

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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Healthy churches are inviting churches.

Like many of you, I grew up in a Baptist church where the “Invitation” was a regular feature as our worship closed. While I lament the disappearance of the formal invitation from many churches, I am even more troubled by the lack of invitation in church cultures.

True, the Invitation I grew up with was predictable and, too often, was perfunctory. We were invited to “confess our sins and accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and follow Him in baptism, to rededicate our lives, or to affiliate with the church by transfer of letter.” The Invitation was not so much wrong or wrong-headed as it was too limited and often failed to flow from the sermon.

I must also confess the times I have observed offensive, manipulative invitations that were more about the preacher’s ego than anything else.

But ... Jesus Christ said “Come, follow me.” Jesus was inviting and expected us to be inviting. That seems inescapable. For us to treat invitations as quaint memories best forgotten or offensive practices to be banned is to betray our own calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I am not arguing merely that the Invitation with a few verses of “Just As I Am” be added to the bulletin right after the Sermon. That should be just the tip of the iceberg of a culture of invitation that lies beneath the surface of everything in a church.

Authentic invitation is born out of a spirit of hospitality and the conviction that we have something to offer. (Though it is not actually our possession to give.)

Invite persons to follow Jesus Christ. The invitation does not have to be offensive or manipulative. Jesus said “I have come to seek and to save that which was lost.” I know it is old language, and some will snicker, but there are “lost” in our communities and among those attending our churches (or at least there should be). Confession must be the heart of a church culture of invitation, but it cannot be the totality of invitation.

Invite persons to deeper discipleship. Invite them to practice spiritual disciplines, especially prayer and Bible study. Invite them to stewardship of their time, talent, and treasure. If we can’t talk about their money, how can we talk about their soul? Invite them to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit.

Invite persons to acts of service and care, especially outside the church among those who do not claim to be believers. Invite because “God so loved the world (*cosmos*)” and not just us and ours.

Invite persons to “rest” in Christ. The harried, hectic lives of most people carry a high price—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Invite to the kind of healing that only God can give.

Invite persons to formally affiliate with the church—not to satisfy their need for status or our need “to grow,” but as an authentic witness to community identity and solidarity that “where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people; your God will be my God.”

Invite persons to consider God’s call on their lives. Is God urging and gifting them to be a minister or a missionary?

Not every worship service needs to conclude covering all the possible bases for invitation. And not everyone needs to “walk the aisle” (but some do!). But to have integrity, the range of invitations should be extended over the course of the year. More than that, each invitation should flow naturally from the sermon. In fact, a good question for a preacher to ask themselves is “What do I think God is inviting people to do as a result of this sermon?” If the answer is “nothing” or “I don’t know,” then I suggest the sermon needs to be reconsidered.

[Just as a sidetrack here. I wonder if the popularity of “teaching sermons” is related to the fact that they rarely invite us to do anything other than collect information? In the sense that every sermon should invite response, every sermon should be “evangelistic.” I’m sure that will bring generate some comments!]

Don’t limit invitation to the worship service and don’t limit the inviter to the Pastor. Invitation can happen one-on-one in the Narthex; in a Sunday School class; at the Tuesday women’s luncheon; at the Saturday men’s breakfast; on the youth outing; etc., etc. Jesus took advantage of all kinds of circumstances, in all kinds of places, to issue invitations in all kinds of ways. Some accepted the invitation; others did not.

Many of our churches do this well. Others could do better. I believe God is inviting us to be inviters.



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