

KEEP
CHRIST.

Embracing
the Discipline
of Being
Different

WELFARE

MICHAEL FROST

AUTHOR OF *SURPRISE THE WORLD*

Mike Frost is one of the sharpest thinkers we've got. I don't just mean that he's clever (he is), but that his ideas cut through nonsense with prophetic clarity. And so, of course, this book does just that. Large swaths of the Western church are in dire danger of cultural assimilation at the precise time that our wider culture is looking for new ideas and alternative answers. Thank God, then, for Mike's message, which calls us back to the glorious weirdness of the gospel.

PETE GREIG, team leader of 24-7 Prayer International,
senior pastor of Emmaus Rd, and author of *Dirty Glory*

Michael Frost reminds us with winsome prose and challenging clarity that if our neighbors don't see us living out our Christian faith together as alternative story, something has gone horribly wrong. Read this book and ignore the noise of conformity. If we do, the best days of the local church are just ahead of us.

TIM SOERENS, cofounder of Parish Collective and
coauthor of *The New Parish*

Following the apostle Paul's advice to the Roman church, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world," Michael Frost offers us a poignant meditation on the weirdness of our Christian faith. *Keep Christianity Weird* is the irresistible sort of book that I will read and reread to remind myself what it means to follow in the way of Jesus and in the footsteps of the faithful cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

C. CHRISTOPHER SMITH, founding editor of *The Englewood Review of Books* and coauthor of the award-winning book *Slow Church*

Keep Christianity Weird is a provocative book, but only for people who need to be provoked. For the rest of us—people who need a fresh reminder of the Good News or the great commission—this book is a gift.

DAVE FERGUSON, lead pastor of Community Christian Church and author of *Hero Maker: Five Essential Practices for Leaders to Multiply Leaders*

Michael Frost calls us away from a generic, domesticated, deistic gospel and back into a wild, incarnate, neighborhood-focused, authentically weird, attractive Christianity—which looks, oddly enough, just like Jesus and his Kingdom come.

AUBREY SAMPSON, church planter, teaching pastor, and author of *Overcomer* and *The Louder Song* (2019)

This book does not disappoint. With Michael's usual mix of biblical and historical wisdom, cultural exegesis, and keen wit, Michael invites us to be God's peculiar people in the best possible ways.

DANIEL FUSCO, pastor of Crossroads Community Church and author of *Upward, Inward, Outward* and *Honestly*

Michael Frost invites us to open our eyes to the way of the Master and to reimagine what it means to be the people of God in our time. He looks at Jesus (the original weirdo) and numerous biblical and historical figures whose unusual ways of relating to the world around them reflected the Kingdom of God and brought about miraculous change. Michael reminds us of things we may have forgotten. Hold on tight.

AL ENGLER, director of Navigators Neighbors and Navigators Workplace

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Keep Christianity Weird: Embracing the Discipline of Being Different

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, I published a little book entitled *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People*. It was a short manual on how to foster the kind of alternative Christian lifestyle that would be likely to, well, *surprise* our neighbors and provoke them to ask us about our faith. I was really trying to help Christians develop the habits that would shape them into generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike missionaries. As I explained in that book, it was their very difference from their dominant culture that made the early church such an intriguing community in its first few centuries of existence. And that intrigue led people to explore the beliefs that cultivated such a winsome community.

Today, church attendance, while becoming ever less popular, isn't an intriguing act. Indeed, in some quarters, just saying you're a Christian might conjure the assumption that you're a fundamentalist right-wing homophobe. It's become more repellent than intriguing.

Surprise the World was my attempt to help Christians think about what alternative practices, beyond mere church attendance, would arouse the curiosity of others, and to show the overwhelming goodness of the Kingdom of God.

My fear, however, has been that too many churches might have used that book simply to promote the five habits as a short-term project bolted on to the many other programs the church conducts. Many pastors contacted me to say they were doing a *Surprise the World* month in their small-group ministries and preaching through the contents of the book. Don't get me wrong, I was delighted to see so many people taking that book to heart. But I'm afraid a month of promoting the five habits won't yield very much unless we can nurture a more pervasive worldview in our churches, one that sees the inherent weirdness, or strangeness, of the Christian experience. This was the key to my five missional habits: They must be *habits*. They must be expressions of a genuinely alternative lifestyle, one that shows our neighbors that there's a different—indeed better—way to be human in this world.

Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Nothing enslaves more than that which we think we cannot live without."¹ And here is an important point. If our churches are filled with people living the same way everybody else does, what do we have to commend? Information on how to



go to heaven when you die? What about helping people become fully alive now! Our churches need to be full of people who have been truly set free from that which enslaves the world and who can show others how Jesus makes that possible. Learning fresh habits helps. But we also need to be freed from that which we cannot live without. Later in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, Hauerwas, writing about the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount, says,

To be formed in the habits, the virtues, of the prayer we are taught to pray means that Christians cannot help but appear as a threat to the legitimating ideologies of those who rule. Christians do not seek to be subversives; it just turns out that living according to the Sermon on the Mount cannot help but challenge the way things are.²

The book you are now reading is my humble attempt to encourage you to challenge the way things are by living a life that has been truly set free by Christ. Consider it a kind of companion piece to *Surprise the World*, a little less practical, but absolutely essential in cultivating a highly missional people.



HERE'S TO THE CRAZY ONES

*Blessed are the weird people . . .
Poets, misfits, writers, mystics, heretics,
Painters, and troubadours . . .
For they teach us to see the world through different eyes.*

JACOB NORDBY

In 1997, Apple launched its now-iconic “Think Different” advertising campaign, featuring black-and-white footage of groundbreakers like Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, John Lennon, Mahatma Gandhi, Pablo Picasso, and others, and voiced by actor Richard Dreyfuss, intoning, “Here’s to the crazy ones.”

To this day, there’s debate about who actually wrote the copy for the “Think Different” commercial.¹ Most agree it was largely the work of Rob Siltanen, a creative director and a managing partner of the ad agency that produced it. But like all ad campaigns, it was a collaboration that included contributions by Steve Jobs himself

and various members of the team from the agency. In any case, the “Think Different” voiceover is one of the truly great pieces of advertising copy ever written:

Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels.
The troublemakers. The round pegs in the
square holes. The ones who see things differently.
They’re not fond of rules. And they have no
respect for the status quo. You can quote them,
disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About
the only thing you can’t do is ignore them.
Because they change things. They push the
human race forward. And while some may see
them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because
the people who are crazy enough to think they
can change the world, are the ones who do.²

You can hear a hint of Robert Frost and Jack Kerouac and even a touch of Kurt Vonnegut in the cadence of the language. But that’s not the only reason why it’s so good. It works because it resonates so strongly with us all. Everyone who appears in the “Think Different” campaign really did epitomize the spirit of the campaign. They broke the rules, they were vilified, but they changed stuff. Dylan, Lennon, Gandhi, Ali, and King all drove their contemporaries around the bend. But looking back, we now view them as groundbreakers



who left the world a better place. We all know it's true that crazy people change the world.

So here's my question: Why isn't there a bit more crazy in Christianity these days? And I don't mean crazy as in zany or juvenile (there's plenty of *that!*). I mean crazy as in Picasso, Jim Henson, Martha Graham, and Cesar Chavez. I mean crazy as in round pegs in square holes. Could it be that the church has closed its doors to the misfits and rebels and troublemakers? Does the church make space for and foster the contributions of those who see things differently? If Steve Jobs was right and the world is pushed forward by people who break the rules and have no respect for the status quo, what does that say about the church's vision to change the world?

ECCENTRIC CHRISTIANS

Not that it's always been this way. In fact, the church has produced these "crazy ones" in the past (MLK being a case in point), and while their contemporaries might have viewed them askance, they are widely regarded as those who pushed the cause of Christ forward.

St. Boniface was an eighth-century Scottish missionary to Germany who became frustrated with the Germanic pagans' devotion to a sacred oak tree worshipped to honor Thor. The Germans feared that to even

touch the tree would bring down the wrath of the gods. So Boniface took an axe to the oak, and having felled it, used the wood to build a church at the site dedicated to St. Peter. That's pretty crazy.

