

Peculiar Community



Good and Beautiful Community Chapter 1: The Peculiar Community

Opener: What was one time during the past week when you really sensed that God was present and at work in or through your life?

Read Chapter Excerpt

- 1) What is your earliest recollection of church? How do you think it shaped your understanding of God and of sharing life with others? (what Christian community should be about)
- 2) Has there ever been a time in your life when you experienced a “good and beautiful community”? What was your experience like?
- 3) Read aloud the Athenagoras quote. What is most striking to you about his description of the Christians? What would he write about Christians in our community at UVM?
- 4) The author gives us this description of God’s peculiar people:

For example, if I (by the power of the Spirit) begin telling the truth in my life, I will become an oddity. If I can learn to slow down, live without being ruled by anger and actually pray for people who try to cut me down, I will be considered weird, because this world does not work this way. Only people who are steeped in the kingdom of God can begin living this way. There are far too few.

Later he quotes Cornel West on how Christians should be maladjusted to the world: “There have always been Christians who are well-adjusted to greed, well-adjusted to fear, well-adjusted to bigotry.” The author adds, “All Christians ought to be maladjusted to things like injustice, greed, materialism, and racism.”

Do you agree that Christians should be ‘peculiar’ and ‘maladjusted’? Why or why not?

The author writes, “The God that Jesus reveals is peculiar.” What is your reaction to this statement?

- 5) Read Romans 12:1-2.
- 6) Create a list of words and phrases from this passage that point to the peculiarity of Christians. Explain why you have chosen those words.
- 7) What does the phrase “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” mean? How do we do that?
- 8) Why would the renewing of our minds lead us to not be “conformed to this world”?
- 10) Close by reading 1 John 4:7-12. “The ethic is simple: as God is, so should his people be. If we do not love, we must not know God. Because God’s love was revealed among us in the person of Jesus that we might live through him.”

Challenge: Do four acts of peculiarity this week - acts of kindness or generosity maladjustment. For example: Take someone’s car keys and wash their car. Shovel your neighbor’s driveway. Be intentional in a conversation, inviting people to talk about their lives. Clean up your house or apartment without being asked. Pay for the person behind you at a drive-in. Intentionally go to a business or restaurant in a part of town that is struggling economically. Let others go ahead of you in line.

Excerpt from *The Good and Beautiful Community* Chapter 1: “The Peculiar Community”

If a CEO or an accountant is caught in an adulterous affair, it is not likely to make the news at all. But when a pastor is caught in an affair or embezzling money, it is a big deal. Which leads us to the question why. Why is it newsworthy if a religious figure has a moral failure? Because they ought not to do that. In other words, we expect them to be different. Why? Because they claim to be different, and for the most part they intend to be different.

And quite often they are different. The true narrative is this: Christians are not always different, but they ought to be, and often are.

I first came across the idea of the peculiarity of God’s gathered people from a passage in the King James Bible: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

I love the word peculiar. Dictionaries define it as “distinctive,” “odd,” “strange,” and “weird.” In a word, peculiar means different. Different from the ordinary, the common, from everyone else. Christians are peculiar in that they are different from everyone else.

But are apprentices of Jesus really so different? I believe we are, or at least we ought to be. For example, if I (by the power of the Spirit) begin telling the truth in my life, I will become an oddity. If I can learn to slow down, live without being ruled by anger and actually pray for people who try to cut me down, I will be considered weird, because this world does not work this way. Only people who are steeped in the kingdom of God can begin living this way. There are far too few.

To be sure, there are non-apprentices who tell the truth, live without anger and can be nice to people who are not nice to them. Christ-followers do not have exclusive rights to the virtues. The difference is in how and why we live this way. We do so because we are following the example of Jesus, our teacher, and are being led by the Holy Spirit, our strength and comforter. And we are living in the strong and sustaining Kingdom of God.

The Epistle to Diognetus (c. AD 120-200) describes how Christians are alike - and different - from others: *The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practice any eccentric way of life... They pass their lives in whatever township - Greek or foreign - each man’s lot has determined; and conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits. Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable and even surprising. For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like transients... Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh; their days are passed on earth, but their citizenship is above in the heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives they transcend the laws. They show love to all men - and all men persecute them. They are misunderstood, and condemned; yet by suffering death they are quickened into life. They are poor, yet making many rich; lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance... They repay curses with blessings, and abuse with courtesy. For the good they do, they suffer stripes as evildoers.*

Why are Christians peculiar? It is because our God is peculiar. The God we love and serve is extraordinarily different than the gods humans design. When the Greeks and Romans created their pantheon of gods and goddesses, they looked remarkably like humans - often at their worst. Their gods lied and cheated and murdered. They committed adultery and punished each other out of anger and jealousy. The stories of the gods are fascinating to read. There’s lots of intrigue.

The God that Jesus reveals is peculiar. This God loves humans so much that he became one of them and died for them. This God forgives when it is not deserved. This God is generous, never vengeful. If the God of Jesus displays wrath, it is only because this God is good and loving, and is rightly against sin because it hurts his beloved children. No one could have made this story up. There is nothing like it in all of religious literature. That is because in all of the other religions there is no God like the one Jesus revealed.