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Introverts
in the
Church

FINDING OUR
PLACE IN AN
EXTROVERTED
CULTURE




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The Extroverted Church

“The extrovert God of John 3:16 does not beget an introvert people.”

RICHARD HALVERSON, *THE TIMELESSNESS OF JESUS CHRIST*

In a 2004 psychological study, students at a Christian college were asked to rate the person of Jesus according to the profiles of temperaments in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. In most categories the students were divided, and they predictably showed a tendency to cast Jesus in their own image. But there were two categories in which students definitively came down on one side. In the thinking/feeling category, 87 percent of the students rated Jesus as a feeler; however 83 percent of the students also identified themselves as feelers. The truly revealing results, though, were found in the extrovert/introvert category. Although more than half (54 percent) of these students tested as introverts, most of the students surveyed (97 percent) said that Jesus was an extrovert.

Extroverts and introverts alike *overwhelmingly considered Jesus to be an extrovert*. This is surprising because the evidence of Jesus' personality is not clear-cut. Our Bibles that print his words in red tempt us to see him as a talking head, while relegating other aspects of his ministry to incidental circumstance. Though he regularly taught throngs of people, we also see him at critical times

retreating from the crowds to pray in solitude and to spend time with his closest friends. He commandeers boats in order to create distance from the urgent demands and hectic energy of the people. He seems to prefer depth of relationship and conversation with a few select. While it is impossible to know for certain, Jesus' personality actually seems balanced between extroversion and introversion. How then does 97 percent of a focus group categorize Jesus as an extrovert? The psychology professor administering this study ventured an explanation and described its impact on introverts:

The perception of an extroverted Jesus might reflect a tendency within American culture to value extroversion over introversion. If one assumes extroversion to be better, one might conclude that Jesus, the perfect human being, would have been an extrovert. . . . Making an assumption that Jesus was extroverted based on a cultural bias might make it difficult for introverts in such a culture to accept and affirm their own behavioral preference as legitimate and valuable; not something to be overcome or even tolerated, but something to be appreciated and blessed. Such an assumption might also make it easier for extroverts to overlook the strengths of introversion and the benefits introverts bring to their interactions with others.¹

If human perfection, epitomized in the person of Jesus, includes extroversion then a large number of the population will always and irredeemably fall short. This adds a theological component to the already-prevailing cultural prejudice that extroversion is the superior temperament. In mainstream American culture (in schools, corporations and social institutions), those who are talkative, outgoing, energetic and assertive have a decided advantage. People who enjoy reflection and solitude, and listen more than they speak, are often viewed as enigmatic, antisocial and passive.

Marti Olsen Laney, who wrote *The Introvert Advantage*, says that “We live in a culture that caters to and extols extroverts. We definitely learn that extroversion is the way we *should* be.”² She quotes David Myers, the author of the book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, who asserts that there are three essential ingredients in the recipe for happiness: self-esteem, optimism and extroversion.³ He finds that, on the whole, extroverts are happier than introverts. Because of this bias, Jonathan Rauch, writer for *The Atlantic*, once dramatically stated that introverts are “among the most misunderstood and aggrieved groups in America, possibly the world.”⁴

For decades psychologists and sociologists have cited findings that introverts comprise a quarter to a third of the general population, and they assumed that the struggles of introverts were intertwined with their minority status. Yet those findings were based on research done in 1962; more comprehensive personality surveys, done in the last ten years, have actually revealed that introverts are in the statistical majority at 50.7 percent of the population!⁵ And researchers point out that there are *not* more introverts in the population than there were in 1962, but our current data and samplings are just more thorough and accurate.

The slant toward extroversion in the larger culture has also infiltrated the church. I interviewed dozens of introverted Christians, and without exception, they expressed some degree of frustration and sense of exclusion from their churches. Many have found that their churches, in both theology and practice, are not accommodating to people of their temperament. These introverts have difficulty finding a place in their communities where they feel encouraged to be who they are and to serve in a way that is consistent with their nature.

For several years, my introverted friend Emily participated in a Christian community where extroversion was normal. Hailing from Japan, Emily was accustomed to a culture where deference to others and servanthood were considered highly desirable quali-

ties, and she felt displaced in an American culture that valued self-promotion and aggressiveness.⁶ She had positive relationships with people in the community, but she was always considered to be on the fringe because she spent a lot of time to herself. The ideal of “intimacy” in this community was people constantly together, and the implicit assumption was that the more activities and social interaction a person engaged in, the closer she was to God. Others thought Emily was antisocial and, therefore, lacking in faith. She was also resistant to sharing intimate details of her life with others, and her lack of vulnerability was construed as a heart resistant to God. Even though she had strong leadership traits, she was never asked to be a leader because she did not show the outward expressiveness that was considered a mark of faithfulness in this community. To her, the expectation to share everything with others felt intrusive, and she groaned, “Why do I have to let everyone into every corner of my life?”