Francis Xavier, one of the craziest evangelists in history, having established Christianity in western India and the East Indies, met a samurai warrior named Anjirō in Malacca in 1547. Anjirō was on the run from the Japanese authorities, having killed a man there. Francis shared the message of Christ's forgiveness with Anjirō, who accepted Christianity and decided to return to Japan to face the music. But he also begged Francis to accompany him and to bring the gospel to his homeland. Remember, this was 1547! Francis had already traveled from his native Portugal to India to modern-day Indonesia. Asking him to go to Japan may well have been like inviting us to the moon. But he agreed, and became the first Christian missionary to the closed kingdom.

Or there's the exotically named Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, who virtually relinquished his high-born status to join a band of traveling asylum seekers from Moravia and Bohemia (the Czech Republic today) who had camped on his estate in Germany in 1722. The Moravians were a disorderly bunch, but nonetheless, the temporary village they created on Zinzendorf's estate soon became a refuge of religious freedom that



attracted persecuted Christians from across Europe. But these people were persecuted because of their passionately held views, so as Zinzendorf's model village swelled with fanatics from differing perspectives, things got very rowdy. Differing factions charged each other with heresy, and their leaders accused each other of being false prophets. Things heated up when these leaders started trading apocalyptic visions at a hundred paces. The village fell into disarray and serious conflict.

Most of Europe's landed gentry, when faced with a disorderly mob camped out on their estate, would have simply and quickly evicted them and been done with it. But not Zinzendorf. He joined them!

He pretty much left his castle to live in the Moravian village, to pray and minister to each family, and to call on them to live together in love. That's just plain weird. But weirder still is the fact that God chose to use this strange community of refugees to ignite the modern missions movement. On August 13, 1727, the Holy Spirit descended on the village, bestowing what Zinzendorf later called "a sense of the nearness of Christ."³ All their differences were blown away and this unlikely community became an extraordinary global missionary force.

I could go on. I could mention Anne Hutchinson from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who was described as "a woman of a haughty and fierce carriage, of a nimble

wit and active spirit, and a very voluble tongue, more bold than a man,”⁴ whose crime—according to America’s founding fathers—was usurping male authority. She was banished from the colony for her eccentricity.

Or Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shaker movement, whose views on equality between the sexes and her then-bizarre practice of speaking in multiple heavenly languages and worshipping by ecstatic dancing or “shaking” (hence the name) led to her being beaten regularly by mobs in England, and later, Massachusetts.

Or the fiery John Brown stirring up ferment against slavery in Kansas.

Or the hermit architect and devout Christian Antoni Gaudí designing the most curious buildings in Europe.

Or Albert Schweitzer madly playing Bach and Mendelssohn on his pedal piano in the Congolese jungle.

Or Stanley Jones hanging out with Mahatma Gandhi in his purpose-built Christian ashram in India.

Or Aimee Semple McPherson hamming it up in her extravagant set pieces every Sunday at Angelus Temple in Los Angeles (and even getting “kidnapped” to Mexico, but that’s another story).

Or Arthur Blessitt, who started carrying a huge wooden cross around America in the 1960s and who has gone on to drag it faithfully all over the world (including over 300 countries and Antarctica).

They were the crazy ones. Round pegs in square holes.



And it feels as if there are fewer and fewer of them these days.

But before we imagine Christian eccentricity is the domain of just a few outstanding personalities, allow me to try to make a case for why *all* Christians should be eccentric.

The word eccentric comes from a combination of the Greek terms *ex* (out of) and *kentron* (center). When combined, *ekkentros* means “out of center.” The term gained currency in the late Middle Ages, when astronomers like Copernicus dared to suggest that the earth was not at the center of the solar system. By claiming the earth in fact orbited the sun, Copernicus became the original eccentric.

Enter Richard Beck, a professor from Abilene Christian University, who pushes the definition of eccentricity a bit further. In his book *The Slavery of Death*, Beck takes its literal meaning (“out of center”) and suggests that an eccentric identity is an identity where the focal point of the self is shifted to God. He says, “The ego, in a kind of Copernican Revolution, is displaced from the center and moved to the periphery. The self is displaced being the ‘center of the universe’ so that it may orbit God.”⁵

In other words, all Christians who have made God the center and focus of their lives can rightly be called eccentric.

