

Sunday morning America: Time for civility and respect

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

Part of the continuing education for religious leaders of all types ought to involve occasional Sunday mornings spent not in church but observing the way that an increasing percentage of Americans spend their Sunday mornings. I came upon this idea some years ago when I found myself at home on a Sunday with reasons not to show up at church, since everyone was expecting me to be away.

Because it was a beautiful spring morning I decided to take a bike ride on Chicago's lakefront. I found that the sun had already brought out swimmers, walkers, runners and bikers. I observed family picnics that displayed the city's ethnic diversity. I saw people playing volleyball, children playing in the sand and grandmothers reading the newspaper.

This experience verified for me the enormous social change that has occurred in my lifetime—the move from Sunday as a day reserved for church to Sunday as a day reserved for leisure and family activities. I saw what the church is up against when it opens the church doors on a spring Sunday morning in hopes that people will choose church instead of the lakefront. As Tome Dawson, in Jason Byassee's article on LifeChurch in this issue, says, "Our competition is not other churches. Our competition is Disney"—and many other forms of entertainment.

The minimal conclusion I drew from my bike ride was that at the very least we ought to ensure that the people who elect to spend Sunday mornings in church encounter a service that is carefully and creatively planned and hear sermons that give evidence of a preacher who has taken the responsibility to preach seriously.

As it happens, I stayed home from church again on the Sunday after Christmas. I made a pot of coffee, gathered the Sunday papers, turned on the television and read and watched. As people had told me, Sunday morning television is pretty good. I discovered enlightened, civil conversations on *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation* and *This Week*. I kept bumping into the channel that features Joel Osteen mesmerizing a

huge sports arena with the promise that God wants to give God's abundance to everyone, not a trickle but a flood. The congregation loved it, and I had to admit that Osteen is good at what he does.

Newt Gingrich was a guest on one of the news shows, and though I don't agree with much of Gingrich's politics, he is clearly very smart, and I was impressed when, in a conversation about health care, he said: "We Republicans must stop thinking of ourselves as the 'opposite' party. We are not the opposition but the alternative. We have to stop shouting 'no' and come up with intellectually viable alternatives."

The issues confronting us are enormous; they deserve our intellectual, theological and spiritual best. Nothing is gained and much is lost when political or religious discourse descends to a level of insult and invective. In church and in politics, we have to work at offering thoughtful alternatives, expressed with civility and respect.