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## Worshipping a Peculiar God

*The following is the text of the chapel message I gave at Immanuel Christian Secondary School this week. It's a little longer than normal, and it has references that make the most sense if we understand them in the context of a chapel setting.*

I attended the first chapel of this school year, and it was then that I learned that the theme for this year is based on 1 Peter 2:9, the KJV translation which says that we are a peculiar people. In that chapel, I think the speaker said that as Christians we are meant to be odd.

I had been doing a bit of research for a sermon a few days earlier, and I found myself going down a lot of rabbit holes. I was going from web page to web page, reading things that I found to be interesting. I happened across one web page which gave a bit of history to the word, "odd."

Today, it's not very popular to be odd, but 500-600 years ago, it was a compliment to be called an odd person. It actually meant "outstanding or illustrious." I think we can know what that means if we apply it to the world of sports. Volleyball season is over, I think, so let me use that as an example. Volleyball is a team sport, of course, and you depend on each other to win the game. But sometimes on a team there is someone who is so good, so far above all the other players that you can't help but notice her. When the team is on the court, she stands out. At one time in history, the highest compliment you could pay such a player was to call her "odd." She was so outstanding that she stood out from all the rest.

Because the KJV uses the word, "peculiar" when it calls us a peculiar people, I wondered if that word has the same history. The KJV was translated in 1611, and the words that they used then sometimes take on a different meaning today. That is true of the word, "peculiar." In 1611 "peculiar," meant "unusual or uncommon" but not in a negative sense. Like "odd" peculiar meant "distinguished, special, particular, select." Today, when we read the word "peculiar" in the Bible, we might read "strange" or "weird." But that is not what the translators of the KJV were thinking in 1611. When they translated the Greek language, they used the word "peculiar" to say that God's people (Christians) are distinguished and special. The Greek word implies that we are God's special possession, as the NIV translates it.

Further, it might be helpful to know that the word, "peculiar," had some relationship to ownership. Let me illustrate. Let's say that you collect classic cars, and you have about 15 of them. Of those 15 cars, however, one stands out above the rest. Maybe it's because it belonged to your grandfather. Or perhaps it is one of 200 left in the world or perhaps it's because it's the first car you restored. For whatever reason, that car is peculiar to you. You own many cars, but it's the car that stands out above the rest. Of all your possessions, it's the peculiar car.

I am sure you have heard a number of times this year, we are a peculiar, odd people, we who call ourselves Christians. For whatever reason, God has chosen to make us his special possession, and he has done that as we put our faith in Jesus Christ. We are peculiar and odd to him, not in a negative sense, but in the sense of the outstanding volleyball player and the special car in your collection. We are special to God.

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But there is something else we need to know. Our God is also peculiar and odd. We worship an odd God, a peculiar God, keeping in mind how I have just defined those words. So, what is it that makes our God peculiar and odd?

Sometimes it's helpful to do a bit of comparison so that we really understand what we are dealing with. We don't know how good a volleyball player is until we see them on a team with other volleyball players.

So, what makes our God peculiar and odd? I think that the best way to think of God is to put him in the context of that biblical times. We all know that in biblical times, both OT and NT, every nation had its own gods. In NT times, Rome had a whole bunch of gods, called a pantheon. In OT times the Canaanites, Egyptians and residents of Mesopotamia had their own gods, and the gods differed from place to place and each god had his own specialty.

So, let's say that you live here in Southern Alberta and want to travel to Montana. If we lived in that time, the Alberta gods had no power and authority in Montana, so if you went to Montana, you would have to change religions. You would have to recognize the gods of Montana. But even if you remained in Alberta, you couldn't have just one god. You would have to have many gods because each god had his (or her) own specialty. One god looked after rain while another took care of relationships. A different god would heal diseases and yet another one could help in times of war. If you wanted help from the gods, you had to know which gods happened to be in the area, and you had to know which god could provide you with what you needed. It was quite complicated, and you had to know what you were doing.

Then along comes the LORD, the God of the Bible, and he makes some pretty big claims. He says, "I'm the God who is everywhere." So, if you travel to Montana or Montreal or Moldova, you can worship the LORD. Further, the God of the Bible makes the claim that no matter what we need, we can turn to him. If we are having trouble in a relationship, we can turn to the LORD. If we need a job, we can turn to the LORD. If a loved one is sick, we can turn to the LORD. No matter what, no matter where, our God, the LORD, the God of the Bible says that he is able to help us.

