



OUTLANDISH

AN UNLIKELY MESSIAH
A MESSY MINISTRY
AND THE CALL TO MOBILIZE

DEREK PENWELL

Study Questions
for Outlandish

Introduction

1. How do you deal with the criticism that “Christians shouldn’t be political”?
2. Given that Jesus had neither power nor pedigree, how is the fact that he was an unlikely Messiah good news?
3. In what ways does Jesus’ life and ministry reorient our definitions of success?
4. Can you point to any reasons why learning to follow Jesus as a political subversive—that is, as one of the members of the “35%”—is crucial for our times?

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The Worst Recruiter in History

CHAPTER ONE

1. Why is Jesus' penchant for surrounding himself with "low rent" followers liberating?
2. What kinds of people would Jesus choose to help him change the world if he were establishing his ministry today? What kinds of people would he avoid? What does that say about to whom the church should prioritize its work?
3. What are some of the ways the church can emulate Jesus' recruitment strategy? Who are the people everyone else looks past in our lives that might just be ones Jesus has in mind to change the world?
4. In what ways are we selling people short by not being honest about the difficult work of following Jesus? What are some strategies for remedying that?
5. How can the church begin to tell its story as an adventure (with all the perils adventure entails), instead of as a never-ending series of reassurances and personal reaffirmations?
6. Does the church have the will (permission) to tell people to "drop their nets and follow"—without resorting to some strategy of novelty marketing?

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CHAPTER TWO

The Worst Social Judgment

1. What are some times you've witnessed people proclaiming their love for others with their mouths, but doing so in a way that communicates something much less endearing?
2. If Jesus were on the scene causing trouble today, who are the people he'd be hanging out with that would make the purity police nervous?
3. What kinds of things can communities of resistance do to follow Jesus in blurring the lines meant to keep the "pure" and the "impure" apart?
4. In concrete terms, what do we owe the "harassed and helpless" in our world? I mean, not just "love" or "mercy," but what should that love and mercy look like when it's raining outside and the homeless woman has no where to go?

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1. If the phrase “kingdom of God” is an inherent mixture of politics and religion, which imagines what the world would look like if God were “Caesar,” what kind of difference would that make in the way of policy?
2. What kinds of practical ways might followers of Jesus operate in those two spheres to pursue a just and peaceful world?
3. How might our lives have to change if we took words from the Lord’s Prayer—like “kingdom,” and “bread,” and “debts,” and “trials”—as literal referents to our lives right now, instead of as words that point exclusively to some “spiritual” sphere in the hereafter?
4. What are some modern equivalents to Jesus’ temple-cleansing that his followers ought to be engaged in in our current situation?
5. How might we begin to identify the prophets working in **our** culture?
6. What are some of the limits that we should place on the use of such potent tools as satire, sarcasm, and irony in speaking the truth?

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1. Assuming Jesus—like everybody else with a lick of sense—detests hypocrisy, why is a reading of Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders of his day as merely “hypocrisy hunting” too simplistic as an interpretive strategy?
2. Why do people in power always seem to steer away from the virtuous? Put more simply, what is it about virtuous people that makes those in power so nervous?
3. Why is community so threatening to the folks in power?
4. Why is empathy alone never sufficient to being a faithful follower of Jesus?
5. If Jesus isn’t merely reinforcing the cultural narrative of the aggressiveness of the strong, and if he isn’t sanctioning some kind of shrinking passivity, what are the alternative possibilities for moral action from his followers?

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The Worst Teaching Style

CHAPTER FIVE

1. How does viewing parables as subversive speech change the way we interpret them?
2. Why is viewing the parables as bite-sized morality tales inadequate to the task of understanding Jesus' ministry as a political radical?
3. If, as I have argued, Jesus isn't proclaiming an ethereal spirituality, what does his spirituality look like?
4. What are some ways in our current political climate that we might recapture the sheer outlandishness not only of the substance of Jesus' teaching, but the subversive nature of his style?

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1. If the membrane between Messiah and social bandit was much more permeable in first century Palestine than we've traditionally thought, how does that alter not only our understanding of Jesus and his messiahship, but how we should seek to operate in our culture?
2. For Jesus to speak about any kingdom other than the Roman empire was to make a political statement. Consequently, we who are his followers must also understand our work as, in some sense, political. But how can we be political without being partisan?
3. If, in order to be faithful, we are called to be political, in what ways can we reasonably say now that salvation is about personal piety?
4. What was it that made Jesus such a lousy Messiah?
5. What are some of the dangers of over-spiritualizing the gospel?

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The Resurrection as God's Ultimate Judgment

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Do you believe that popular theories of the atonement, which view Jesus as a substitute to receive our punishment, are adequate in what they say about God? Why or why not?
2. If, as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest, we understand that, "Easter is God's 'yes' to Jesus *against* the powers who killed him," how does that affect our conception of what salvation looks like?
3. Why is the resurrection central to our understanding of what social justice and advocacy ought to consist of?
4. In what ways should an understanding of resurrection as judgment shape and form Christian community, as well as its ministry to the world?

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1. From the standpoint of vulnerable populations, why is the imposition of nonviolence as a strategy problematic?
2. If requiring everyone in the community to be heroes or saints is unreasonable, how do we form the kinds of people necessary to sustain communities of resistance?
3. How do we fashion people with the strength of courage to stand among the 35 percent? People capable of saying “no” to authority when that authority seeks our active participation (or silent approval) of policies that trample the weak and the destitute?
4. How can congregations begin to balance the work of justice and mercy, so that mercy isn’t the only faithful Christian response?
5. What are some ways to help a congregation begin the transformation from reflexively saying “no” to saying “yes?”

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