THREE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL ANCHORS

American partiality toward extroversion infects many Christian traditions, but certain church cultures are more difficult for introverts to navigate than others. I have found that features of evangelical church culture, even the defining attributes that comprise evangelicalism, can create environments that are intimidating and unnatural for introverts.

A disclaimer: In the pages that follow, I will admittedly be painting with broad strokes, and not every church or tradition will relate to all aspects of my critique of mainstream evangelicalism and its slant toward extroverted ways of thinking and acting. When the scales are weighted heavily on one side, as I believe evangelicalism is toward extroversion, we sometimes need to over-emphasize a point in order to restore balance. In the same way, in portraying the characteristics and gifts of introverts, and what we have to offer evangelical churches, I do not presume to capture all

the complexity of each individual introvert. Lastly, as I describe the qualities of introverts, I am not thereby implying that extroverts are *not* capable of those things (such as thoughtfulness or depth). In fact, as I will discuss in chapter two, each person has both an introverted and an extroverted side, though most of us will land on one side of the spectrum.

However, in most evangelical circles, there are three theological anchors—an intimate relationship with God through Jesus, the authority and centrality of the Bible, and active personal evangelism—that are often expressed in strikingly extroverted ways.

A personal relationship with God. At the heart of evangelical theology is the doctrine that God is personal. God is *intrapersonal*, in that his very being is composed of three separate persons who live in a dynamic state of mutuality, love and togetherness. Early church theologians used the word *perichoresis* (Greek for “dance”) to describe the interconnectedness that characterizes the life and work of the three persons of the Trinity. God is also *interpersonal*, in that he relates with his creation and seeks relationship with each one of his creatures. Evangelicals place central emphasis on the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God who appeared in human form as Jesus of Nazareth. We affirm that God’s redemptive plan centers around the saving death of Jesus, and people receive the victorious power attained in his resurrection through a trusting, intimate, personal relationship with the living, ascended Christ. This Jesus is fully accessible to us and we can relate to him as a friend in open, informal and conversational interaction.

The evangelical priority on this kind of personal relationship with Jesus has direct implications for the nature of the community that forms around him. It is not surprising that evangelicals have a high value for intimate, informal relationships with one another, and we structure our churches—with small groups in our houses, fellowship hours, social events, accountability

groups and prayer chains—in order to support this value. Most evangelical churches strongly encourage (and sometimes require) participation in these kinds of activities.

Unfortunately, sometimes our value for community life can become a substitute for relationship with God. Psychology professor Richard Beck says that for some churches *spirituality* is equated with *sociability*.⁷ The mark of a progressing faith is familiarity with a growing number of people and participation in an increasing number of activities.

Yet for introverts who are wearied by and sometimes apprehensive of large quantities of social interaction, these evangelical emphases can feel discouraging and marginalizing. By no means are introverts against intimate relationships; indeed we are motivated by depth in our relationships. And while the emphasis on intimacy with Jesus is welcome, in community we prefer interactions with smaller numbers of people with whom we feel comfortable. So when an evangelical community explicitly or implicitly preaches broad interaction across the congregation, the introverted resistance to it can produce interior feelings of spiritual inadequacy.

Centrality of the Bible. Evangelicals are, perhaps, best known for their reverence for Scripture. The community is guided by, and shaped around, its interpretation of the Bible and its application to the governance, values and life of the community. Other church traditions also rely on ritual, symbolism, liturgy and iconography, but evangelicalism predominantly exalts the power of the Word. Evangelicalism is a self-proclaimed “word-based” community. Though throughout Scripture the “word of God” refers to different self-expressions of God, including the embodied Word in the person of Jesus, in evangelical churches the “word of God” is most used to describe the Bible.

Evangelical church services usually are organized to feature the sermon, in which the pastor routinely expositions a biblical text or texts. In some evangelical churches, the sermon may take more

than half of the worship service. At the eight nondenominational, evangelical churches that I visited while writing this book, the sermon averaged forty-three minutes, and the entire worship service averaged eighty-one minutes. Sermons were intentionally delivered in a conversational and a loosely organized way, which contributed to their length. This style both emphasizes the centrality of Scripture in those communities and the regard for personal relationships that I have already mentioned. The pastors sought both to exposit Scripture and to connect on a personal level with their congregations.

This regard for the Bible and the informal preaching method of many evangelical pastors filter down into congregations and combine to create a conversational culture, in which learning about, discussing and living by the words of Scripture is very important. A love for the Word of God easily translates into a love for words about God . . . and words in general. Put more bluntly: Evangelicals talk a lot.

Former-evangelical-turned-Catholic-priest Thomas Howard explains a difference between Catholic practice and evangelical practice: “Emotionally, one would have to say that evangelicalism is a much more ‘up front’ form of piety, and very talkative.”⁸ Whereas in some church traditions you enter a sanctuary in a spirit of quiet reverence, in evangelical churches you walk into what feels like a nonalcoholic cocktail party. There is a chatty, mingling informality to evangelicalism, where words flow like wine.

