

WHAT LIVING IN THE MARGINS TEACHES US ABOUT FAITH

THE  
GIFT  
OF  
THE

OUTSIDER

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## INTRODUCTION

Some look to mountains or seas, yet others to the expanse of the sky, but I have always looked to human diversity as the pinnacle of God's creative splendor. The more of its beauty I've understood, the more I've understood how many fail to see its full beauty. My curiosity around difference has grown with each difference encountered.

There are so many ways to be human.

It is not just the world at large that stages God's workmanship. The church—in her unique call to embody the excellencies of Christ, to evidence the power of God, and to unite in mutual submission under one head—also bears the marks of his hands. Yet since time immemorial, insularity, arrogance, comfort, power, and greed have launched sustained attacks against the church in attempts to render her embodiment of Christ's excellencies corrupt, to weaken the influence of God's power, and to foment division.

This book has emerged from a patchwork of joy and sorrow sewn together over the years as I have processed what it means to be different. I share something in common with both those on the margins to whom this book is dedicated and the insiders I seek to convince of the profound beauty of the paradoxes of God's kingdom. With the outsider, I share knowledge of what it's like to navigate systems that, by design, do not work optimally for those in the margins. With the insider, I share knowledge of what it's like to benefit from systems that do. I am both insider and outsider, and I suspect this is true to some degree for most. I also share with each a commitment to glorifying God and enjoying him forever as my chief end,<sup>1</sup> knowing that both those endeavors are enhanced by living faithfully within a united yet diverse community.

We'll begin our journey by coming to an understanding of what I

mean when I say “outsider.” Then I’ll examine four categories of gifts: sight, dependence, freedom, and suffering. Some categories, like sight, are broad enough to encompass a variety of outsider experiences. The others were written with specific outsider groups in mind: those who have disabilities, are chronically ill, or are economically depressed, unmarried, persecuted, or grieving. I’ll conclude by illustrating implications of valuing these gifts and those outsiders who steward them well for the church. Each chapter contains reflection questions at the end, some for those who see themselves more as the insider, and some for those who consider themselves more as the outsider.

This book lends its voice to a larger, ongoing discussion about how we—intricately varied as we are—ought to live together in light of the glorious kingdom to which we belong. We’ve been gifted a messy yet marvelous mission that—when embarked upon faithfully—is sure to stretch us, but more importantly, to result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Christ alone can claim the credit for fashioning a community where all are recognized as essential and truly treated as such.

When I first sat down to write this book, I feared I would be labeled divisive for raising the issues I wanted to raise. But I cannot be persuaded that the church is not better when we honor *all* its members, when we acknowledge everyone has something to contribute, and when our values are rightly ordered. I have found myself always richer to participate in groups of mixed makeup, regardless of what those lines of difference might be. My prayer is that you would walk away from this book a little more persuaded too.

## WHO IS AN OUTSIDER?

*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;  
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;  
God chose what is low and despised in the world, even  
things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so  
that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:27-29

**N**ick speaks with a stutter. Angela uses a wheelchair. Steven was homeschooled as a child but now, as an adult, lives in a big city. Marlene is in her forties and has never married. Bouangern is a new international student in the US. Dan has recently gotten swept up in replacement theory. Alex is an undocumented immigrant. Jasmine, a Black woman, attends a predominantly white church. Mariella is a first-generation college student. John is a recovering addict. Wayne is the only man who works in his department. The Moores struggle with infertility. Sarah Kate is politically conservative but moved to Seattle for work. Terry has lived for 30 years in his quickly gentrifying neighborhood, where nearly all his neighbors are recent transplants.

Liz and Michael are the only white people on their block in an “up-and-coming” neighborhood. Stephanie suffers from chronic illness. Maxwell is neurodivergent.

What do these people have in common?

