

### The Changing Church: *We are the Weird Ones Now*

Think of a group or organization to which you belong. Can you identify the “oddball” in the group? You know, that person who doesn’t quite fit. Maybe it’s how he dresses. Maybe it’s how she interacts socially. Maybe it’s the unusual way that person speaks or a set of beliefs that sets him apart. When that person is in the group, you are reminded of the old Sesame Street song: “One of these things is not like the others...”

I hope the peculiar person finds acceptance in your group. I hope you treat him with loving kindness and appreciate his uniqueness. However, if we’re honest, most of us will confess difficulty in relating to such people. We like sameness. We like it when everything and everyone fits. Outliers make us nervous. Sometimes they exasperate us or make us angry. We’re tempted to think of them as backward or rude or uncooperative. Their presence is a threat to the unanimity we desperately want. We’ll grudgingly concede that they have a right to their peculiarities, but the least they can do is be low-key about it and stay out of the way of the rest of us.

Now here’s the point I wish to make about the changing church: *We are the oddballs of our society!* A Christian with a biblical worldview and the desire to live out that worldview is an outlier in America today. If we believe and attempt to practice what followers of Christ have always believed and practiced, then *we are the weird ones now*. Orthodoxy is peculiar. We are not the majority. We are very much out of step with the times. And remember the challenges we have dealing with the oddballs in our groups? *That’s exactly how the majority culture feels about us*. Let that sink in for a moment.

I find that believers often take one of three paths concerning their oddball status.

*Some refuse to accept reality.* They are convinced there is still a “moral majority” of people like them who just need to rise up and reassert their political dominance. They think we’re just one election and a few good Supreme Court justices away from setting things right again in “Christian” America. We’re not, and we move further away from majority status with each passing generation. Consider this: Lifeway estimates that only 15% of the Millennial generation, born 1980 – 2000, are Christians as you and I would define the term ([thomrainer.com](http://thomrainer.com), “Six Ways Millennials are Shaping the Church,” 12.11.13). This is the largest generation in U.S. history – some 80 million strong – and roughly 20% of them are not even yet voting age. There is every reason to believe that the majority electorate will continue to become less like us as the years go by. But why should politics be the church’s hope anyway?

*Some are defiant.* They know the reality and are very mad about it. They tend to see the church as a place to “circle the wagons” and fend off the attackers. They wish to have very little to do with the folks “out there” in the cultural mainstream. These are our brethren who have both a fish and an angry bumper sticker on their cars.

*Some seek to change their oddball status.* It is uncomfortable for most people to be so different than the majority, so some are trying to fit in. They keep their Christianity in a separate compartment from the rest of their lives, if indeed they keep it at all. A vague, inoffensive spirituality will get you much fewer dirty looks from the majority culture.

There is a better path than the three above. Paul tells the peculiar, oddballs-in-their-culture Colossian church: “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (4:5-6). In saying this the apostle was basically restating Jesus’ charge to all his disciples: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Rather than denial, defiance, or disowning the faith, I think it’s time for the church to *deploy!* Here are some characteristics of a church that understands the new situation and desires to make the best use of the time.

1. *Purpose:* They have a broadly-owned mission statement that shapes everything they do. They have clarity about why they exist and the main objectives they are to pursue.
2. *Identity:* They see themselves as missionaries living in a mission field.
3. *Movement:* They have a “go to them” rather than a “come to us” mindset. They are organized and resourced to move members into the community and beyond to serve in the name of Jesus Christ (the “incarnational” model of church). They have gotten over the illusion that there are lots of unreached people out there who are eager to go to church (the “attractational” model of church).
4. *Metrics:* They no longer think of success in terms of “how many times a week can we get people to come to church.” They think of it in terms of “what key factors make for a growing, on-mission disciple.” They define, strategize for, and measure those key factors.
5. *Focus:* The basic gospel is front and center in everything they do. The church’s message isn’t “modify your behavior” (i.e., a works-based message). The church’s message is Jesus (i.e., a grace-based message).
6. *Connected:* They join with strategic partners to carry out the Great Commission at each level of Acts 1:8, giving definition to their “Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Bottom line: It’s a losing strategy to keep doing church-as-usual and hope that the culture comes back to us. Our situation has changed and we need to change with it. Church, *deploy!*