

Depth Perception

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Do I have to join?

Recent travel placed me in such far-flung states as Connecticut, Washington, Illinois, Colorado, Florida and Ohio. This gives occasion to read a variety of local newspapers filled with articles on local elections. It also means getting to see a lot of campaign signs in front lawns and street corners. My conclusion: this year's crop of candidates would prefer you know their name but not their party. You won't find it in the stump speeches and it is not printed on the banners. The sentiment seems to be: "*I'm with you, not the party in power. I may be a Democrat/Republican, but I am not affiliated with my party's agenda.*"

This shedding of labels is curiously similar to the many congregations that chose to shed their external denominational identity, doing so because they believed it a hindrance to attracting new adherents. In my many conversations with church leaders who chose to do this, it was not rejection of a faith heritage that drove this, but bad experiences in being associated with sectarian or inexplicable behavior at the extremes of that faith tradition. They wanted to remove obstacles from accomplishing their mission--the same mission that originally brought their faith tradition into being.

The major similarity between this political and religious shedding of labels is not so much their removal. Instead, it is the hostility it brings from those more committed to the heritage (or political platform) than to the founding mission. These hostile critics tend to come from power centers. They can't help but feel rejected as labels are shed and they tend to view those making these changes as disloyal troublemakers. A battle for the heart of the movement commences.

I point this out because it seems many of us seek to be stripped of the labels larger society assigns us. North Americans relish the freedom to determine who we are. What is happening politically and religiously seems to happen at the personal level too.

But the final chapter is not yet written. Yes, some may effectively reclaim lost or distorted mission of their church or political party, but personally we may be in grave danger of being nameless, rootless, passionless persons who prefer to hide rather than constructively participate in the increasingly angry society that surrounds us.

-mark l vincent

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