



STRANGE THINGS ABOUT THE CHURCH

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Greetings and welcome. Pure Christianity has never been the mainstream of society. Sometimes people suggest that America is a Christian nation. While it may be true that many of the founders acknowledged God's existence, even professed Christianity, and leaned to the word of God for principles upon which to build the framework of the country, that doesn't mean that Christianity, as it is revealed in the scriptures, was universally accepted, and practiced. Throughout history, and that includes American history, the teachings of Christ and His apostles have run counter to the popular culture. This was the case in the beginning days of the revealed Christian faith and continues to be the case today.

In 1 Peter 4:1-5, we read: ***"Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."***

Peter said that those who live in sin think the peculiar lifestyle of the followers of Christ is strange. Would the world say that about you? Some seem to think that the way to win the world is to be like it; to make the world comfortable around the church. But the opposite is true. It is human nature to conform to our environment, but the bible teaches that true believers are to be different, so much so, that it shocks the non-believing world. The strangeness Peter speaks of does not mean weird or bizarre behavior or being different merely for the sake of being different. It means that our lifestyle is to have been so radically changed by the Christ that the world does not understand it and is surprised by it.

The first epistle of Peter, possibly written in Rome, was addressed to Christians scattered throughout parts of the empire. They were enduring some form of suffering because of their faith. Many believe that the fiery trial the saints were encountering was persecution by the emperor Nero. There were

various campaigns of persecution that were waged against the church in the first century by the Romans and it is believed that Christians were living through such a time when Peter wrote to encourage and embolden them. Regardless of what political opposition they may have been encountering, they were also dealing with the same kind of persecution that Christians of every age have had to face in one degree or another – and that is the scorn of their unbelieving neighbors. Some hated the Christian faith then, just as many do today, because it is a rebuke of their sinful lives. Jesus once said that the people of His kingdom were “the salt of the earth” meaning that Christians are a preserving and seasoning or influential force in a perishing world. Despite its positive qualities, if salt contacts a wound, it stings and it burns. That’s the reaction many have when they encounter the Christian influence. The world is not going to applaud you for being a Christian and you are not going to find favor with men by following Jesus. In fact, Paul plainly said in 2 Timothy 3:12, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

One of the themes of Peter’s first epistle, was for believers not to give the world reason to criticize their faith and Christian character. They were to be true to their convictions and to stand in contradistinction to the immoral, pagan world around them. He said in chapter 2, verses 19-20 that if we suffer for doing wrong, we get what we deserve, but that it is commendable before God when His people are willing to suffer for doing what is right and being true to the faith. Christ thus suffered and we should be willing to follow His example. He then said in chapter 3:13-16, “And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. **“AND DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEIR THREATS, NOR BE TROUBLED.”** But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.” In other words, our lives should be as powerful of a defense of the Christian religion as the words we speak or oral arguments we put forth. Our conduct alone, should shame those who would hurl insult and accusation at the church.

There is little doubt that the shrinking influence of the church in the modern American culture (and many other cultures around the world) is not a lack of evidence or lack of a good argument or defense of the faith; it is the superficial, hypocritical, and sometimes outright scandalous lives being lived by those who profess the Christian faith. Ironically, it’s also the compromise some have made with the world which, has not drawn people to Christ, but rather diluted the message of Christ to unbelievers. The Christian’s life should be so different from that of the people around them that the world looks upon the Christian as a strange specimen. In fact, let me just state it as plainly as I can: if the world thinks your “cool” for being a Christian, you’re not much of a Christian. If the world looks at your life and doesn’t see much difference between you and them, you’re not a good example of the true faith of Christ. Christ makes a radical change in the hearts and lives of those who follow Him.

Now, Peter speaks of that in the passage we began with today. 1 Peter 4, beginning in verse 1 says: ***“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking***

evil of you. They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. When Peter wrote “they think it strange...” he used a verb in the original language which according to Thayer’s Greek lexicon meant “to surprise or astonish by the strangeness and novelty of a thing... or to be shocked.” No longer do we do the things we once did but rather such a change has taken place in the life of the baptized believer, that the people around us are astonished.

First, Peter points to the moral code by which Christians live. He names sins of the flesh and sins characteristic of the past lives of the average worldly person and says the world is surprised that we no longer fulfill these lusts and desires of the flesh. Look in verse 3. He mentions “lewdness” or lasciviousness. That refers to shameless and sexually suggestive conduct whether it be in word, or in action, or in dress. The word can refer to suggestive bodily movements such as you see in much of the dancing that takes place. We see so much of that on television, on stage, even in common social and school functions until we no longer think that much of it. We have become desensitized to something we used to warn people about and preach against. But Paul says that such behavior characterizes the pagan who lives to gratify the flesh – not the person who has been transformed by Christ and is trying to live a clean and holy life. Of course, the world will make fun of you for that. Some who claim to be Christians will make fun of you for that too.

Peter also mentions “lusts”. This refers to hidden sins of the heart that can then manifest themselves in our behavior. It refers to unclean and dirty thoughts and desires. It would include pornography; unholy entertainment that excites unlawful desire and tempts one to do immoral things. Christians are to strive to be pure and holy in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. David, who knew all too well the destructive effect of lust later wrote in Psalms 101:3-4 “I will set nothing wicked before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; It shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will not know wickedness.” People think your strange if you refuse to go sit in a movie theater or watch the trending shows on television that parade nudity, vulgarity, sexual immorality, and innuendo before people. Does the world think you’re strange?

