

The Duck at prayer

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue



FAMILY DINNER: Patriarch Phil Robertson (center) and family sit down to pray and eat together at the end of each episode. A&E Television Networks, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

To enliven a sermon recently, I quoted a line from *Duck Dynasty*, one of the most-watched shows on cable TV. In case you haven't noticed, the Duck is ruling the world. Three of the top 25 books on the *New York Times* best-seller list are written by members of the dynasty to which *Duck Dynasty* refers—the Robertson family.

Si Robertson's *Si-cology 1* has hit no. one, with his brother Phil's *Happy Happy Happy* close behind. In the South it is hard to pass through a hardware store or even a convenience store without running a gauntlet of *Duck Dynasty* merchandise. Rumors suggest that the show's star, Willie Robertson, may run for Congress.

Duck Dynasty, which is in its fourth year on A&E, is a highly scripted reality show. Think *The Beverly Hillbillies* meets *Jersey Shore*.

The Robertsons are real people, but the situations and the comedic timing suggest that the shows are carefully contrived. Every episode joins a campy scenario (a cookoff between men and women, failed efforts to lose weight, fishing contests) to interviews with cast members.

The Robertsons struck it rich with a company that makes duck calls, Duck Commander, which they run in their hometown of West Monroe, Louisiana. The show makes a lot of the difficulty of owning a family business. Bad employees aren't fired because it's impossible to fire members of the family. Willie worries that the family's wealth will mean that his children will be more yuppie than redneck.

While the Robertsons hunt, fish and frolic in the swamp, they have cash to spare, and the incongruity between their money and their redneck lifestyle provides most of the entertainment. That and the beards. The Robertson men almost all have long hair and long beards. While they proudly refer to themselves as rednecks, I'm not imagining much sunburn.

Part of the success of the show is its well-scripted comedy. Jase Robertson is the hilarious younger brother employed by Willie, who is CEO of Duck Commander. Jase uses self-deprecating, laid-back humor to express his family's realities: "The girls don't get this whole redneck feng shui thing we got going on," he complains.

Uncle Si has grabbed a lot of screen time as the family's nonsense-spewing guru. In one episode, the men slyly ask their braggart uncle why he doesn't know a famous NASCAR driver. He replies, "Hey, look here, Jack, 20

million people in the world, am I supposed to know them all?”

When Willie takes his 16-year-old and as yet unbearded son to buy a car, he first talks to his friend Mountain Man, and then to a man named Squirrel. Willie laments to the camera, “I have got to start dealing with people who have honest-to-God first names.”

In another episode, Phil takes his grandsons squirrel hunting and returns home to peel the furry hides off the carcasses. Viewers and the younger Robertsons stare at a massive, disgusting bowl of skinless squirrel. But when Phil feeds his wife, Miss Kay, the matriarch of the Robertsons, a bite, she purrs with contentment. “Don’t marry little yuppy girls,” comments Phil. “Find you a woman who will eat squirrel brains.”

Phil is the Robertson most likely to be quoted approvingly in conservative Christian circles. He very occasionally recites culture war talking points. He also loathes beavers and sets off dynamite in swamps to defeat them. (“Fire in the hole!”)

Most of the show derives its humor from class incongruities. Every episode opens with ZZ Top’s song “Sharp Dressed Man,” played over a sequence of bling—gold rings, canes, tuxedos—transferred to the world of camouflage design and shorts.

Race is perhaps a more troubling aspect of the show—troubling in the fact of its absence. West Monroe is depicted as a town without minorities, despite the fact that in real life it has a large African-American population.

At the end of every show, a mandolin melody kicks in, and Phil blesses the food the family has gathered to eat: frog legs, fish, deer meat, even road kill. Yes, this popular show has a prayer in every episode. The Robertsons attend White’s Ferry Road Church of Christ, though the denomination is not identified on screen. The church is in West Monroe and appears more suburban than swampland in style. Brother Alan, who first turns up in season three, is a minister and the only beardless son.

Several Robertsons have complained off camera that their religiosity is not fully depicted by the show’s producers. What is depicted of church is pretty ordinary: preparing food for festivals, dressing up like Santa to present gifts. In a speech on YouTube, Willie says that he has gotten more criticism of the show from fellow church members than from anyone else. Though it’s a show that most of America would find extraordinarily pietistic, a lot of church folks find it not pious enough. Willie encourages them to take the long view: the Duck is having a cultural impact for Jesus.

Duck Dynasty is mostly just funny. Tune in to see what people are watching and to know what youth are referring to when they say, “Happy happy happy.”