

## **THANK GOD LOW SUNDAY CAN BECOME HIGH SUNDAY**

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By Christmas lunch-time most pastors will have had their surfeit of services. The Sunday before Christmas will have been dominated by carol services, then comes Christmas Eve, then Christmas Day. It's an exhausting business. And then, before you can breathe, another Sunday comes. To make matters worse, this year 'Boxing Day' is a Sunday. It really is tough – everybody else is able to relax over Christmas, but not the poor pastor, who has to spend the two festival days working. And before you can say Jack Robinson, there are up-lifting sermons to be prepared to mark the New Year. True, most, if not all, church organisations observe the Christmas break, but death is no respecter of Christmas – one Christmas I had six deaths taking place in the fellowship over the Christmas period!

So what can be done to make the pastoral load easier? First of all, cancel the evening service on the Sunday after Christmas – the only people who would turn out would be a few 'guilt-ridden' church members. Some might say cancel the morning service too, for certainly this year many of us will be going to church three days running. And yet I would be loathe to do that – surely Sunday worship has to have the primacy, even at Christmas. An alternative (for the pastor, though not for the people) is to take off that Sunday and get somebody else to preach that day.

My preferred solution, however, is to use the Sunday to thank God – or rather to get the church to thank God. Yes, get the church to thank God for the year that is past. Turn the service into an occasion for short (five minutes maximum!) testimonies to the goodness of God. One person might speak of the joy of coming to know the Lord through an Alpha course; another of God's encouragement while away at university; a third, perhaps, of her gratitude to God for the gift of a child; while another might speak of the strength received to cope with bereavement. There are all kinds of reasons why people might thank God: a new job, a new home, a new church family; a silver wedding or a golden wedding; healing of relationships or healing of body. There is much to be said for each testimony being linked with a verse of Scripture. For inevitably testimonies are subjective, whereas there is a certain objectiveness about the word of God.

Clearly such a service demands some preparation – people need to be asked to speak, even if one opens the service up to others to share an informal word of testimony. However, from the perspective of the pastor, the great thing is that if there are five or six testimonies, there is no need for a full-blooded sermon – a five-minute 'address' at the most is sufficient. And as for the congregation, they won't feel short-changed that day, but rather they will be uplifted as they listen to others tell of God's gracious action in their lives. What technically is a 'Low Sunday' in the church's liturgical year becomes a 'High Sunday'.

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