## The Terrors of the Outside

At one time or another, and to varying degrees, the people just described have all felt like outsiders or feared becoming one. For some, trying to recall a time when they *didn't* feel like an outsider proves more difficult than pinpointing a specific situation in which they did. Whether what sets them apart from the majority is visible or something derived from personal choice or background, their experience of being different is likely similar: feelings of discomfort, isolation, or anxiety, or the sense of being unseen. Perhaps they want nothing more than to minimize the felt difference between themselves and others as they attempt to acclimate to a new culture (even if that culture is just a new church). Maybe they carry a sense of loss, having once been on the inside. If they're at all like me, they've struggled with how their difference might limit them and frustrate their ambitions. Maybe they walk on eggshells, unable to fully be themselves for fear of offending the dominant group or exposing themselves as outsiders and facing marginalization. However else they may differ from each other, in these ways, they can relate.

An outsider is a person or group of people who differ from those around them in one or more ways that are meaningful either to them or to the prevailing immediate culture. Their difference may be based on life stage, socioeconomic status, education, circumstances, culture (ethnic, regional, national), ability, interests, or identity. Their experience of being on the outside may be episodic or permanent.

If mapped as concentric rings, insiders—those sharing the most meaningful traits with each other—would make up the innermost ring. Outsiders would fall at various distances from the center based on a variety of quantitative and qualitative factors. In how many ways does

the individual differ? How visible is their difference? To what extent does their difference prevent them from full participation in the wider group? How much weight does the group or individual put on sameness in general or on that specific difference? What legal protections or lack thereof accompany that category of difference? To what extent are freedoms, power, and influence limited or is dignity denied as a result of the difference?

In C.S. Lewis's essay "The Inner Ring," he writes, "I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside." *Terror* may seem like a strong word, but some go to quite drastic lengths to maintain or gain privileged positions. Most people vie for the inside. When being on the inside means being known, seen, and accommodated, who wouldn't want that? If we had our way, we'd avoid the outside at all costs.

## My Outsider Story

It seems everywhere you turn, diversity is discussed. The discussions I hear most often revolve around racial diversity—which I, too, am a huge proponent of—but diversity is, well, more diverse than that. I am not limiting this exploration to racial differences, nor to only those differences I've experienced. I'm casting a wider net than most in how I think about outsiders because the experience is more widespread than we tend to think.

I was born in Kansas to Air Force parents, and soon thereafter we relocated to Japan for a couple of years before spending five glorious, harsh winters in Michigan. My family was one of a handful of Black families in each of these locations. I hadn't thought much of being different until, after sharing with my older sister that I had a crush on a white neighbor, she told me white boys didn't like Black girls.

In fourth grade, I found myself in Virginia, where I finally got to interact with more Black kids. It was not a positive experience for



me. My Black peers regularly gave me the cold shoulder or accused me of “acting white” when I was just being me. One Black classmate “befriended” me just to give me “Black lessons” during lunch. Apparently, my other—white—friends were all wrong and I spoke “too proper.” I wondered why I needed to change for my own people to accept me. At least openly, white people didn’t point out my differences, and as far as I knew, they didn’t seem to punish me for them either.

Neither I nor my interests were particularly popular. I was that kid in school who would pre-emptively ask the teacher if I could work alone on group projects—not because I was an introvert, but because I was scarred from not being chosen so often. Music was my passion, and my favorite genres were alternative, classical, and Latin—choices the rest of my family couldn’t have been less excited about. On Sunday afternoons, a local radio station would play Latin music. I would book it from the church sanctuary to the car after Sunday services so I could catch some of it before my sisters caught up and asked me to turn it off.

In high school, I went on scholarship to summer arts camps where most campers came from affluent backgrounds. Before then, I’d mostly mixed and mingled with those from the same socioeconomic status as my family. I still remember sitting in a Northwestern University dorm listening to other campers talk about places in Europe they’d visited on vacation as casually as if they were destinations right down the street. At a different camp, I’d lie in bed listening to the others talk about their favorite artisanal breads and cheeses when I only knew white, wheat, and cheddar. That summer, I was grateful for our camp uniforms—corduroy knickers, knee socks, and polos—because they made it less obvious who was well-off. I felt no love for overt signals of social status.