The alternative, Beck says, is what Martin Luther called *incurvatus in se*, the self “curved inward” upon itself, with the ego at the center of our identity. “*Incurvatus in se* suggests that human sinfulness is rooted in self-focus, self-absorption, and self-worship.”⁶ It’s me at the center. A true conversion to Christ involves displacing me and becoming truly “off center.”

Now, of course, that’s not how we usually use the term *eccentric*. When we think of people who are “off center,” the center we have in mind is usually some cultural or behavioral norm. So eccentric people are those who act in a socially unorthodox fashion. They’re strange, unusual, sometimes deviant. But Beck is trying to rehabilitate the term, to drive us back to its original meaning and to suggest eccentricity should not only be expressed in zany behavior but also in truly biblical Christianity. When we put God at the center of our identity and push our egos out to the edge, we will become a different kind of people. He says,

Eccentric Christianity is a new orbit where the self is displaced and God is found at the center of life. And in this displacement the Christian begins to act in “strange and unusual ways” in relation to the norms of the world.

We become, in the words of the King James Version, “a peculiar people.”⁷



In my previous book *Surprise the World*, I make the case that the early church eventually usurped and conquered the Roman world by living such a sublimely alternative lifestyle that they attracted thousands of people bowed and broken by the cruelty of life under Caesar. These Christians were a peculiar people. Or, as I pointed out in that book, they lived “questionable lives.”⁸

Today, the church in America seems to have traded in its mandate to be eccentric and aimed instead at an unconscious conventionality. Rural norms are too quaint, urban norms too dangerous, so the church finds a happy medium in a suburban spirituality. It's impolite to think of ourselves as rich and demoralizing to think of ourselves as poor, so we find a happy medium in the middle class. We are happy. We are medium. We fit in. And very often we baptize that conventionality by suggesting that God is primarily concerned with order, and with us living peaceably with our neighbors. I'm certainly not suggesting we shouldn't be peaceable, but neither should we be indistinguishable from our fine, upstanding non-Christian neighbors.

We're the “off center” ones. Or, at least, we should be.

THE ECCENTRIC GOD

If Richard Beck's more psychological argument about displacing the ego and orbiting our identity around

God isn't convincing enough (he is a professor of psychology, after all), he also offers a handy theological basis for eccentricity as well: *God is eccentric*.

Yep, we have an eccentric God. Think about it. While many religions see their deities being intrinsically bound up in creation, the biblical God is “off center.” The God of the Bible is separate from the created world. Certainly, God is involved in the created world. God draws close to his people. He's described as sustaining the universe and involving himself in human affairs. And he is revealed to us most clearly as the enfleshed Messiah, Jesus. All that is true.

But orthodox Christianity teaches that the triune God remains wholly Other, separate from the universe he has created. Beck puts it this way:

The eccentric God is always experienced as “outside” the system and status quo. God approaches us from “the outside” of our current arrangements and understandings. Consequently, when it comes to God the community of faith has to adopt a *receptive posture*, waiting upon the initiative of God. And while all this is often described with the language of “transcendence”—using a higher vs. lower metaphor—it can also be described by the eccentric metaphor, an inside vs. outside distinction.⁹



He's right. God is holy, ineffable (indescribable), beyond. And there's something thoroughly eccentric about that. It means God can never be captured or made "ours." If God exists beyond us, God can't be circumscribed or reduced to our agendas or systems. I'm not suggesting we can't know God. In Christ, God has reached out to us. God desires relationship with us and has shown us great mercy and kindness. But we don't get to own God.

God is not an American or Australian. God is not middle class. God is not black. Or white. Or poor. Or rich. Or Southern Baptist. Or Pentecostal. Or Republican. Or Democrat. Or any of the other containers we try to put him in. He's an eccentric God, and an eccentric God is free—truly, utterly free.

And we need this truly, utterly free God, because all of us (conservatives and liberals, left and right) are so profoundly tempted to align the voice of God with our own voice.

As Richard Beck points out, to be a genuinely eccentric people, we need to serve an eccentric God, one that "cannot be bounded, encircled or delimited to our group, our interests, our values, our nation, our way of life, our choices, our worldview, our economy, our church, or our theology."¹⁰

In other words, if we can make God captive to our cultural preferences, then we will most certainly

ourselves be captive to them too. We have to learn the often-challenging truth that God exists beyond our agendas, which in turn could free us from our own unhelpful, even ungodly, plans and schemes.

