

# On Shortening the Church Service

by J.H. Newman

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*The speaker argues that the current shortening of church services is a gradual change that may lead to a loss of the original meaning and identity of worship.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 55:17, Psalm 119:164, Acts 2:46, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 10:25

**Topics:** "Worship Practices", "Church Reform"

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## Description

J.H. Newman addresses the growing sentiment that church services are too long, highlighting the historical context of ancient Christian worship where believers prayed multiple times a day following biblical instructions. The transition from the primitive mode of worship to the current practices in the Church of England was gradual, with changes in the frequency and structure of services over time. The Reformers aimed to adapt the services to the spirit of their age by compressing rituals and incorporating the English language. Newman points out the shift from daily to weekly services since the Reformation, raising concerns about the potential future reduction to monthly services.

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## Transcript

There is a growing feeling that the Services of the Church are too long; and many persons think it a sound feeling, merely because it is a growing one. Let such as have not made up their minds on the subject, suffer themselves, before going into the arguments against our Services, to be arrested by the following considerations.

The Services of our Church, as they now stand, are but a very small part of the ancient Christian worship; and, though people now-a-days think them too long, there can be no doubt that the primitive believers would have thought them too short. Now I am far from considering this as a conclusive argument in the question; as if the primitive believers were right, and people now-a-days wrong; but surely others may fairly be called upon not to assume the reverse. On such points it is safest to assume nothing, but to take facts as we find them; and the facts are these.

In ancient times Christians understood very literally all that the Bible says about prayer. David had said, "Seven time a day do I praise thee;" and St. Paul had said, "Pray always." These texts they did not feel at liberty to explain away, but complying with them to the letter, praised God seven times a day, besides their morning and evening prayer. Their hours or devotion were, in the day time, 6, 9, 12, and 3, which we called the Horae Canonicae; in the night, 9, 12, and 3, which were called the Nocturns; and besides these the hour of day-break and retiring to bed; not that they set apart these hours in the first instance for public

worship,-this was impossible; but they seem to have aimed at praying with one accord, and at one time, even when they could not do so in one place. "The Universal Church," says Bishop Patrick, "anciently observed certain set hours of prayer, that all Christians throughout the world might at the same time join together to glorify God; and some of them were of opinion, that the Angelical Host, being acquainted with those hours, took that time to join their prayers and praises with those of the Church." The Hymns and Psalms appropriated to these hours were in the first instance intended only for private meditation; but afterwards, when Religious Societies were formed, and persons who had withdrawn from secular business lived together for purposes of devotion, chanting was introduced, and they were arranged for congregational worship. Throughout the Churches which used the Latin tongue, the same Services were adopted with very little variation: and in Roman Catholic countries they continue in use, with only a few modern interpolations, even to this day.

The length of these Services will be in some degree understood from the fact, that in the course of every week they go through the whole book of Psalms. The writer has been told by a distinguished person, who was once a Roman Catholic Priest, that the time required for their performance averages three hours a day throughout the year.

The process of transition from this primitive mode of worship to that now used in the Church of England, was gradual. Long before the abolition of the Latin Service, the ancient hours of worship had fallen into disuse; in religious Societies the daily and nightly Services had been arranged in groups under the names of Matins and Vespers; and those who prayed in private were allowed to suit their hours of prayer to their convenience, provided only that they went through the whole Services each day. Neither is it to be supposed that this modified demand was as all generally complied with. Thus in the course of time, the views and feelings, with which prayer had been regarded by the early Christians, became antiquated; the forms remained, but stripped of their original meaning; Services were compressed into one, which had been originally distinct; the idea of united worship with a view to which identity of time and language had been maintained in different nations, was forgotten; the identity of time had been abandoned, and the identity of language was not thought worth preserving. Conscious of the incongruity of primitive forms and modern feelings, our Reformers undertook to construct a Service more in accordance with the spirit of their age. They adopted the English language; they curtailed the already compressed ritual of the early Christians, so arranging it that the Psalms should be gone through monthly, instead of weekly; and, carrying the spirit of compression still further, they added to the Matin Service what had hitherto been wholly distinct from it, the Mass Service or Communion.

Since the Reformation, the same gradual change in the prevailing notions of prayer has worked its way silently but generally. The Services, as they were left by the Reformers, were, as they had been from the first ages, daily Services; they are now weekly Services. Are they not in a fair way to become monthly?

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