

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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Two of the five GRR churches I attended in January and February celebrated baptisms as part of their worship service. Then on Sunday, Martin's Prairie (served by Rev. Al Eastin) baptized four adults as a prelude to the evening worship at the Area II meeting in Jacksonville. It was reminiscent of the old riverside associational meetings.

Our regional emphasis for 2009 is **Harvest Time**. The biblical "harvest" is more than baptisms, but it is at least that much. Further, a harvest that excludes baptisms as unimportant is a serious neglect of our call as God's field hands. It was exciting and encouraging to witness these baptisms. Churches are still proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Persons are still responding. The fields truly are ready for harvest.

The event of baptism is not merely punching someone's ticket for the heaven train. It is a commitment to a way of life no longer dominated by private desires and needs, but energized and driven by Jesus Christ and shaped by full participation in the community of faith (the Church) and manifested in the love of neighbor. In baptism we publicly announce that we have turned from sin and turned toward that new life. The public event of baptism is also the opportunity for me to be reminded of my own baptismal commitments. The public event is the gathering of the entire community of faith around the core of our identity.

The **American Religious Identification Survey** was released just last week, and there have already been responses by several pundits. Just from a statistics perspective, the report documents the fading of organized American Christianity. Some have described it as a "meltdown." We are still a nation in which the majority self-identifies as "Christian," but the numbers are falling quickly.

Some use the **Survey** to jump to a quick "I told you so," as they go on to critique and judge Christians in America. Certainly, much of the criticism is warranted, but I believe it is more often because we have distorted what Christianity is all about or, in some cases, come close to abandoning faith by redefining Christianity to our own liking.

Some say the **Survey** documents the disastrous effects of culture-war battles and sharp religious differences in America. They say, if the Church is to survive, then it must cool its rhetoric or change its positions on issues in order to become more acceptable to Americans. If the Church is to venture outside its own four walls, it must only advocate those positions the public has already deemed acceptable or speak against those positions the public has already rejected. It seems to me that this fits the definition of civil religion.

Some say the **Survey** is a long overdue judgment on churches in America. The Church has abandoned its first love. It has compromised and capitulated for too long. We must redouble our efforts with greater energy and louder rhetoric. I don't think the Church can avoid being

offensive, but I am not sure we need to work so hard at it. I would prefer that others find offense in a faithful, winsome testimony to Christ, and not my own failings in what I choose to do and say.

Some say the **Survey** reflects a growing disdain for organized religion in general. One columnist said "Religion has become an ugly thing." I have to agree that the public face of religion (all of them, not just Christianity) is often very ugly. But I also know that ugly face is usually a universalizing caricature drawn by someone just as angry and judgmental as those they are railing against.

For my own part, the **Survey** is sobering, but not much of a surprise. Others who have been paying attention are not surprised. But the problem with the **Survey** is not with what the numbers reveal. The problem is the presumption that the numbers are the exclusive divine standard by which God judges the Church gathered around the Name of Jesus Christ. As I told those gathered for the Area V meeting, I am only a field hand, not the Lord of the Harvest. It is not mine to define the crop or demand its yield. My calling is to gather what the Lord of the Harvest has produced in His field.

There was a time when public baptism following competent confession in Jesus Christ was the non-negotiable public face of "baptists." Our distinctive was not worship style, "practices," music repertoire, architecture, freedom, the size or translation of our Bible, inclusion, exclusion, missions, food pantries, social positions (take your pick), or political positions (again, take your pick). If we engage our Christology rightly, we will be shaped by life in a community of faith (ecclesiology), and will be driven to mission and ministry (missiology).

That is the movement: Christology to Ecclesiology to Missiology. If we omit any one of them we are left with a two-legged stool. I am persuaded that when we neglect or downplay Christology, our ecclesiology will be uncertain and weak. I am also persuaded that weak, uncertain ecclesiology results in a missiology without focus or purpose. This survey information (and others like it) should jolt us into rethinking what we are all about, not about how to be more numerous. Are we being faithful field hands of Jesus Christ?

You can get a copy of the survey at http://b27.cc.trincoll.edu/weblogs/AmericanReligionSurvey-ARIS/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf

