
	never	23%	59%	36
Children's activities at church	every week	43%	28%	-15
	most weeks	23%	37%	14
	some weeks	28%	30%	2
	never	6%	5%	-1
Family devotions	every week	9%	2%	-7
	most weeks	12%	6%	-6
	some weeks	49%	39%	-10
	never	31%	53%	22
Visiting shut-ins	every week	4%	0%	-4
	most weeks	5%	2%	-3
	some weeks	74%	50%	-24
	never	17%	48%	31
Fun activities as a family	every week	22%	16%	-6
	most weeks	33%	51%	18
	some weeks	42%	33%	-9
	never	3%	0%	-3
Special meal	every week	48%	33%	-15
	most weeks	37%	34%	-3
	some weeks	13%	28%	15
	never	2%	5%	3
Visiting family or friends	every week	14%	15%	1
	most weeks	29%	36%	7
	some weeks	53%	48%	-5
	never	4%	1%	-3
Lawn mowing and other yard work	every week	1%	6%	5
	most weeks	4%	24%	20
	some weeks	46%	56%	10
	never	49%	14%	-35
Attending sporting events	every week	0%	1%	1
	most weeks	4%	8%	4
	some weeks	44%	68%	24
	never	52%	23%	-29
Shopping	every week	0%	3%	3
	most weeks	1%	5%	4
	some weeks	22%	77%	55
	never	77%	15%	-62