

Commentary: Reclaiming enthusiasm

May 23, 2018

Ready for a vocabulary lesson?

Stagnant. Boring. Aimless. Tired. Tepid.

What do these words describe? You? Your minister? Your church? Your Sunday School class? Your career? All too often, I hear ministers and parishioners alike using such words to describe all of the above. Far too many of God's people and God's churches find themselves with a shortage of passion and energy for the journey before them.

Many churches seem to be going in circles, without energy and lacking a sense of missional direction. Ministers talk about burnout and seem to have lost their focus. A sense of calling and passion has slipped away. Laypersons show up without preparing to worship. Life at the church becomes predictable. New ideas and suggestions meet with practiced indifference. Is it any wonder that eventually parishioners talk about their pastor, and ministers describe their congregation using such words?

Do you know how we got our word "enthusiasm"? It comes from the Greek, and is a blend of two words, one being *en* (in) and the other *theos* (God). Enthusiasm, as originally defined, means **having God within us**. Of course, over time, enthusiasm came to mean "any rapturous inspiration like that caused by a god." Today, we are more likely to use this word to describe our feelings about a favorite athletic team or hobby than to describe what God is doing in and through us.

Perhaps it is time we revisit this word and reflect on its origins. The truth that God within us sparks enthusiasm and ardor is both biblical and

healthy. When faith is healthy, it begins within and is passionate, heartfelt, spontaneous and authentic. It is less concerned with meeting the expectations of others and more concerned with giving witness to the One who gives us purpose and direction. It is when our religious practice flows out of guilt or meaningless repetition or thoughtless habit that it is thin, shallow and unable to hold up to the demands of life in the 21st century.

When our life in Christ flows out of a personal relationship that defines everything about us and gives us a center to build the rest of life around, enthusiasm is inevitable. Christ as the organizing center of all of life not only holds life together, it gives life meaning beyond the ups and downs of circumstances. Without that deep indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our congregation and the individuals who make up the congregation, we are prone to become like the shallow soil of the parable of the sower . . . unable to root deeply and endure the inevitable dry season.

Individuals can be enthusiastic, but so can congregations. When the body of Christ is "*en theos*," that is, when local church life is grounded in God's presence rather than ritual or personality or practice, then healthy enthusiasm becomes a defining trait of God's people. The healthiest churches I know are not clergy-focused or program-focused or doctrine-focused. They are Christ-focused. Whether it be acts of worship or mission endeavors or teaching opportunities or fellowship events or outreach efforts, the persistent emotion underneath them all is a deep and authentic enthusiasm.

Emerson had it right: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm."

When God's people are filled with the character and spirit of Christ, then great things are possible. Check your vocabulary, and let's see if we can inject some new words into our conversations: passion, energy, enthusiasm, meaning, purpose. Those words describe the kind of church and church

leader our world needs today.

Dr. William “Bill” Wilson is the director and founder of [The Center for Healthy Churches](#), where this article originally appeared.