After high school, I said goodbye to the suburbs of southeastern Virginia to study music education at Rutgers—a state school in New Jersey—where many students either knew each other or at least shared a Jersey identity. The rest of my family had or would attend historically Black colleges. I had a Black roommate briefly at the beginning of my

freshman year. We'd talked over the phone once during the summer, but when she met me in person, she said, "I thought you'd be Blacker." Perhaps I should have warned her. I played two less popular instruments, viola and tuba, and was one of two Black string players in the orchestra and the only woman tuba player in the marching band.

As a departure from my traditional Black church roots, I joined a predominantly white campus ministry. Even though I was well liked, I sometimes felt culturally and politically like an outsider. Once a group of us went to a state fair, and I grabbed a button from a Democratic politician's booth and pinned it to my shirt. One friend glared at me nearly the whole car ride home before he could no longer contain himself, exclaiming, "I don't see how you can be a Democrat and call yourself a Christian." But as far as I could otherwise judge from our fruit, political affiliation bore no direct appreciable impact on our spiritual maturity.

Other times, my difference played out in small interactions like retreat games or conversations about childhood memories and "classic" performers and TV shows I'd never heard of. I met my first boyfriend through that ministry—a white guy who at least partially proved my sister wrong. His mother thrust me quickly back to reality; after our first meeting, she described me as "lazy like all Black people" because I'd told her I had a chance to perform at Carnegie Hall but was considering turning it down due to other commitments. I wasn't Black enough by Black standards, but still managed to be too Black by some white ones.

After college, I moved to China, my first stint abroad since I was three, and threw myself into a new language and culture. Although I was even further from belonging to the majority there, I felt a strange sense of relief to not be surrounded by the white majority of whom I'd begun to grow weary. I moved to a new city each of the three years I lived there. In the smallest of those cities, I was one of two Black residents out of a population of a million. I'd chosen that location because of a university there specifically for Chinese ethnic minorities.

The experience of minorities in other countries intrigued me. In the mornings on my way to class, I had to bike past a field where soldiers trained. Every day a different one would point at me and yell in Chinese, “Look! It’s an African!” Their shocked expressions after I yelled back in Chinese, “I’m not African, I’m American!” are forever etched in my memory.

I stuck out more in China than anywhere else I’d lived, but I approached Chinese people’s curiosity about my difference as an opportunity to be an ambassador for Black people. I knew that apart from Obama, Oprah, and Kobe Bryant, Chinese exposure to Black people was limited to either news headlines about our criminality or movies depicting us as underachieving students or athletes in need of white saviors. It became my mission to ensure my every interaction with them would send them home with a radically different picture of what it meant to be Black.

My experience in China unlocked within me an unapologetic embrace of being different. After repatriating to the States, I joined an Asian American church in Boston that significantly expanded my understanding of the Bible’s stance on justice—a topic largely unbroached in my previous church experiences. I was a long way from my college church, where they taught that a missions trip wasn’t a missions trip if you only met material needs. This church held it wasn’t a true missions trip if you neglected those physical needs. The discomfort of that tension kept me there. I considered it good to be a little uncomfortable at church. I busied myself with Japanese classes since I wanted to keep in touch with my non-English-speaking Japanese friend. She and I moved away from China at the same time and I worried one or both of us would forget Chinese and have no way to communicate. I also joined the bhangra dance club. My house of four women was multicultural: one white Christian, one Jewish, one Indian, and me.