That's what makes the God of Scripture odd and peculiar. He stands out above the rest, and he is outstanding in every field. Now, of course, we all know that there is only one God, the LORD, and that all those other gods are simply figments of human imagination. That being said, we can also worship figments of our imagination, if we make something into a god. People actually worshipped those gods which didn't exist and which couldn't help them because they were nonexistent. But we shouldn't be surprised because lots of people make things into gods and worship those things, even when it's obvious that what they worship can't do anything for them. People who make money their god, for example, are big fools because money doesn't help us. True, money can make life a little better, but money doesn't really help us. Money doesn't care about us, and it doesn't even know that we exist. But money has become a really big god that lots of people worship. And money is not the only thing people worship. I know some people who worship themselves, thinking that they can do everything they need to get through life. I don't know about you, but I am not nearly as outstanding as I would like to be, and I don't think depending on myself instead of the God who is powerful will get me anywhere where I need to be.

So, when we compare the God of Scripture to any other gods, our God is peculiar and odd in that no matter where we are, he is able to provide us with what we need.

But there is something else that we should know about this peculiar God. He is committed to us. Remember the car collection with that special car. Let's say that it belonged to your grandfather. You'll never part with it, no matter what. That car is going to stay in the family forever. Even if you fall on hard times and you have to sell everything else to survive, you won't sell that car, no matter what. You're committed to it.

In the same way, God is committed to us. He won't let us go, no matter what. Again, it is helpful to know that the gods of the nations in biblical times didn't have that same commitment. In fact, they didn't care about the people at all. The only time they would respond to the people is if they felt like it, and it wasn't too inconvenient, or, perhaps, if they could benefit from the people in some way. Our God is not like that. He is fully committed to us, and we know he is because he made us his possession by giving Jesus, his eternal Son, to die for us on the cross. Our God will not part with us.

But I'm not supposed to be talking about all of this. I was asked to talk about worship, our peculiar practices, why we go to church, why we worship as a community, that type of thing. I was asked to talk about why our worship is peculiar or different. But I couldn't do that without talking about the object of worship, our peculiar and odd God who is able to do all things and who is committed to us.

So, why do we worship? Better to ask, "What is worship?" The Hebrew and Greek are a little more vivid in their words. In the Hebrew, one of the primary words used for worship is "to fall prostrate on one's face." In some cultures (Korean, for example), people show respect for each other, and the deeper they bow, the more respect they show. The Hebrew pictures us showing so much respect that we bow with our faces to the ground.

The Greek word that is most often translated as worship has to do with serving. When a king has subjects, they serve him by doing his bidding and by obeying the laws he puts into place. We bend our wills to the one we worship.

All of life, if we understand worship as bending our wills (symbolized by bending our bodies to the ground) is worship. In other words, when you are in Math class or driving to friend's house or baking a cake for your mother's birthday – in all of that we bend our wills to God.

But we easily forget that. And that is why we need communal worship, gathering with other believers who call the LORD their peculiar and odd God. When we gather for communal worship, we do so to honour God. As we are reminded of who God is (and we need that reminder regularly), we learn again to bend our lives and our wills to serve him. In a sense, communal worship (what we do in church and what we are doing here during the school chapel) is practice for life. In communal worship we learn that our peculiar God is outstanding, unique, and totally capable of taking care of us in every way, and we are reminded that he is committed to us.

And communal worship gives us the opportunity to learn how to respond appropriately. The songs we sing and the prayers we offer are ways to practice serving the Lord. If we don't make that a regular practice with other believers, we will quickly find that we are not serving God as faithfully with the rest of our lives.

I know that represented in this school there are many different churches, and I know that the style of worship varies greatly from one church to another. We should know that the style of worship is our preference, not God's. What God is looking for in worship, no matter what the style (and he can handle almost any kind of style) is that as we are reminded of the fact that he is a peculiar and odd God, and that

we want to serve him. What disappoints God in worship are those times when we don't learn about God and aren't called to bend our wills to him.

Worship, then, is being reminded of what kind of God we have and, as we learn about him, we bend our wills and our lives (and sometimes our bodies) to respond to him by serving him with all that we are.

Worship by Christians is peculiar and odd because we have a God who is peculiar and odd, if you remember the meaning of the words that I gave you earlier. Our God is so outstanding, he is the only one in the field, and he is also committed to us. Because we have peculiar God, our worship is peculiar, because, in our worship, we honour and serve him alone.

*Pastor Gary*