

*All Wet?*  
A Baptism of the Lord Sermon  
Matthew 3:13-17  
January 13, 2008  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

I read a disturbing article in *USA Today* this past week that had disturbing news for the institutional church. In a new survey of U. S. adults who never darken the door of the church, even on Christmas or Easter, 72% say that though they believe that God actually exists, the problem is that the “church is ‘full of hypocrites.’ Indeed, 44% agree with the statement ‘Christians get on my nerves.’”<sup>1</sup>

Ed Stetzer, director of research, noted that the most disturbing findings for the institutional church is that “we no longer have a home-field advantage as Christians in this culture.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, 79% say “Christianity today is more about organized religion than loving God and loving people.”<sup>3</sup> The study finds that non-attenders “do not believe the church is being very successful on fulfilling the two great commandments – to love God and love your neighbor. ‘When they look at churches....,’ says Scott McConnell, ‘they don’t see people living out the faith.’”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, a high percentage of those who participated in the survey sees the face of the institution when they think of church or attend on rare occasions. They see an organization that is more interested in self-preservation and holding on to entrenched power and authority than in living out the mandate of what the organization says it believes in. In other words, they see the church as “all wet.”

For all of us who are invested in the church, hearing studies like this are always disturbing. It’s easy to become defensive and point out the hypocrisy of those who criticize without joining in to solve the problems that face the church and the world. But if we can step back and let go of our need to zap them in return, it’s important to try to understand what the news is telling us about ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Faith found outside church,” *USA Today*, Wednesday, January 9, 2008, 4D, [http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20080109/d\\_unchurched09.art.htm?loc=interstitialskip](http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20080109/d_unchurched09.art.htm?loc=interstitialskip).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

This research is not fresh news, of course. It confirms what surveys have been telling us for the last 30 years – that there’s a big authenticity gap for the church in terms of integrity and witness in the midst of modern day life.

Today’s lesson tells the wonderful story of how a prophet named John meets a stranger at the Jordan who comes to be baptized. Biblical scholar Eugene Boring notes though Jesus and John the Baptist had no previous contact with each other in Matthew’s Gospel, somehow John’s spiritual intuition tells him that the one standing before him is his superior.<sup>5</sup> He tries to give the water to Jesus and says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus will have none of it and submits himself to John and, of course, God, to be plunged beneath the waters.

In the witness of that moment, a spectacular sequence of divine revelation takes place – the opens open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and alights on Jesus, and a voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

In many ways, John the Baptist who was a widely recognized prophetic figure of the day suddenly felt changed as well. Though he was the spiller of the water, he felt splashed in it, too, and somehow felt accountable to the one he has just baptized. Bishop William Willimon says, “To be a Christian is to be somebody who understands that our lives are answerable to a higher standard of judgment than our own. We are accountable, held to account to the standards of God’s righteousness.”<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to say that righteousness – or what I call getting all wet in the waters of the kingdom of heaven – “means to live life in congruence with the demands of a just God, to see our lives, not as our own, to use as we please, but rather as God’s gifts, to be used as God pleases. When we do right, when we hold one another to account, when we urge one another to be all that God intends for us to be, and courageously allow others to demand

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<sup>5</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 160. Dr. Boring is Professor of New Testament at the Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>6</sup> William Willimon, “No Problem,” Sermon Archive, Duke Chapel, January 10, 1999, <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=29>. Bishop Willimon, who preached this sermon while serving as Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, is now the Episcopal Leader of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church.

the best of us, we are fulfilling the righteousness made possible in Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reformation, said it just as powerfully but very simply. In moments of despair and doubt and desolation, Martin Luther would say to himself as a reminder, “I was baptized.” That single affirmation – “I was baptized!” – grounded Luther and made him aware of God’s grace and renewal on a daily basis.

Going back to the survey that I mentioned earlier, all of it is not bad news for the church. The research shows that “78% would ‘be willing to listen’ to someone tell ‘what he or she believed about Christianity... And 71% agreed that ‘believing in Jesus makes a positive difference in a person’s life.’”<sup>8</sup> The lead researcher said that what surprised him is “the openness of the hard-core unchurched to the message of God and Christianity... It’s a personal thing, not an institutional thing. It’s a matter of starting conversations.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps, we need workshops on how churches can be less hypocritical and annoying, as some church growth experts have suggested. Perhaps, what we need is something more direct, more spiritual, more foundational – like how to start a conversation about matters of faith with those who are waiting to hear from us.

Philip Yancey tells the story of a friend of his who went swimming in a large lake at dusk: “As he was paddling at a leisurely pace about a hundred yards offshore, a freak evening fog rolled in across the water. Suddenly he could see nothing: no horizon, no landmarks, no objects or lights on shore. Because the fog diffused all light, he could not even make out the direction of the setting sun.”<sup>10</sup>

Yancey writes that his friend splashed about in absolute panic. “He would start off in one direction, lose confidence, and turn 90 degrees to the right. Or left – it made no difference which way he turned. He could feel his heart racing uncontrollably. He would stop and float, trying to conserve energy and force himself to breathe slower. Then he would blindly strike out again. At last he heard a faint voice calling from shore. He pointed his body to the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Grossman, Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1988), 203.

sounds and followed them to safety.”<sup>11</sup>

Today is the Sunday in the year when the church intentionally remembers that it needs to get all wet in the amazing grace-filled waters of our baptism in Jesus Christ – drenched, gloriously dripping wet, in to him to whom we are accountable and in whom we are all saved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.