But there's more. Beck adds a third dimension to this discussion of eccentricity—the Kingdom of God is eccentric.

We know the Kingdom of God isn't a specific territory. The Kingdom of God is like salt and light. Like God, it cannot be contained or walled in to a particular zone. It's not like America is Kingdom-of-God territory and Syria isn't. The very character of God's Kingdom is alternate to the character and values of this world. It doesn't create borders and defend them. It doesn't foster parochialism or insist on pledges of allegiances to particular flags. Its values are justice, reconciliation, beauty, and wholeness. It can't easily be identified in conventional, observable ways. Jesus said as much when the Pharisees challenged him to show them this kingdom he was speaking about. He replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20-21). Similarly, Richard Beck says,

The eccentric Kingdom doesn't claim territory over against the world. The eccentric Kingdom



doesn't erect walls to create a gated community. . . . The eccentric Kingdom is the embedded, pilgrim, landless, possessionless, homeless, sojourning, itinerant missionary community called and commissioned to live lives of radical service and availability to the world.¹¹

Wow.

ROUND PEGS IN SQUARE HOLES OR SQUARE PEGS IN ROUND HOLES?

Apple's "Think Different" ad quirkily referred to round pegs in square holes, even though the common expression is "a square peg in a round hole." It seems the campaign writers were willing to be eccentric even in their use of idioms. The challenge of eccentric Christianity is that quirks so regularly get mainstreamed into the dominant culture: Round pegs are hammered uncomfortably into square holes, or even—sometimes—offered round holes in exchange for their compliance. What began as surprising over time becomes unremarkable. So the call to be eccentric people serving an eccentric God, and sent out to alert others to the eccentric Kingdom, involves a call to perseverance, an active resistance to domestication.

I think we should all be striving to dethrone our egos

and have our identities shaped by God as our center. We should all be seeking to become more off-center. But in our general attempts to become the eccentric Christians we're meant to be, it appears that God gives us certain "crazy ones" who seem freer to embody the faith. They are beacons to us. Indications of the life we were set free from in order to live. The John Browns or Aimee Semple McPhersons seem more capable of throwing off convention than the rest of us. We need to find these people and value them.

Of course, the church has a habit of either banishing or killing their crazies. But they are essential to the church's health and future. In a fascinating study in *Scientific American*, Shelley Carson examined why creative people are more eccentric than the rest of us. She concludes that it partly has to do with brain function. Studies have shown that highly creative individuals are more likely to display something called cognitive disinhibition. That's the tendency to indulge in information that is irrelevant to whatever you're working on or thinking about. Most of us inhibit or filter irrelevant information when we're concentrating on a particular task. But creative people don't do that. They let it all come flooding in.

Carson sees this cognitive disinhibition as "likely at the heart of what we think of as the *aha!* experience. During moments of insight, cognitive filters relax



momentarily and allow ideas that are on the brain's back burners to leap forward into conscious awareness."¹² Kind of like Russell Crowe's depiction of John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind*, or Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game*. Their breakthrough ideas seem to catch even them by surprise.

Responding to all this stimulus can make creative types seem less interested in the mundane or the everyday. They're not so concerned about the state of their dress. Or with learning the strictures of polite conversation. So they seem eccentric or outlandish. In her own research into eccentricity, Shelly Carson asks subjects, "Do you often feel like a square peg in a round hole?" (That phrase again!) Participants who score high on the creativity scale answer "yes" way more often than less creative participants. "In fact," Carson reports, "one participant—a Hollywood screenwriter—answered 'no' but then wrote below the question: 'I don't feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. I feel like an octagonal peg with conical appendages.'"¹³

There's plenty of funding for studies in creativity and eccentricity, it turns out, because these kinds of people are good for business. They are highly prized in the marketplace. Carson reports that big corporations like Coca-Cola, DuPont, Citigroup, and Humana have recently created the position of CIO—chief innovation officer—as part of their leadership structure.

Accordingly, business schools like Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, and Yale now offer courses on creativity as part of their curricula. And Fortune 500 companies—including PepsiCo, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Aetna, and Marriott—are putting employees through creativity training programs to help non-eccentrics open their minds to out-of-the-box thoughts and stimuli that might otherwise be ignored or suppressed. Creativity is a highly sought-after commodity in the global market.