Two years later, I was accepted into graduate school and moved to Seattle to study China and museums. Having once been completely ignorant about the beauty, depth, and diversity of the region myself,

I wanted to teach people about that part of the world. Outside of my years in China, Seattle was the first time I really felt like a religious minority. I was the only Christian in either of my programs and frequently watched classmates demonstrating open antagonism toward Christianity. I attended a Korean American church, where I was adopted by the most amazing family who let me spend school breaks and holidays like Thanksgiving with them. One year, after finishing the Thanksgiving meal with *haraboji*, *halmoni*, and a collection of aunts, uncles, and cousins, a group of us were watching TV in the living room. A crime show came on, featuring police arresting Black people doing their best to resist. I immediately felt embarrassed.

After finishing graduate school, despite hating hot weather and bugs and adoring big cities, a dream work opportunity took me—with no connections—to Laos, a tiny landlocked country in Southeast Asia often eclipsed by its neighbors Thailand and Vietnam. Drawn once more by my interest in what it was like to be a minority somewhere else, I worked at a museum highlighting the different ethnic groups in Laos, mostly alongside local men with just a high school education. I was the only Black person living in my town. Because staff meetings were mostly conducted in Lao, I added another language to my growing collection. My second year, I began studying Thai. That year, I also lived with my closest friend, a Vietnamese woman from Hanoi, as well as a Canadian woman. I called myself “the poor expat”; compared to my Lao peers, I earned a lot, but compared with other foreigners, I made very, very little.

When my contract ended, Washington, DC, became home, and I first worked for two years at an Asian art museum where I was the only person of color on my team. This time, I joined a majority white church with more politically conservative members than in my previous churches and got to explore more dimensions of difference. After my first small group—folks I felt a strong affinity with because of shared experiences living or studying abroad—disbanded three years in, I intentionally joined the least diverse—and most unlike

me—small group I could find. I thought it would be good for me to have my own assumptions challenged and to find common ground with people with whom I thought I had little but Jesus in common. I also thought it would be good for them. “Everyone benefits from difference” had become my mindset.

Four years ago, I embarked on a master’s program at a theologically conservative seminary where, as a Black, politically liberal woman, I stand out from most of my classmates. I’m toward the lower end of the income scale compared to most of my peers. I’m also in my late thirties and happily unmarried, while my friends have nearly all coupled off and begun their own families. As a result, friendships dynamics have begun to shift. Three years ago, I began to suffer from as-yet undiagnosed health problems. To top it all off, I run in nerd circles but have never seen any *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or *Harry Potter* movies, nor have I heard the soundtrack to *Hamilton*.

In terms of race, socioeconomic and marital status, nationality, religion, interests, politics, gender, and life experience, I’m often on the outside. Sometimes being an outsider has been beyond my control; I had no say in my race or gender, and no control over my childhood experience moving around. Sometimes it was a consequence of my choice to pursue certain interests or communities. Other times I sought it out, as with my choices of universities, churches, and living abroad.

No matter how being an outsider has come about for me, I’ve always learned from it. Over time, I moved from insecurity about my difference to neutrality to recognizing the value in it and letting it better me. It has taught me about the bigness of God, the closeness of God, the power of God, and the person- and circumstance-specific care of God. I have grown in how I view myself, where my value does and doesn’t come from, what I was made for, and how to reconsider the sand under my house I’d mistaken for rocks.

During a particularly trying season of life, I wrote to a friend, “Are all stations and circumstances that illuminate the true nature of grace

a gift? Since Paul boasts in his weaknesses and hardships because they facilitate his most powerful encounters with grace (2 Corinthians 12:8-10), then are all things gifts that bring to rest on us Christ's power?"

It was my very differences that convinced me of God's sovereignty over things like the time and place in which I lived and the family into which I was born. The realization that God wasn't just able to work for my good *despite* my race, but *because* of it, deepened my faith. And with every new dimension of difference granted to me and that I've observed in others, my understanding of God's grace and the staggering beauty of his kingdom deepens.

In *The Outside Edge*, Robert Kelsey claims that being a true outsider is exclusively negative: "There's nothing inherently enabling about this situation, no matter what the view of fashionable commentators. There are no advantages. There's no *edge* to being on the edge."<sup>1</sup> A bleak outlook indeed.

