

# CHAPTER 1, SESSION 25: THE PECULIAR COMMUNITY

## CHAPTER CHALLENGE

With this chapter it may be tempting for members of the group to slip into legalism and guilt. Whenever we are confronted with the lives of other Christians, it is tempting to judge and condemn ourselves rather than see it as an invitation from the Holy Spirit to grow and learn. If guilt begins to surface, keep the group mindful of the story of William Penn and the carrying of his sword.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that the Church has largely failed to produce people who are “different,” and that includes most of us, so we need to be honest about the issues we have adjusted to in our world and allow the Spirit of Christ to challenge us to live differently.

## SUPPLIES

- ☞ Altar (any type of table with a cloth on it)
- ☞ Candle (preferably a pillar type)
- ☞ Lighter
- ☞ Pens and paper for the group

## OPENING TO GOD [5 minutes]

Have the person who volunteered last week offer their reading as a lead-in to 5 minutes of silence.

These 5 minutes of silence allow the members of the group to release the tension and busyness of their day and become fully present to the moment. At the conclusion of the silence you may offer a brief prayer, ring a meditation chime, or simply say “Amen.”

## SOUL-TRAINING [10-20 minutes]

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four. Use the questions below to discuss your experience of spending two hours with God and performing four acts of peculiarity.

### TWO HOURS WITH GOD

1. As you are comfortable, share with your group how you spent your two hours with God (for example: a single two hour block, one hour of worship plus one hour at a park, or eight 15 minute blocks).
2. Did you utilize the author’s eight suggested steps for quiet time? What steps were most helpful? If you left any steps out, why did you omit them?
3. What challenges did you encounter in spending two hours with God?
4. How did the time with God affect you?

### FOUR ACTS OF PECULIARITY

1. What effect did your four acts of peculiarity have on you?
2. What challenges did you experience in fulfilling this soul-training exercise?
3. How were your acts of peculiarity an expression of God’s peculiarity?
4. Did your “maladjusted” actions ever give you a sense of being a citizen of the kingdom of God? If so, how?

## ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30-40 minutes]

If you divided into sub-groups for your discussion of the soul-training exercise, you may regroup for your discussion of the chapter. If time is limited, read through the following questions and note which ones you especially want to discuss, and then begin with those questions.

1. What is your earliest recollection of church? How did it shape your understanding of God and sharing life with others?
2. Can you recall a time you encountered a good and beautiful community? If so, describe your experience and what the group was like?
3. Read aloud the Athenagoras quote on pages 28-29. What is most striking to you about his description of the Christians? What would he write about Christians in your community?
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 (p. 27).  
 Then Cornel West gives us this description of how we are to be maladjusted to the ways of the world: "There have always been Christians who are well-adjusted to greed, well-adjusted to fear, well-adjusted to bigotry" (p. 34). 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?
  - ☞ How do you feel about being peculiar because of your faith?
  - ☞ On page 31 the author writes, "The God that Jesus reveals is peculiar." What is your reaction to this statement?
5. Reread the first four paragraphs of "Trust the Leading of the Spirit, not Laws and Rules" on pages 35-36.  
  - ☞ What wisdom do you draw from George Fox's response to William Penn regarding wearing his sword?
  - ☞ Is there any area of your life you wish someone would tell you what to do? How can you apply Fox's principle?

### ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud Romans 12:1-2. Then discuss the following questions.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

1. As a group, create a list of words and phrases from this passage that point to the peculiarity of Christians. Explain why you have chosen those words.
2. What does the phrase "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" mean? How do we do that?
3. Why would the renewing of our minds lead us to not be "conformed to this world"?

### EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION

On pages 32-34 the author describes various people throughout history and even today who are peculiar. This segment of the session will give participants a chance to name the individuals in their life who have been maladjusted inspirations for them. It will also give everyone an opportunity to listen for the Spirit's leading in ways they can become more maladjusted to this world.

To help set a reflective tone for this segment, you may want to move to a different room, particularly if the room where you regularly meet does not have a warm and worshipful feel to it. Whether you move to another room or not, you will need to redirect everyone's attention to the altar area.

Begin with a few moments of silence to give everyone a chance to relax and open themselves to the Spirit's presence. Light the candle as a reminder that Christ is present as our light and life. Then offer this prayer or a prayer of your own:

*Gracious, loving and peculiar God, throughout history you have raised up people who were maladjusted to the patterns of this world, and for those people we give you thanks.*

*We give you thanks for Abraham who set out for an unknown land and had faith in your promise to him.*

*We give you thanks for Moses who led your people to freedom.*

*We give you thanks for the prophets who confronted your chosen people.  
 We give you thanks for Mary who surrendered herself to your will.  
 We give you thanks for John the Baptist who lived in the wilderness so he would recognize your coming into the world.  
 We give you thanks for Paul who saw the boundaries between people dissolved by Christ.  
 We give you thanks for all those throughout history who, by the gift of your Holy Spirit, were able to see greed, injustice and oppression in the world around them and had the courage to stand against such forces.  
 We are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.  
 Lead us on, o Lord, to be your people filled with Christ's presence in our hearts, planted securely in your wondrous Kingdom.  
 Reveal to us greed, injustice and oppression in our own times and give us the courage to stand with you in opposing such forces in our own individual lives and in the larger social structures of our world.  
 This we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

After the prayer, invite the group to spend a few moments in silent reflection. Have each person write down in a journal, in their book, or on a blank sheet of paper someone who has inspired them by being maladjusted to this world. (They don't have to have known this individual personally.) Each person can also list the characteristics they find inspiring from that person's life. Two examples would be:

*Francis of Assisi—characteristics: left a life of wealth and comfort to serve the poorest in his world.*

OR

*My cousin Rich, who lived a life free from material possessions and loved strangers unconditionally.*

Give the group about 5 minutes. After the 5 minutes, ask everyone to discuss with a partner who they wrote about and what they wrote. Give partners about 5 minutes to share.

Next, return to silence, but this time have each individual reflect on any sign of peculiarity in their own life and have them write about that. What changes have they made in their life as they have become more like the God Jesus reveals?

After the silence, invite everyone to turn to their partner again and discuss what they noticed. It is possible folks will feel awkward talking about themselves. Encourage everyone simply to be honest and to remember that they are celebrating God's work in their lives, not their own accomplishments.

Finally, spend time in silence with individuals asking the Spirit to reveal any aspect of their life where they have become conformed to the patterns of this world. They might want to journal these thoughts.

When the 5 minutes of silence has ended, invite people to turn to their partner and reflect on what they felt the Spirit revealing, if anything. The partners can pray and encourage one another throughout the week, perhaps exchanging e-mails or phone calls. Remind the group that they should not feel condemned by these revelations but should see them as invitations to a deeper understanding of who God is and how God is revealed in their life.

### GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud the following Scripture passage:

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:7-12).*

### FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter explores the source of hope for the Christian community. The soul-training exercise is sharing your faith. The author gives very constructive steps to make this happen, however you will need to begin early in the week in order to see the impact of these steps prior to your next gathering.

Finally, recruit a volunteer to bring a Scripture, prayer, poem or song for the next class as a lead-in to the opening silence.