Celebrating this trend, and affirming those creatives who have not been silenced by convention, Shelley Carson concludes,

Indeed, we all owe a deep debt of gratitude to those whose creative work has been accomplished at the expense of square-peg feelings of alienation and ostracism. The creative efforts of eccentrics add richness, beauty and innovation to the lives of those of us who have fit somewhat more comfortably into our round holes.¹⁴

So the broader culture increasingly recognizes the contribution of eccentricity to the greater good. But not the church. Just as business and education is fostering greater creativity and innovation, the church is in a



phase of rewarding compliance and conservatism and suppressing eccentricity.

I'm not happy to do that. Are you? As Carson said, eccentrics add richness, beauty, and innovation to our lives. And Christian eccentrics can help push us forward into the things God has in store for us.

PAPA CHUCK AND THE JESUS FREAKS

But what if you're not a natural eccentric? What if you don't have cognitive disinhibition? What if you like coloring between the lines and you feel more like a round peg in a round hole? No worries. Lots of people—most people—are like that.

When it comes to cognitive disinhibition, I'm inclined to think that while some are naturally gifted, others need to develop it as a discipline. If we're going to embrace our calling as eccentric followers of an eccentric God, we need to be aware of those in our midst who are naturally inclined that way and be welcoming and supportive of them. But those of us who were not given the gift of cognitive disinhibition need to work at it. I'll explain how to do this later in this book, but for now, we need to understand that eccentricity might be a gift for some, or work for others, but we should all be looking for ways to increase our capacity for eccentricity as part of the normal Christian life.

From what Shelley Carson concludes, you don't have to be weird; you just need to foster environments where weird people are welcome and their contributions are encouraged, and where we can learn to be weirder from them. And my fear is that the church is not that kind of place. But as I've mentioned earlier, it hasn't always been that way. There have always been eccentric Christians, but it seems to me there's always also been a movement to suppress or domesticate them. We need to embrace the task of encouraging weirdos and unleashing them on the church. So if you're not crazy yourself, look to make space for some crazy.

A perfect, (relatively) recent example of this is the emergence of the Jesus People movement and the rise of its epicenter, Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California.

Back in 1967, most churches across America were still singing hymns to pipe organs and robing their thirty-person choirs. Sermons were preached with a rhythmic authoritative cadence unlike ordinary speech. And ministers were as revered as bank managers and school principals. They combed Brylcreem through their hair and wore blazers and ties as streetwear.

But 1967 was also the Summer of Love in San Francisco, and thousands of young people were descending on the Haight-Ashbury district and filtering down into Southern California, attracted by promises of free love, psychedelic drugs, and great surf. They



were rejecting the materialist world and middle-class ideals of their parents and their Brylcreemed ministers. They embraced the hippie lifestyle—anticonsumerist, off-the-grid, and definitely alternative.

But not all eccentricity is healthy (more on that later), and for many of these young people, the promises made in the songs of the Mamas and the Papas and the Grateful Dead were never fulfilled. The dark side of the Summer of Love was pretty dark indeed. Many ended up homeless and hungry in Southern California, easy prey to overdose, disease, and even cult leaders. And right in the middle of all this cultural upheaval was a conservative nondenominational preacher named Chuck Smith.

Chuck Smith was pretty much a minister right out of central casting. He didn't use Brylcreem because he was bald, but other than that, he'd fit right in at any traditional church across the country. He wore suits and ties and turtleneck sweaters and loved preaching forty-minute sermons. He held to all the mainstream values the hippie generation was rebelling against. But what marks "Papa Chuck" (as he became known) out from other ministers was that he loved crazies.

Chuck had founded Calvary Chapel in 1965 and soon discovered the streets and beaches around the church were littered with the flotsam rejected by the Haight-Ashbury culture. He and his wife, Kay, started

taking drug-addled young vagrants into their home. Then he rented a house in Costa Mesa to serve as a Christian communal home and invited the kids to attend Calvary Chapel's Wednesday night Bible classes. Soon, thousands of "freaks" were attending these meetings.

