

# unfashi nable



making a difference in the world  
by being different

**tullian tchividjian**

foreword by **timothy keller**

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UNFASHIONABLE

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The names of some individuals whose stories are told in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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The great guide of the world is fashion and its god is respectability—two phantoms at which brave men laugh! How many of you look around on society to know what to do? You watch the general current and then float upon it! You study the popular breeze and shift your sails to suit it. True men do not so! You ask, “Is it fashionable? If it is fashionable, it must be done.” Fashion is the law of multitudes, but it is nothing more than the common consent of fools.

— CHARLES SPURGEON

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## f reword

Tullian Tchividjian bravely steps into one of the hottest debates in contemporary evangelicalism—the divisive issue of how Christians should relate to our broader culture. He does so with grace, providing us with one of the most accessible guides to this issue that we have.

Let me give a brief outline of the current conflict as I see it.

Traditionally, evangelicals' attitude toward culture has been one of relative indifference. It was thought, after all, that this world is only going to burn up in the end. Only human souls last forever. What matters, then, is to convert as many people as possible, and if we do so during the time we have left here on earth, society will be bettered and changed “one heart at a time.” Many churches and Christians still understand things this way. But during the last generation, as American social values changed drastically and as the distinction between Christianity and the rest of the culture has sharpened, many Christians have felt pressured to respond. Three very different approaches have emerged.

First, some perceive the main problem to be the loss of moral absolutes. They insist that Christians have been too passive and must “take the culture back” through politics and grass-roots social activism around issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, fatherhood, traditional gender roles, and abstinence education. They complain that Christians have become too much like the culture since we have as many divorces and abortions and since many no longer really believe in absolute truth. Young people are therefore encouraged to recover a Christian worldview and then to penetrate the culture and accomplish a conservative version of the “long march through the elite institutions” that the young 1960s radicals achieved over the last thirty years.

In reaction to this approach, other Christians have insisted that the main problem today is the church's irrelevance to the concerns of people and the problems of society. While the first group thinks Christians are too assimilated into the world around them, this second group believes Christians are too withdrawn into their own subculture. Believers speak in language that is now undecipherable to the average person. In particular, they are indifferent to the inequality, injustice, and suffering in the world. In this model the church is called to connect with the felt needs of people and especially to work against inequality and injustice in society. As different as they seem on the surface, older churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback and many emerging churches basically share this way of relating Christ to culture.

The last of the three approaches believes the main problem today is that both the conservative evangelical church and the liberal mainline church have been corrupted by the "Constantinian error" of seeking to reform the world to be like the church. Instead the church has become like the world. It is dominated by the political economy of capitalism and liberal democracy. Trying to change the world seduces Christians into conformity to the world in order to get into positions of influence. Trying to be relevant and to meet felt needs only turns the church into another consumer mall. Instead the church needs to recapture its calling to be an alternative society, a counterculture. It needs to follow Christ "outside the camp," identifying with the poor and marginalized. It needs to have rich, liturgical worship that shapes Christians into a new society. It should stop trying to bring the kingdom of Christ into the world and simply live as signs of the future kingdom. Christians certainly live in the world and have secular vocations, but in them they should aim to act as good citizens and neighbors like anyone else. They shouldn't try to transform the culture.

So who is right? Is the main problem a lack of evangelism? Or is it the failure of Christians to live out their worldview in the cultural institutions? Or is it our inability to connect with nonbelievers in their own language, to work against injustice, hunger, and poverty?



Or is it the thinness and lack of distinctiveness of our own Christian communities?

When one takes a view of these models from thirty thousand feet, it is not too hard to realize why they all have so many adherents. Each one is onto something extremely important. Their biggest weakness, however, is that they tend to define themselves against each other instead of against the world. This means that, for all their strengths and insights, none of them seems to be able to see the strengths in the other approaches. This leads to imbalances and overreaching.

What I love about Tullian's book is that he implicitly critiques all of these approaches, not by directly trying to refute them, but by selecting the strengths of each approach, explaining and illustrating each one in ways easy to grasp, and then showing how at a congregational level they can be woven together into a coherent whole. Here you will learn how we must contextualize, how we Christians should be as active in Hollywood, Wall Street, Greenwich Village, and Harvard Square as in the halls of Washington DC. And yet there are ringing calls to form a distinct, "thick" Christian counterculture as perhaps the ultimate witness to the presence of the future, the coming of the kingdom.

Tullian gives us a great example of how the emphases I've described can be combined in a local church in our own cultural moment. Read it carefully and you will profit greatly.

