

Are You a Christian Weirdo?

According to the apostle Peter's first letter, labeling Christians as "winsome weirdos" is not only linguistically alliterative; it is also exegetically accurate. The implications for our cultural moment in America are crucial.

I have especially in mind 1 Peter 4:3–4:

"The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you."

Two statements stand out: "they are *surprised*," and "they *malign* you." The word here for "surprised" (Greek *xenizontai*) is translated "strange things" in Acts 17:20 ("You *bring some strange* things to our ears"). It's built on the word for *strange, foreign, or unfamiliar* (*xenos*).

Eight verses, both the verb (*xenizesthe*) and the adjective (*xenou*) forms are used to describe the persecution of Christians: "Beloved, do not be *surprised* at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something *strange* were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

We might paraphrase by saying: "Don't think it strange (4:12) when they think you are strange (4:4)."

Sojourners and Exiles

The first sparks of the "fiery trial" are already flying as Peter writes. They include the "maligning" of Christians in verse 4. The word translated "malign" is *blasphemeo*—from which we get our English word *blaspheme*. The Greek dictionary (BDAG) defines it as, "slander, revile, defame, speak irreverently/impiously/disrespectfully of or about."

What, then, is the situation as a whole?

Peter has already identified the Christians as “elect exiles” (1 Peter 1:1), whom he urges “as *sojourners and exiles* to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). The entire Christian life is “the time of your *exile*” (1 Peter 1:17). In other words, we are “strangers (*xenoi*) and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

The implication of this “foreign” status of Christians among the cultures of the world is that the new birth (1 Peter 1:3, 23) has given us new desires (1 Peter 1:14; 2:2) that no longer match “what the Gentiles want to do” (1 Peter 4:3). The result is a disruption of whom we literally “run with” (verse 4). And this disruption causes our associates to be “surprised.” That is, they think it “strange” that we are not running with them into the same “sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry” (1 Peter 4:3).

Weirdos

This reaction to our new *strangeness* is so strong that they “malign” (*blaphemountes*) us. This is where I see the idea of “weirdo.” Their response to our “strangeness” is not mild or respectful. It is strong and severe. The word “malign” does *not* mean they say: “We all have our preferences, and we can live and let live with mutual respect.” No. “Malign,” together with “see as strange,” means they are using strong language to insult the Christians. The label “weirdo” would be among the more mild results of our new way of life.

Other results of Christians becoming culturally alien “weirdos,” who are out of step with “what the Gentiles want to do” (1 Peter 4:3), include: being “reviled” (1 Peter 3:9, 16), being called “evildoers” (1 Peter 2:12), “suffering” (1 Peter 3:14, 17, 18), and being “beaten” (1 Peter 2:20).

Weirdness Embraced

What makes this situation remarkable is that the apostle Peter calls us to embrace it, but then to do so many good deeds, that at least some of our detractors are won over, and even glorify God because of our lives. Not because we become less “weird” but because we are *more* than weird.

First, notice that our “weirdness” is *called for* by Peter, and *embraced* by us. He says we are to “live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do” (1 Peter 4:2–3). In other words, we are to choose to march out of step with a culture which is driven by “human passions,” and in step with the “will of God.” Weirdness called for. Chosen. Embraced.

Winsome Weirdness

But, second, notice that, just as prominent in this book, is the call to be so busy with good deeds that those who malign us are “silenced,” “shamed,” and “converted.”

- “This is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to *silence the ignorance* of foolish people.” (1 Peter 2:15)
- “Have a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be *put to shame*” (1 Peter 3:16).
- “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and *glorify God* on the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:12)

Our aim in filling our lives with “good deeds” is that:

- Ignorant and foolish criticism of Christians would be revealed and silenced.
- Slandorous reviling of Christians would be put to shame.
- And, best of all, calling Christians “evildoers” would be converted into calling God glorious.

That is where I get the word “winsome.”

In Step and Out of Step

What is striking and paradoxical in 1 Peter is the mandate that Christians are to be *both* out of step with their culture, *and* compelling in the culture. We are to be weird and winsome.

The key in 1 Peter is that the inevitable moral weirdness that arises from replacing “human passions” with the “will of God” (1 Peter 4:2), and replacing “passions of former ignorance” (1 Peter 1:14) with joy in Christ and his ways (1 Peter 1:6, 8; 2:3; 4:13), is matched with a Christian zeal for “good deeds” (1 Peter 2:15, 20; 3:6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17; 4:19). Perhaps Peter’s strongest statement of this zeal is that we are to be “zealous for the good” (1 Peter 3:13).

And it needs to be stressed that “good deeds” are not merely the avoidance of bad behavior. That avoidance is crucial. It is essential throughout 1 Peter. That is why we are maligned as “weirdos.” But “good deeds” are the proactive efforts to “bless” those who revile us (3:9).

Of course, there are many things Christians regard as *good* which the culture will call *evil*. That is what Peter says: “They speak against you as evildoers” (1 Peter 2:12). But right alongside of that recognition, Peter presses us: “that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12). These are deeds that, if God wills, even the hostile culture will see as good.

The Relevance for America

What makes this so relevant today is that American culture is increasingly out of step with the way of life which the Bible calls “how you ought to walk and to please God” (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Proposals about how Christians should respond to this situation include (as a recent symposium in

Christianity Today illustrates), the Benedict Option (Rod Dreher), the Wilberforce Option (Peter Wehrner and Michael Gerson) and the Dr. King Option (Gabriel Salguero).

It seems to me that all of these options embody aspects of the response to culture that are needed in our day: ongoing engagement, creating alternative communities, readiness to surrender dominance.

What the apostle Peter contributes to this debate, among other things, is this: Baby Boomers (like me) who grew up with an assumed overlap between Christian morality and cultural expectations, and Millennials, who desperately want to be hip and cool, must both joyfully embrace the calling to be *weirdos*. It is not our culture. And we are not cool.

And, with just as much resolve and joy, we must set our faces to be *winsome*. Not by cowering before the slander, or desperately trying to avoid being maligned, but by getting up every morning dreaming of what new good deeds can be done today. What fresh way can I “bless” my enemies (1 Peter 3:9) or anyone in need? This may be as simple as a genuine conversation with the woman panhandling at the corner of 11th Avenue and 17th Street. Or it may be creating a ministry as huge as World Vision or Samaritan’s Purse or Food for the Hungry.

The apostle Peter is calling for a special breed. Not the kind of conservative who gives all his energy to embracing and defending his weirdo status. And not the kind of liberal who will embrace any compromise necessary to avoid being a weirdo. But rather a breed that is courageous enough to be joyfully weird, and compassionate enough to be “zealous for good deeds.”

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