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Have you ever found yourself feeling as though you don't fit in with those around you? Maybe there was a time in life when your friends were wearing the "in" clothes but you wore the out of date hand-me-downs from other family members. Or maybe your friends listened to the latest music that you didn't really enjoy.

This past week while on vacation I encountered two events that made me stop and think about how often we struggle to discern whether to "fit in" with everyone else. The first event was a wedding that I performed for the mother of a student I taught 27 years ago in Head Start, which is a federally funded program that provides an early education for children in low income families so they have a head start before attending kindergarten. Nothing about the wedding seemed to fit in with the past weddings I conducted.

When we arrived at the address for the wedding, we discovered the location was a Moose lodge, complete with Bingo score boards hanging on the

walls and flashing Christmas lights strung on the arch on the stage. Our family realized we were overdressed in suits and dresses when the guests arrived wearing flip flops and casual shirts. Although the groom seemed disinterested in the day's events, the bride was excitedly running around introducing me to everyone by saying, "This was my son's Head Start teacher."

I knew only the bride and her son, who obviously had changed a great deal in 27 years and now had a wife and two children of his own. As he shared memories of the books I used to read him, I suddenly realized how big a role I had played in his early years as I helped to prepare him to fit into the educational system by giving him a head start.

In this case, helping someone fit in was a good thing, but sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of those conversations that we don't really want to fit into—conversations that gossip about others or the discussions that strive to tear other people apart. And although we don't want to participate in

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these discussions, it also feels awkward to not fit into them. We're often afraid to let others know our inner thoughts about our ideas or experiences that differ from others, for we want to avoid looking even more "out of place" or as though we don't fit in.

I imagine the apostle Paul felt a bit awkward writing a portion of his letter to the church in Corinth, for what he wrote just doesn't seem to "fit in" with most people's experience. Although he wrote the passage in the third person about someone he identified as "another person," he was writing about his own experience of a visit into heaven. He wrote that he was unsure whether it was a dream or actually happened. He heard things that he was not allowed to repeat, and although he might be tempted to boast about such a special revelation, he also wanted to avoid being considered a fool. He tells of his own weakness and his struggles that kept him from being too arrogant

and conceited, even referring to what he called a thorn that felt like a pain in his body.

Just imagine if I began telling you about some mystical experience I had of being transported into heaven and seeing things I could not tell you about, and then I began telling you about all my personal struggles to "prove" I was better than you. Although you have known me for many years, you might wonder whether if I was not longer fit.

Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth was a bit more complex than my connection to you, for although he was the founder of their church, when he left them to begin more churches, some people began to question his authority. Groups began arguing with one another, and Paul's letters to them seem to swing between tender affection to stinging attacks. His fondness is reflected earlier in his letter when he wrote "I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you" (2 Cor. 7:16). But after he writes and tells of his mystical experience, he lashes out by writing, "I have been a fool! You

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forced me into it” (12:11). It’s as though Paul wants to fit into their arguing about who is best by bragging about his mystical experience, and yet, he’s frustrated that he’s been dragged into the conflict, as though he’s not sure whether or not to fit in.

I think Paul might have enjoyed reading the book *Fitting in Is Overrated: The Survival Guide for Anyone Who Has Ever Felt Like an Outsider*. In the book the author asks the question:¹

- “Do you sometimes get in hot water because your honesty, your insights, or your outsider’s perspective are threatening to certain people who aren’t ready to hear the truth?”

Paul might have replied, “Yes! I’m always in hot water for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. When I confront people about their bickering with one another, they do not hear how Christ has freed us from our pettiness.”

Paul would have also identified with this statement from the *Fitting In* book:

- “At work or at family gatherings, do you find that you’re reluctant to partake in the pettiness, competitiveness, or mean-spirited comments that others engage in and that this keeps you from fitting in?”

I imagine Paul would quickly identify with not fitting in, and his letter to the church in Corinth seems to imply that he did not like getting caught up in the arguments of their congregation. He was passionate about his message of Jesus Christ who came to offer the world God’s hope, who came to bring healing into a world torn apart by violence and hostility.

The author of the book on *Fitting In* relates to Paul’s struggle of balancing passion and the desire to fit in: “How do you balance the desire to be accepted by the people around you with the desire to follow what’s in your heart and soul? This is the dilemma you face when you’re forced to choose between the side of you that wants to play it safe and fit in, and the side of you that is willing to risk

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being more honest and discovering a more genuine life. It's never an easy choice."²

As Christians, we often face that uneasy choice: when to fit in and go along with everyone else, and when to take a stand that makes us appear not to fit in, which leads to the second event this past week that reminded me how people of faith often struggle with the decision of whether to fit in. In Northern Indiana many Amish have settled in the area, and in our visit to Amish Acres we saw the 1955 Broadway musical *Plain and Fancy*. It tells the story of a big city man who inherited a piece of property in an area highly populated by the Amish. But before he sells the property, he wants to see it. In his encounter with the Amish he discovers many of the customs and beliefs of these plain people who have resisted modern conveniences and who often don't seem to fit in with the modern world.

Even though we may not follow many of the Amish customs, the musical helped the audience to

identify with their faith and their decision to not fit in with the rest of the world. Although Christians may choose not to fit in with all the practices around us, such as the arguing and bickering that Paul said was not worth bragging about, we do have the reassurance that we fit into God's family with whatever gifts or talents we have to share. Even when we feel we do not have the strength to get through a difficult day, Paul reminds us of the reassurance he heard from Christ: "My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

May you trust that God's grace will get you through any event, even when you feel as though you don't fit in.

¹ Leonard Felder, p. 23. Also at
<http://www.fittinginisoverrated.com/>

² Felder, p. 12.