Influenced more by the Beatles and the Beach Boys than by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, these new congregants began composing Christian folk songs, singing them in a huge circus tent Chuck had erected on church property. Thousands more began attending, and soon Papa Chuck was conducting mass baptisms below the ocean cliffs of Corona del Mar. No one knew it yet, but there amid a haze of drugs, folk music, and intense discussions about peace, love, and the gospel, the "Jesus freak" movement was about to be born.

The key to the success of Calvary Chapel, and the Jesus People movement it spawned, was Papa Chuck's acceptance of all comers. There was no dress code. The freaks could come as they were. He welcomed hippies, yippies, student activists, dropouts, and the drug-damaged. Inadvertently, Papa Chuck and the Jesus freaks were changing American Christianity as we know it. They invented a whole new style of worship, and from them emerged the charismatic movement, the contemporary Christian music scene, even the church growth and "seeker-sensitive" movements.



Whether you love everything about the kind of church that arose in the 1980s and beyond and whether you agree with everything Chuck Smith said or stood for is beside the point. The point is that Calvary Chapel was cognitively disinhibited enough to see a place for a generation of young people who otherwise would not have darkened the door of a church.

Part of Papa Chuck's genius was that he was theologically conservative but simultaneously culturally avant-garde. He knew the importance of making space for eccentricity and creativity. I suspect that God was on the move in the 1960s and 1970s, loosening up the American church, pushing them into the kind of eccentricity Richard Beck talks about. And while Chuck Smith wasn't the naturally eccentric kind of leader who could have taken the church there, he was comfortable enough with freaks to allow them to make a contribution.

I can think of several examples of how more socially conventional leaders opened the church to the voices of a more eccentric form of Christianity. In 1974, the Anglican rector John Stott used his position as a universally respected evangelical leader to intentionally incorporate the contributions of the Latin American leaders of the integral mission movement at the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne. The congress had been established by

Billy Graham with the theme “Let the Earth Hear His Voice,” and might have just stuck with discussing the whats, whys, and hows of successful evangelization had it not been for the emergence of firebrand student leaders from Peru like René Padilla, Pedro Arana, and Samuel Escobar.

Padilla, Arana, and Escobar went to Lausanne to ensure that social justice was not marginalized from the discussion. They referred to their approach of integrating evangelism and social action as “integral mission,” and in the strife-torn and poverty-stricken nations of Latin and South America, they considered it essential to successful mission. Suspecting that the Lausanne delegates might champion evangelism to the exclusion of justice ministries in reaction to a number of previous missionary conferences that had done the reverse, Padilla, Arana, and Escobar invited Stott to see what integral mission looked like in Peru.

Looking at old photos from Stott’s visit to Peru, you see the cultural and generational differences quite starkly. Stott was a square—a kindly Anglican minister, dressed conservatively and smiling politely for the camera. The Peruvians, meanwhile, wore natty safari suits and floral shirts and sported pencil mustaches and long hair. Nevertheless, Stott was impressed with what he saw and heard. And when they all got to Lausanne, Stott held the door open for them.



The result was the highly influential Lausanne Covenant. It affirms social justice, values the integration of word and deed, and declares the importance of evangelism. And the evangelical world hasn't been the same since.

Maybe an even more contemporary example than Chuck Smith or John Stott is that of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Untroubled by fear of controversy, and genuinely compassionate toward the outsider, Pope Francis (as he is now known) is stirring up the Catholic church, creating an environment where fresh voices and new perspectives can at last be heard. Who knows where it will lead, but Francis has demonstrated his own eccentricity, and his church is finally safe for eccentrics to play in. The first pope from the Franciscan order, he is a living reminder of his namesake, Francis of Assisi. There has hardly been a more eccentric Christian than he was.

What about you? What scares you about the crazy ones? Whose voices are you least likely to listen to? How might you imagine they would change your life for the better? And what about your church? Whose voices are unheard? Is it a safe, generative space for the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes? Because if it's not, the church is the poorer.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

1. Who are some historical (or contemporary) people you particularly admire? Why? What, if anything, is eccentric about those people?
2. When you think about the “eccentricity” of Christianity, what comes to mind first? Why?
3. What fears do you have about allowing eccentric Christians to make a greater contribution to your church?
4. Where do you fall on a spectrum of conventional to crazy? How do you feel you fit in to this vision of the Christian faith? Why?

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