He then says “drunkenness”. The King James says “excess of wine” which is often used to justify drinking, just not too much, but that’s reading more into the Greek word than is there. He goes on to list “revelries” and “drinking parties”. Christians aren’t to be part of those occasions. We’re not to engage in celebrations and parties and social affairs where the liquor is flowing and where people are losing their inhibitions and throwing off restraint. Again, though, if you refuse to be part of those kinds of things, especially in a time where our culture is nearly swimming in alcohol and now recreational drugs, you’re looked at as strange. I’m sure there’s someone listening now who is smirking and laughing (including religious people) because it sounds so extreme and so radical and so outdated to take such a view. Peter expected the church of his day to take that view because he said the outside world would look at them with shock and often contempt for their refusal to have any part of it. In fact, there are things about the truly converted person that many professing Christians find shocking. In fact, it’s disheartening to see so many who claim to

represent and even preach the Christian faith spending their time acting as apologists for the world and its behavior and in effect, tearing DOWN the walls of distinction between the church and the world instead of pointing those distinctions out and encouraging saints to be different. But some of us do believe we are to be different – so much so, the world is taken aback, and shocked by the holy lives believers strive to live.

Then he says “abominable idolatries”. These Christians had come out of the pagan world and the false and often lewd worship that took place in idol temples. Their coming to Christ meant that they left the tables of idols and came instead to the table of the Lord. Paul referred to that very thing in 1 Corinthians 10. Peter says, “In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation speaking evil of you.” The “flood of dissipation” is a distasteful word picture Peter uses. Gareth Reese in his commentary likens it to an overflowing sewer and that sinners were swimming in such filth and because Christians refused to join them and be polluted by the filth of the culture, they were being maligned and spoken evil of. Does the world malign you? Not for your political views... not for your socio-economic position... but because of the holy life you strive to live? Do your friends, co-workers, classmates, neighbors, maybe even family members think you strange because of the clean life you live?

And then, the world thinks Christians are strange, not only because of our moral ethics, but our social ethics... how we deal with others and treat others. If we're truly living a Christian life, the world will be just as shocked by how we treat other people, even those who do us wrong or seek to do us harm. This is the implication of Peter's admonition to those suffering saints. It may have been tempting to lash out or it may have been tempting to compromise and deny their faith. Peter says to simply live a humble and sincere life before a hateful and opposing world that was seeking to harm them. Let their defense be a MEEK and humble defense of the gospel and the kind of life produced by the gospel. Now, when you live by that kind of ethic and you live as Jesus taught us to live in the Sermon on the Mount, the world will find that shocking. What is the rule by which most people in the world live? Is it not: “you do right by me, and I'll do right by you?” Is it not: “if you do this or the other to me then I have the right to do the same unto you?” Well, Jesus said while most people live by the code “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, the kingdom-seeker is different. When one smites him, he turns the other cheek. When one tries to take his tunic, he gives him his cloak also. When one compels him to go with him one mile – he instead goes two. And this culminates in the what is perhaps the hardest commandment for any of us to obey: Matthew 5:43-48 "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." That's an ethic the world can hardly comprehend and its one of the primary ways our life and our character should astonish the unbeliever.

Finally, our depth of commitment to Christ should astonish the world. You know, you can get by with claiming to be a Christian today if you just don't mean that too seriously and as long as you don't go overboard. The name "Christian" has been so diluted in today's culture that it really doesn't mean very much. But listen to what it meant to Peter in 1 Peter 4:16. "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter." Christianity is not a title that one adopts to describe their religious preferences or even their superficial beliefs. The name Christian implies a deeply devoted follower (which is what the word means) - a deeply devoted follower of Christ to the point of suffering for His sake. There is a devotion and commitment to Christ that people see as strange, especially in our Laodicean culture of lukewarm, nominal, pseudo-Christianity. So much so, that even being dedicated to the things of God in matters like church attendance often makes the unbeliever and the pseudo-believer alike scratch their heads. For example, the Lord's Day, Sunday, is a sacred day in the life of the Christian. The world doesn't respect, much less understand that. They don't understand people being so committed to Christ that they will put themselves out or give up important things to seek the things of Christ first in their lives.

Many churches, for example, have a roll. And the number of names on that roll often differs greatly from the number on the attendance board on Sunday. That's because many people work or they play or they vacation, or they sleep in on Sunday. Hebrews 10:25 teaches that Christians are not to forsake the assembling of themselves with other Christians (as some were making a habit of doing) but rather they were to regularly meet to encourage one another and worship the Lord together. I know of many Christians who have turned down exciting trips, because they couldn't assemble with other faithful Christians and worship in the way the bible teaches. I've known many Christians who have turned down jobs and even careers because it would prevent them from assembling at the Lord's Table on Sunday. I've known many Christians who went hours out of their way on some trip or delayed their plans (like Paul did in Acts 20:7) so that they could meet with a biblical church and break bread on the first day of the week. And the world thinks that's strange! Some Christians think that's strange. But so be it.

Do the people among whom you live look with astonishment when they see the purity of your life? When they see that you won't behave like they do; go to the same places they go to; dress in the same way they do? What about when they see your attitude toward those who hate you and would do you wrong? What about in your depth of commitment to the Lord that you will not only sacrifice and go without and do without to faithfully serve Him, and even be willing to suffer for Him? If not, your life is not so different from theirs, and perhaps you need to question whether you're even trying to be a Christian. The world thought Christ was strange. The world thought his disciples were strange. The world thought the early church was strange. And those who follow Jesus today will be seen as strange by an unbelieving and godless world as well.

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