But if I could go back and reverse any of my outsider experiences for the inside, I wouldn't. All the privileges and benefits of the inside could not tempt me to part with all I've gained from being on the outside. I would not trade discomfort for comfort, difference for sameness. A world where I don't see what I now see, feel what I now feel, or know what I now know is unimaginable. I am fully convinced the world and church need certain things for their flourishing that sprout only from seeds of difference.

Even with all its seeming disadvantages, being an outsider comes with benefits—as overlooked and underappreciated as they may be. Though my experiences have been wide-ranging, I know enough to understand they don't encompass the full scope of the outsider experience.

## A Better Endgame

We love rooting for underdogs, whether in sports or business. Rags-to-riches stories also have wide appeal. We make heroes of those who rise above humble beginnings to "make something" of themselves.

But here's where Christians diverge from this way of thinking. Certainly, the story of the Bible is one of nothings—the least of all nations—finding themselves undeservedly at the center of God's favor. Throughout Scripture, being outnumbered was a source of anxiety for Israel. Every time they faced an enemy, they cowered because of their size (Numbers 13:25-33; Deuteronomy 2:10; Deuteronomy 7:1; Judges 7; 2 Kings 6:15-17). Being small both in number and size meant they were especially vulnerable to enemies. They were ripe for defeat—yet still chosen by the Most High.

God's people are not those who live to “make something” of themselves. Rather, we live to be made—through the immeasurable greatness of resurrection power—like the very best of somethings: Christ. Self-mortifying, neighbor-edifying, right-forfeiting, enemy-blessing heirs of grace.

So, if growing in Christlikeness, being carriers of his scent throughout a decaying world, and striving to make the realities of his kingdom visible in your living and loving are not your goals for these few precious days you've been given, you may struggle to appreciate what follows in the pages ahead. You will find no secrets about how to crush it at work or win friends or gain access to the inside. This is not that sort of book.

Reaching the inside—that coveted inner ring—is not my endgame; it wasn't Christ's. What you will find instead is a way of thinking about the cards we've been dealt and the experiences we've had as raw materials God can use to exhibit his all-surpassing power. What most benefits us, individually and as the church, is what moves us closer to our goal of becoming worshipers with a singular boast who make nothing of ourselves and everything of God—becoming faithful disciples and proof of his power.

### **Prosperity's Unread Warning Label**

As we pine after the inside, we assume that smoother and easier always means better. This is not the case. Far too often, the dangers

and temptations of the inside are glossed over to our detriment. Insiders may unknowingly inflict harm on others and continue in unchallenged sin, harming themselves and missing out on the grace flowering in dark corners of their hearts. Smooth and easy come with their own risks.

Not every outsider will necessarily possess every gift we will examine. Rather, you can think of it as ease of acquisition, like learning a language by immersion rather than in a distant classroom setting. Certain circumstances lend themselves more naturally to certain ends. For example, when Jesus speaks of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:23-24), he doesn't say it is impossible for the rich to enter his kingdom, just that it is more difficult for them than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Some rich will be in heaven, but they will have overcome the worldward gravitational pull of their wealth. While viewed from the world's perspective, their wealth is an asset; from a heavenly perspective, it is a liability—one that those of lesser means do not have or have in lesser degrees. Power, influence, and privilege (in all its forms) may also be liabilities.

Sure, some people without power, influence, and privilege still orient their lives around the attainment and worship of these things. But the challenges for those who already possess them are real. The closer we get to being able to explain away the good things in our lives through our own sense of self-sufficiency, the greater the temptation to worship ourselves rather than God. When Israel finally entered the Promised Land after wandering in the desert for 40 years, they switched from being fed by God directly through manna that miraculously appeared to cultivating and harvesting the land for food (Joshua 5:12). During that transition, God instituted a festival. Its purpose was to ensure they remembered he was the God who continued to feed them even as they worked the ground—*not* a God who fed them and then left them to feed themselves in Canaan. Once our hands hit the ground, God must contend with our own sense of resourcefulness for credit.