—Timothy Keller, senior pastor of  
Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City,  
and author of *The Reason for God*

# Are You Unfashionable?



THIS IS A SERIOUS BOOK about a topic that Christ followers need to take seriously if they're going to make a serious difference in the world. So I thought it would be fun to begin with something not so serious: a David Letterman-style top ten list that will hopefully, in an uncomfortably fun sort of way, help you understand what I mean by the term *unfashionable*.

## *You May Be Too Fashionable If...*

10. You can look around at church and notice that everybody is basically the same age as you are, and they look and dress pretty much like you do.
9. You think it's very uncool to sing a worship song that was "in" five years ago—much less sing a hymn from another century.
8. It's been a long time since you disagreed with anything said by Oprah.
7. You've attended a "leadership" conference where you learned more about organization and props (structural renovation) than proclamation and prayer (spiritual reformation).
6. Your goal in spending time with non-Christians is to demonstrate that you're really no different than they are, and to prove this you curse like a sailor, drink like a fish, and smoke like a chimney.

5. You've concluded that everything new is better than anything old *or* that everything old is better than anything new.
4. You think that the way Jesus lived is more important than what he said—that his deeds are more important than his doctrine.
3. You believe that the best way to change our culture is to elect a certain kind of politician.
2. The church you've chosen is defined more by its reaction to “boring traditional” churches than by its response to a needy world.
1. The one verse you most wish wasn't in the Bible is John 14:6, where Jesus says, “*I* am the way, and the truth, and the life. *No one* comes to the Father except through *me*.” That's way too close minded!

Part 1



# The Call



# A Cry for Difference

One of the great attractions of Christianity to me is its sheer absurdity.

—MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE



I WISH EVERYONE could have had my upbringing. I come from a line of devout Christians who have been used by God in various ways to change the world. As far back as I can trace, strong Christian conviction and devotion to Jesus Christ have been defining marks of my family legacy—a gracious gift to me from God, something I neither asked for nor deserved.

That heritage goes beyond my maternal grandparents, Billy and Ruth Graham, faithful servants of the kingdom of God for the last sixty-five years. It also includes my dad, a respected psychologist, who has always put service to God and others before himself. And it includes my mom, a Christian writer and speaker whose ministry to women, especially to mothers and wives, has spanned the globe.

With a large family entrusted to them (I'm the middle of seven children—five boys and two girls), my parents worked hard to create a home atmosphere that encouraged us kids to take God seriously but not take ourselves too seriously. The flavor of Christianity they cultivated in our family was joyful, warm, inviting, hospitable, and real, not legalistic or oppressive.

We laughed hard and often, mostly at ourselves. We were trained to think deeply about God, to feel passionately for God, and to live

urgently in response to God. The gospel, according to my parents, needed to be understood with our heads, felt with our hearts, and worked out with our hands. Anything short of this was a less-than-balanced expression of true Christianity. They taught us to think, to read, to pray, to sing, to cry, to love, to serve.

Growing up, my brothers and sisters walked the straight and narrow for the most part, rarely giving my parents any real trouble. And then there was me. Different story!

Maybe it was because, despite my healthy upbringing, I found it difficult being the middle child. There's a large age gap between my three older siblings and my three younger ones, and I couldn't figure out if I was the youngest of the older set or the oldest of the younger group. I was in the unenviable position of being both a youngest child and an oldest child. Faced with this tension, I should have "cast all my anxiety on the Lord," as I was taught. But I didn't. Unsure of where I fit inside the family, I set out trying to fit outside of it.

At sixteen I dropped out of high school. Then, because my lifestyle had become so disruptive to the rest of the household, my grieving parents decided to kick me out of the house. But I refused to go quietly. On that memorable, dreadful afternoon, I was escorted off my parents' property by the police.

I'll never forget sitting in the back of that police car and looking out the window at my crying mother. I felt no grief, no shame, no regret. In fact, I was pleased with my achievements. Having successfully freed myself from the constraints of teachers and parents, I could now live every young guy's dream. No one to look over my shoulder, no one to breathe down my neck, no one to tell me what I could and couldn't do. I was finally free—or so I thought.

My newfound freedom had me chasing the things of this world harder than most others my age. I sought acceptance, affection, meaning, and respect behind every worldly tree and under every worldly rock. The siren song of our culture promised me that by pursuing the right people, places, and things, I'd find the belonging I craved. If I

could look, act, and talk a certain way, my deep itch to fit in would finally get scratched.

But it didn't work out that way. The more I pursued those things, the more lost I felt. The more I drank from the well of worldly acceptance, the thirstier I became; the faster I ran toward godless pleasure, the farther I felt from true fulfillment; the more I pursued freedom, the more enslaved I became. At twenty-one I found myself hungering for belonging more than ever.

The world hadn't satisfied me the way it had promised, the way I'd anticipated. The world's message and methods had, in fact, hung me out to dry. I felt betrayed. Lied to. I desperately needed to be rescued by something—or Someone—out of this world.

