

Salt, light and introverted congregations

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For a variety of reasons, Christian faith in America tends to be a private and personal thing. Faith is what we believe, and that can be safely tucked away in our brain somewhere. In the faith understanding I grew up with, you can be a faithful Christian if you go to church on Sunday and abide by societal norms for morality. So, in essence, if people don't check the church parking lot on Sundays, nothing about your faith would distinguish you from anyone else who functioned as a good citizen.

Jesus clearly didn't anticipate such a development. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to us as salt and light. The obvious idea is that we impact the world we live in. And given that the world does not yet look all that much like the Kingdom of God, Jesus fully expected that our impacting the world around us would cause problems, that we would be persecuted like prophets of old.

It's worth noting that prophets generally were not persecuted for what they believed. The people who persecuted them were fellow members of their faith, fellow worshipers of Yahweh. They were persecuted because they insisted that being God's people demanded that they live differently than they were doing. The prophets insisted that they could not claim to be God's people while exploiting the poor, worrying about their personal fortunes more than God's commands, and so on.

I regularly hear the term "introverted" used to describe church congregations. Often this happens in the context of not doing evangelism. But I think the issue is much larger, going well beyond our not telling others about our faith. Our introversion thinks that we can be "good Christians" without being noticed. It thinks we can blend in with the prevailing culture, acting no different from anyone else beyond believing in Jesus and going to worship on occasion.

I sometimes think that the demise of Christendom, of a culture that enforces some basic Christians practices, is a huge gift to the Church Jesus envisions. When the

culture stopped being overtly Christian, being a good citizen could no longer be synonymous with being a follower of Jesus. This has been bad news for the institutional church, hurting attendance on Sunday and shrinking the collections in offering plates. But it does force us to re-define ourselves. If we aren't simply good citizens who believe a few peculiar things, then who are we?

Increasingly, non-church folk who decide to do some spiritual exploring, who visit congregations wondering if there is anything significant going on there, are embracing or rejecting Christian faith according to the answers they see us giving to such questions. If they drop by on Sunday, and nothing they see or hear suggests that the worshipers are any different from the other, non-church folks they know, why would they bother to become a part of such an enterprise?

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