In Ezekiel's allegory of the unfaithful wife (Ezekiel 16:1-58), God



describes Israel as a woman he discovered bloody on the street after her birth, a woman whom he cleaned, clothed, and adorned with jewels. Later, that woman came to trust in her own beauty. God said,

And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD. But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore (verses 12-15).

This is often us, trusting in gifts bestowed. The temptation for those of us who came to know Christ as kids is to sanitize our conversion story. In our memories, there was no time when we were abhorred and wallowing in our own blood (Ezekiel 16:5-6). As far back as we can remember, we have been adorned—but in reality, we are still being cleaned and clothed.

God desired and provided prosperity for his people, but he knew abundance carried the risk of losing the plot, forgetting his hand, and drifting into idolatry of the very goods he'd blessed them with. This holds true for us too. Satan sought to capitalize on the natural tendency of humankind when he sought permission to test Job, saying: "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (Job 1:9-11).

Was Job in it for God? Or the well-hedged, enviable life he lived?

When we are comfortable, provided for, healthy, approved by our peers, enjoying systems that work in our favor, or in possession of what we most desire, it is hardest to discern the truth of our love for and

commitment to God. Often, as goes the ease goes our love. When life goes sideways or we face opposition, out comes doubt. *Is God good? Can he be trusted? Is he still the good, good father I sang about last week?*

We think too little of the dangers—often stealth—of easy and comfortable Christian lives. In some ways, we may be hampered by privilege and prosperity. The very things we think help us advance may actually hold us back. Theologian Charles Hodge writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, “The things which elevate man in the world, knowledge, influence, rank, are not the things which lead to God and salvation.”<sup>2</sup> We fail to value plotlines for our lives that put our beliefs to the test—plotlines that take us, like Job, from hearing of God by the hearing of the ear to seeing him with our eyes (Job 42:5). That force our genuine convictions into the open. Steadfastness, while admirable in others, pales in comparison to prosperity when it comes to what we desire for ourselves, even though steadfastness is the goal of our faith (James 1:3-4).

Yet prosperity is not always the marker of health we think it is. Time and again, people in the Bible confessed they envied or almost envied the at ease and prosperous (Job 21:7-34; Psalm 73:3-16; Jeremiah 12:1-2). Time and again, God assured them no correlation existed between what they had and his pleasure with them. It is not that God does not want us to prosper, but rather that prosperity comes with a warning label we rarely read.

I won't demonize the young, the wealthy, the powerful, etc.—God has great plans for them too. In and of themselves, youth, wealth, and power are not evil, but they do come with powerful temptations that age, poverty, and vulnerability might not. Let us exercise our holy imaginations and reconsider the dignity and strengths of outsiders.

Part of the gift of being an outsider is being able to live unencumbered (or at least, less encumbered) by the distortions and self-deceptions that come from whatever form of wealth—financial, relational, reputational—we are prone to define ourselves by. The insider is at higher risk of unwittingly making their possessions—both

material and immaterial—their masters. And, as Matthew 6:24 says, “No one can serve two masters.”

## The Value of Difference

A value of difference unique to the church is that it presents a canvas upon which God can paint one of its most distinctive features: unity. There is power in finding unity where we least expect it. As differences increase, we expect the opportunities for division to increase as well. But God makes the startling possible: We can discover unity in diversity—even where histories of mistreatment and mistrust run deep and the potential for marginalization and neglect run high.

One summer as a VBS volunteer, we played a game where we split into groups. Some members were assigned roles such as being a baby or a sick or elderly person requiring extra help. Then we were told to complete an obstacle course and finish together. The spectacle of total depravity that followed was sad yet unsurprising. Those without special roles rushed ahead, concerned only with their race and their finish time—even if it meant their team ultimately lost. Few wanted to be weighed down by those who might cost them their individual lead. Players demonstrated little interest in unity because it moved them down the leaderboard.