### Punctured Roof

One morning I woke up with an aching head and a sudden stark awareness of my empty heart. Having returned to my apartment after another night of hard partying on Miami's South Beach, I'd passed out with all my clothes on. Hours later, as I stirred to a vacant, painful alertness, I realized it was Sunday morning. I was so broken and longing for something transcendent, for something higher than anything this world has to offer, that I decided to go to church. I didn't even change my clothes. I jumped up and ran out the door.

I arrived late and found my way to the only seats still available, in the balcony.

It wasn't long before I realized how different everything was in this place. I immediately sensed the distinctiveness of God. In the music, in the message, and in the mingling afterward, it was clear that God, not I, was the guest of honor there. Having suffered the bankruptcy of our society's emphasis on self-fulfillment, I was remarkably refreshed to discover a place that focused on the centrality of God.

I didn't understand everything the preacher said that morning, and I didn't like all the songs that were sung. But at that point the style

of the service and what people were wearing became nonissues. They could have all looked Amish or all like hipsters from Brooklyn; they could have been singing old songs or new songs—it didn't matter. Why? Because that morning I encountered something I couldn't escape, something more joltingly powerful than anything I'd ever experienced, something that went above and beyond typical externals. Through both the music and the message, the transcendent presence of God punctured the roof, leaving me—like Isaiah when he entered the temple—awestruck and undone.

I was on the receiving end of something infinitely larger than grand impressions of human talent. God was on full display. It was God, not the preacher or the musicians, who was being lifted up for all to see. It wasn't some carefully orchestrated performance (which, believe me, I would have seen right through). Rather, the people of God were simply honoring God as God.

In the Bible the glory of God is God's "heaviness," his powerful presence. It is God's prevailing excellence on display. That's what I encountered that morning. I met a God who is majestically and brilliantly in command.

I was a seeker being reached, not by a man-centered, trendy show, but by a God-centered, transcendent atmosphere. I was experiencing what Ed Clowney, the late president of Westminster Theological Seminary, used to call "doxological evangelism." It was, quite literally, out of this world.

Here, finally, was the radical difference I'd been longing for.

After the service I couldn't leave. I had to stick around and find out who these people were. As I talked with some of them, I was struck by how different they seemed from the group I'd been out with the night before (or any other night, for that matter). The people here seemed more solid, less superficial, more real, more grounded. They asked me questions. They listened. They genuinely cared about one another—and me. They were indisputably peculiar, in a refreshing way.

Back in my apartment that afternoon, I thought long and hard



about what had made my experience that morning so magnificently satisfying. What stood out most was just how refreshingly different it was, compared to everything I'd come to believe was cool and in style. In fact, according to the culturally fashionable standards I'd come to embrace, everything I had encountered in church that morning was delectably unfashionable.

I had not only encountered radically different people, but through those people I had encountered a radically different God—and as a result I could sense that I was being pulled in a radically different direction. The profound difference I had experienced that morning had already made a profound difference in my life—a difference that would last forever.

I couldn't wait to go back the next week.

### Looking for What?

It's been many years since that riveting morning in church. Now I'm a pastor trying to reach the kind of person I used to be. So I reflect on that time in my life and ponder, *What was I looking for? And why?*

My experience in church that morning convinced me that serious seekers today aren't looking for something appealing and trendy. They're looking for something deeper than what's currently in fashion.

The point I want to drive home in this book is that *Christians make a difference in this world by being different from this world; they don't make a difference by being the same.*

This is critically important, because in our trend-chasing world it's tempting for Christians to slowly lose their distinctiveness by accommodating to culture. But by trying so hard to fit in, many Christians risk having nothing distinctive to say to those who feel, in Walker Percy's memorable phrase, "lost in the cosmos."

In contrast, I'm asking you to embrace the delicious irony Christ demonstrated in bringing a message of God's kingdom that subversively transforms both individuals and the world. Only by being

properly unfashionable can we engage our broken world with an embodied gospel that witnesses to God's gracious promise of restoration, significance, and life.

As you'll come to see in the pages ahead, by *unfashionable* I'm not talking about what you wear or how you look, the lingo you use or the music you listen to. I'm talking about something deeper, more significant—and much more demanding.

I want to help you reimagine the potential impact of a radically unfashionable lifestyle. I want to show you what God-soaked, gospel-infused priorities look like in relationships, community, work, finances, and culture—and how those priorities can change the world. I'm hoping you'll work your way through this book (and the study guide at the back) and gain a clearer picture of what it means to live subversively—and redemptively—for God and his expanding kingdom. My earnest prayer is that this book will help to mobilize a generation of God-saturated missionaries who will live *against the world for the world*.

So let's get started.