

One New Book for the Preacher

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David E. Campbell and Robert D. Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 673 pages.

“Exactly who will show up this Sunday to hear the sermon?” Every preacher asks this question at some point during the long and solitary work of sermon preparation. Good preachers pose it often. They will also ask plenty of questions regarding the biblical text that is staring them in the eye. Yet if all of one’s energies are spent exegeting a scriptural passage, and one has little clue how to exegete parishioners’ lives, a fruitful sermon seems unlikely.

Ministers are smart to ask themselves, as they do the hard work of preparing to preach, “What is preoccupying the minds of these worshipers? What are they hungry for in a deep down way? Surely they are arriving with expectations and assumptions. So, what are they? What do these listeners think of their neighbors? How religious or holy do they understand themselves to be? If it’s true there is a broken heart in every pew, what do the cracks inside these people look like?”

Questions that zero in on audience attitude and disposition are very appropriate. Unfortunately, there is no perfect way to answer them. A lot of guesswork is always involved. Guest preachers have it the worst. They must struggle to know the hearts and minds of completely unfamiliar people.

Along comes a major new resource to better acquaint preachers with their flock. David Campbell and Robert Putnam provide over 600 pages of ideas for pulpit ministers to contemplate. Their massive tome, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, is surely the most exhaustive study published to-date of twenty-first-century religious trends in America. If you open the book, be ready for scrupulous research. Prepare to appreciate graphs; more than 150 of them fill the pages. Enjoy writing that is meticulous and comprehensive, even if fact-driven and analytic in tone.

Campbell and Putnam’s multi-year research project outlines a host of characteristics and behaviors associated with people of faith in our day. Preachers will want to take special note of those that help interpret who might be sitting in the pew this Sunday. The rich findings are many, but some examples to inspire or give pause to preachers include the following.

On average, religious Americans are less tolerant than secular Americans when it comes to defending the civil liberties of opponents. As discouraging as this may be--the author’s call it “the darker side of religion’s link to citizenship”--it is well worth recognizing. Religious individuals tend to be less enthusiastic about tolerating political differences and dissent than their secular counterparts.

Not surprisingly, religiously based social networks are a powerful predictor of life satisfaction and overall happiness. Wise clergy will pay attention to the impact of religiously based social networks on parishioners’ lives. These networks, as defined by Campbell and Putnam, are comprised of elements like close friends at church, small

group participation within one's congregation, and frequency of talk about religious topics among family and friends.

As for neighborliness, Campbell and Putnam are convinced that the social component of religious community influences positive behavior toward others. Religious people who make a practice of belonging to a church are likely to engage in many more neighborly acts of kindness than fervent believers who prefer to pray alone and dissociate themselves from religious community.

The value of religious friendship brings to mind the somewhat imperfect (though still meaningful) distinction between belonging and believing. When it comes to the probability of religious people engaging in kind behavior toward their neighbors, a strong sense of belonging to a community of faith outweighs the motivating influence of adhering to a specific set of beliefs.

Most Americans are well acquainted with people who do not share their faith. In fact, two out of three are said to have at least one extended family member who is of another religion. Grudging acceptance of religious diversity is not the norm in America; explicit embrace is. So say the statistics.

Religiously observant Americans tend to volunteer more and give more generously than their secular neighbors. They are also more conscientious on citizenship fronts, engaging in civic responsibilities more readily than the rest of the population. Trust is high for religious people. They trust others more than their non-religious friends do, just as Americans trust religious people more than non-religious people.

Some of the Campbell and Putnam conclusions raise questions that deserve further exploration. If 44 percent of all Americans report saying grace before their meals, where are all these praying people hidden? I certainly do not see them in my own congregation, much less in other circles I frequent. Perhaps the key to accuracy here is the self-reporting element. Americans may believe they pray at mealtimes much more frequently than they actually do--a phenomenon that would correspond with how regularly Americans understand themselves to be in worship as compared with actual attendance figures.

A great deal of page space references what the authors call "churchgoing liberals" and "churchgoing conservatives." These do not seem to be especially helpful categories for meaningful conversation and analysis, even if some of the survey questions may have prompted their use. They present more ambiguity and confusion than clarity.

Puzzling to some readers will be the claim that Americans peaceably combine a high degree of religious devotion with extraordinary religious diversity. If this is true, how do we account for all of the interfaith tensions of recent years, particularly those connected with accepting Islam in America?

The authors' data suggests that people tend to sort themselves into congregations where their lives will align with other people who share similar political perspective. In other words, people will gravitate toward churches filled with others who vote like they do. This "self-reinforcement" strategy for choosing friends may be true in many circles of life. It is not supposed to be true in the church, at least not in a church guided by injunctions of the New Testament. One would hope church leaders are busy striving for a plurality of perspective. I would be hard pressed to label the congregation I serve with a uniform political persuasion. Surely our community of faith cannot be an exception.

The sample vignettes, or case studies of particular congregations, seem pecu-

liarily chosen. While they take up a good deal of narrative space in *American Grace*, they represent a minuscule sampling of congregational life in the United States. One wonders if selecting this odd assortment of congregations really contributes to the project's findings in as many helpful ways as the authors intend.

Perhaps the most notable gap in the book is the absence of any reference to the impact of social media on American church life today. We may cut the authors some slack on this score, given the timing of the book's release. Still, one would think there would be at least a passing reference. The bulk of the Campbell/Putnam research was conducted in 2006 and 2007, with more than 3,000 respondents participating. The compilation of the survey data and the written conclusions emerged throughout 2008 and 2009. The book rolled off the press in 2010.

At the start of 2009, there were 42 million Facebook users in North America. By the start of 2012, that number will have risen to 180 million. One in every nine people on earth now uses Facebook. Fifty percent of the 800 million users on this planet log in every day. The average user has 130 friends. Fifty percent of young people today report they receive their news through Facebook.

I, for one, think the impact of social media may be the biggest game changer in decades for church attendance and church belonging. Facebook delivers an instant sense of community to users hungry for it. "Who needs Christian community," one may ask in all sincerity, "if I can be religious and feel that many of my social needs are being met online?" A Facebook user may connect with scores of people in far flung places any time of day or night. Even when a user is not logged in, there is still the personal impression that one's networks and affiliations are expansive. The individual interactions within these networks may bear little resemblance to the embodied face-to-face contacts with which we formerly defined valuable human interaction, but people connecting on Facebook have one important thing in common. They still call each other *friends*.

In the final analysis, those committed to the preaching task may resonate with the most dominant theme in *American Grace*. There is a high degree of religious fluidity in our country. A lot of mixing and switching is constantly going on. People find religion, drop out of religion, and reconnect with some new expression of faith with growing regularity. It's a dynamic reality guaranteed to keep even the best preachers on their toes.