Had there been no special roles or had the object of the game been different, an every-man-for-himself, survival-of-the fittest mentality would have made sense. But that game would be completely divorced from the character and aims of God’s kingdom and its witness in the world. In our call to Christ, we are called to each other. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

Without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Difference also expresses the vastness of God's beauty and wisdom. We are prone to looking at the surface of things, to judging people by their utility, to settling into rigid ways of thinking, to valuing the inconsequential, and to dismissing the invaluable. But the innumerable ways of being and speaking and thinking that exist serve as a witness to the unfathomable imagination of our Creator. Would a bald mountain range dare say to one covered in trees, "Because you are covered in trees, you are less majestic," or a bird-of-paradise blossom say to a magnolia, "Because your colors are not as vibrant as mine, you are not beautiful"? Not at all! And we are just as much the proclamations of his handiwork as the skies, fields, and seas.

Our difference is also sometimes the very thing God intends to use to mold us into his image. It may not be our preferred method of learning, but difference provides us with natural opportunities to see God's hand—and to see others—in ways we otherwise could not. Status quo and sameness cannot fully teach us about his depths. We are valuable apart from what we do, who sees and desires us, where our limits fall, and where we rank in this world of distorted weights and measures.

### **Outsiders in the Body of Christ**

The body politic metaphor Paul employs throughout his letters has long served to illustrate diverse members of a political or social community working together toward shared goals. When Paul speaks of the body of Christ, he invokes and inverts that image. Whereas in its most common usage, the members lower on the social hierarchy are rallied to work toward the interests of those higher on the hierarchy, Paul is arguing for deference to those of lower position. Anglican theologian Anthony C. Thiselton writes,

It is an affront to Christ if a self-effacing or vulnerable Christian is made to feel second class or alienated, perhaps because he or she does not have what others see as the "right" gifts. It is a betrayal if such a person reaches the point of saying, "I do not *belong* to the body" (1 Corinthians 12:15).

To drive home this principle Paul borrows, *but also then reverses*, an application of the imagery of the body long known and used in Greco-Roman politics and rhetoric. From the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. through the first century up to the second, Plato, Plutarch, and Epictetus (contemporary with Paul) used the image of the body to promote the need for harmony where there was diversity of status. The Roman historian Livy narrates an appeal by the senator Menenius Agrippa to rebel workers on strike to resume work (*Ab Urbe Conditu* 2.32). He appeals to the interdependence of the “body” of the city to urge that the workers or slaves must provide food for the governing classes. Paul reverses the thrust of this appeal, *transposing it into an appeal to “the strong” to value “the weak” or despised.*<sup>4</sup>

The church, to its glory, is comprised of varied peoples with varied gifts. Yet, whether we’d like to admit it or not, even here we find evidence of the adoption of social distinctions more closely mirroring the culture than God’s kingdom. The culture Paul was addressing in Corinth was composed of individuals under the same spell as the larger Greco-Roman culture, which ruthlessly sought status and honor.<sup>5</sup> While we may not admit that love of honor and status is the animating force of our lives, let either be lost and we are overcome with shame.

The gospel holds out the hope of existing within a culture where honor, dignity, and belonging are not a product of pedigree, family of birth, being chosen by others, color of skin, income, ability, or what one can produce. But we do not reflect God or the true culture of his kingdom when people who are visible and dear to him are invisible or inconsequential to us. We fail to comprehend the magnitude of his purposes and grace as well as the utter perfection of his world-frustrating wisdom.

We are presented, as members of a diverse church, with opportunities to affirm the dignity, beauty, and value of its every member. We are challenged to rethink our boast as God pursues, chooses, and lavishes his grace upon those whose only boast is him. And we each must face

these uncomfortable truths: As far as God's kingdom is concerned, we were chosen despite ourselves. No one will inherit the kingdom who believes they are entitled to it. Our weakness carries more cachet with God than our strength.

