

Life on the Fringes

Folks today like to be mainstream. In fact, it is a common slur to denigrate someone as being outside the mainstream. Those outside the mainstream are the fringe element. Among churches this term is used to manipulate folks to believe what everyone else believes.

Folks talk about mainstream religion. In our day, this is often used to talk about the big three: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, it is really only used to talk about those in the big three who act like it really doesn't matter what you believe. The rest are fringe, fanatics, radicals.

Then you hear folks talk about mainstream Christianity. This refers to evangelicalism. Anyone who suggests that it really doesn't matter what you believe, teach, or practice as long as you call Jesus Lord gets to be part of the mainstream. Folks who want to spend time debating doctrine or being dogmatic on any issue are part of the fringe. Those who claim God may have some real rules about how to worship and serve Him are part of the fringe element.

I've even heard people talk about "mainstream churches of Christ." Typically, this refers to churches of Christ that don't want to spend too much time arguing about authority. The folks who are constantly asking, "Is there authority for that?" get to be on the fringes. The folks who stand out against common practices get to be on the fringes.

At every level, the hope is if people are made to feel abnormal, different, outsiders, maybe they'll step back in line. So we start talking about mainstream and fringe. Whatever the case, you don't want to be on the fringe. That would mean you're...well...weird.

No doubt, being on the fringe can be bad. There are some fringes we don't want to be on. I'd say that someone who practiced cannibalism would be on the fringe of society. However, being on the fringe is not necessarily bad. In fact, sometimes it is positively good.

That is exactly what the Hebrew writer was talking about in **Hebrews 13:11-13**:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (ESV).

Those who seek to push us to be mainstream want us to value what we have here on the earth. They want us to fear being ostracized and outcast. They want us to fear not getting to take part in the recreation, business, and fellowship of the mainstream. But Jesus calls us to look outside the mainstream. He calls us to go outside the gates. That is exactly where He went. Like the sacrifices that were burned outside the camp, Jesus was taken outside the gate and His body was nailed to a cross.

Jesus went to the cross because He didn't fit the mainstream idea of a Messiah. He didn't offer what the mainstream were hoping. Instead, He called the mainstream to task. He said that something was wrong with the mainstream. Eventually the mainstream killed Him outside the gates.

Jesus invites us to go outside the gates. That is a frightening place to be. After all, being outside the gates means living on the fringes. It means being ostracized by most people. It means being looked down on by the majority. It may mean losing a job or losing a sale. It may mean being called names. For all we know, in the near future it might even again mean going to jail. But this shouldn't surprise us. After all, living on the fringe cost Jesus His life. Can we, His followers, expect much better?

But here is the key, the Hebrew writer says. We seek a city that is to come. We aren't seeking what is down here anyway. We know that if we live for the praises and rewards of men, that is all the praise and reward we'll get (cf. **Matthew 6:1-6**).

Let us be people who meet Jesus outside the gate. Let's be the people who live on the fringes. Let's be the people who are called weird, fanatic, radical. No matter what it costs down here, it won't matter because we aren't looking for what is down here anyway. We are looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. If we refuse to get distracted by the cities that men are making here on earth, we can live on the fringes with Jesus and He'll get us to that city.

--Edwin L. Crozier