### **A New Kind of Opting Outside**

The impulse to be on the inside isn't always wrong. In my two stints living in Asia as an adult, I dove headfirst into two cultures that couldn't be further from my own and did my best to acclimate. This meant more than learning the language. I tried making Paul's aim to become all things to all people my own:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Meeting people where they are for the sake of the gospel is commendable. Of course, I inevitably stuck out as a Black woman. No matter how proficient I became in the languages or how well I adapted to doing as the locals did, my outsider status remained painted on my skin.

### **Loved Deep and Wide**

The identity of outsiders is not foremost as victims but as recipients of special grace. This puts us in league not necessarily with those whose lives overflow with material blessings, but with Paul: "afflicted in every

way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair” (2 Corinthians 4:8). We are witnesses of and to the surpassing power of God, a greater badge of honor than summer homes, loving spouses, healthy bodies, and lives of utmost comfort.

Paul’s prayer for the Christians in Ephesus to have the strength to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:14-21) is also my prayer for you. That, for the outsider, as you let the truths of God’s heart for you seep into the deepest and hardest-to-reach corners of your identity, you would ascertain new levels of its depths. For the insider, that as you watch the same love God has for you extend across the widest of margins, you would better comprehend its breadth. And that we together would marvel at God’s expectation-shattering love.

### **Our Journey Together**

Some may accuse me of having an overly rosy picture of life on the outside. Or of glorifying something that, in some cases, might better be grieved. It’s true; sometimes the mere existence of an outside bears bitter witness to a broken world. I know well that it comes with its share of challenges—real, big, heartbreaking, and in some cases, life-threatening. But it holds as much potential for growth and self-discovery as for pain.

Part of my aim in writing this book is to stimulate self-reflection. The reflection questions at the end of each chapter present a chance to step back from being defensive or reactionary and think soberly about ourselves. Another goal is to share some of my journey from viewing differences as burdens to recognizing them as gifts as I engaged God through them. I also want to encourage those still burdened by their difference to see how they can be bettered by it. But more than anything, I want us, whether insiders or outsiders, to see Christ more clearly and to delight in the paradoxical vision he has for his body. To see with fresh eyes its goodness and godliness and to seek anew its peace and purity.

Our journey in these pages will take us deeper into the gifts that come with being on the outside. Some of these gifts will be general to all kinds of outsiders, whereas others may be more specific. Outsideness endows its possessor with a special ability to see what can only be seen from a distance, with a field of vision wide enough to see the margins, with a higher tolerance for discomfort, and with a sensitivity to others' experiences that insiders may lack. The Bible speaks to the unique contributions of outsiders to God's kingdom, to God's special care for outcasts, to the special honor given to parts of the body that lack it, and to the supremacy of faith. The gifts of the outsider require thoughtful embrace both by the outsiders themselves and those predisposed to see the outside position as one of weakness.

When Jesus took on flesh, he embarked on the life of an outsider. Whether we've always been outsiders, are looking to become one, or just want to better love the ones in our midst, he knows our path. Christ gives us courage, conviction, and perspective the world cannot, and we look to his example. Humbled by a sacrifice that undid our alienation, we honor everything his blood bought for us. As people of the cross—being built together with Christ as our cornerstone—division does not become us.



*Reflection Questions*

1. When you think of an outsider, what comes to mind?

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2. Which, if any, of the individuals at the opening of this chapter can you relate to?

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3. If you consider yourself a seasoned outsider, what has that experience taught you?

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4. If you consider yourself a sporadic outsider, what is your normal reaction or response to situations that draw attention to your outsiderness?

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5. Who are the “outsiders” in your life?

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6. Read Colossians 3:11. If Paul were writing to the church today, what divisions do you think he would highlight? If he were writing to your specific church, what might he point out?

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7. In your culture, where are the loci of shame and stigma when it comes to difference and division? Where is it okay to be different? When does difference carry shame?

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