To participate in the evangelical church is to join the conversation. Introverts, however, spare our words in unfamiliar contexts and often prefer to observe on the fringe rather than engage in the center. Our spirituality may be grounded in Scripture, yet is quieter, slower and more contemplative. In an upfront, talkative, active evangelical culture, we can be viewed as self-absorbed or standoffish, and we can feel like outsiders even when we have faithfully attended a church for years.

Personal evangelism. Evangelicals place a high priority on personal evangelism. We take Jesus' Great Commission—where he gave his followers the mission to announce God's kingdom—very seriously. An important part of our personal discipleship is sharing the good news with others. Typically, the evangelical emphasis has been on *speaking* the gospel. The famous line, attributed to Saint Francis: "Preach the gospel at all times—if necessary use words," has not traditionally been the backbone of our evangelistic methodology.

Instead, we believe, that people come to know Jesus through conversation with those who already know him, through people who can persuade with relevant arguments or share their testimonies of God's goodness. This evangelistic style is consistent with the features of evangelicalism noted above, and evangelism is believed to be most effective when words are exchanged in the context of personal interaction. Some even teach that, a true "evangelistic" interaction requires a thorough, verbal presentation of the gospel. At other times, evangelical evangelistic strategies are aggressive and confrontational. Some consider it our duty to challenge and disprove the viewpoints of others, simultaneously demonstrating the superiority of our worldview.

Apprehensiveness toward evangelism is not unique to introverts, but introverts may have a stronger resistance to evangelical methods for evangelism. A disinterest in small talk makes us reluctant to approach strangers, and we do not always have the energy to engage people in long conversation. Confrontation is not usually a comfortable approach for us, as our inner processing slows us down in a debate format. Our sense of personal uneasiness about evangelism is compounded by a spiritual guilt that creeps in when we fear we are neglecting the Great Commission.

Theological cornerstones of evangelical churches—like the accessibility of a personal, relational God, the authority and inspiration of Scripture, and the command to share the gospel and make

new disciples—are paramount, indispensable values. Yet our methods for expressing those values are often tilted toward extroversion, and when we conflate our values with our methods we run the risk of alienating introverts.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE EXTROVERTED CHURCH

The roots of the bias toward extroverted ways of thinking and acting reach back into the history of evangelicalism. The evangelical movement in the United States traces its origin to the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The winds of revival swept through Europe and North America, bringing with them an eruption of conversions and rediscovered religious zeal. The Awakenings gave birth to fresh commitments of obedience to Scripture, and they were frequently accompanied by physical and emotional experiences of God's presence. People gathered for worship had personal experiences of God's holiness, and many collapsed into tears or froze in silent awe. Others fainted or trembled uncontrollably.

At the center of the first Great Awakening was George Whitefield, an English evangelist who preached in churches throughout the American colonies. Some people hiked for days to hear him, packing every venue. Church historian Mark Noll describes Whitefield's highly extroverted preaching style: "In the pulpit he simply exuded energy; his speech was to the highest degree dramatic; he offered breathtaking impersonations of biblical characters and needy sinners; he fired his listener's imagination; he wept profusely, often and with stunning effect."⁹

Even with these emotional displays, the first Great Awakening maintained a remarkable balance between heart and mind, owing largely to the genius and devotion of another prodigious figure of the time—Jonathan Edwards, an introverted, Congregationalist pastor in Massachusetts. He was able to provide an intellectual

framework for the emotionally charged revivals, recording the movements of God in a short work called *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* and later penning a now-classic book that defended and clarified the nature of the revivals, *The Religious Affections*.¹⁰

During the Second Great Awakening—the origin of the camp meeting or tent revival—people would gather under a tent, sometimes for days on end, to hear evangelists preach the gospel. These evangelists addressed their listeners with dramatic urgency and intensity, impressing on them an immediate need for decision. People also responded with great emotion, sometimes in melodramatic displays of weeping or shrieking.

But whereas the first Awakening led to the founding of several of the country's most elite colleges, such as Princeton and Dartmouth, the Second Great Awakening of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries introduced an anti-intellectual bent to evangelical Christianity. Suspicious of a dry, lifeless, academic faith, the leaders of the Second Great Awakening emphasized that conversion must be an *experience* in order to be authentic. Piety of the heart began to overshadow the understanding of the mind. A wedge was driven between the emotions and the intellect, a divide that would endure for generations of evangelicals. After the Second Great Awakening, many evangelical leaders eschewed learning and theological understanding altogether, to the point that nineteenth-century evangelist D. L. Moody boasted “My theology! I didn't know I had any!”¹¹ What mattered to them was a genuine inward devotion to Christ that expressed itself in a life of obedience.

Scholar Os Guinness explains that the tent revivals, the forebears of twentieth-century evangelical crusades, featured props and other innovations that were indicative of cultural pragmatism. Americans valued “hard work, common sense, ingenuity, and know-how” and did not have room or need for intellectual sophistication, abstraction or thoughtful reflection.¹² American

evangelicals applied these pragmatic values to religion and began to focus on the visible effectiveness of their methods—in the form of tangible, quantifiable results.

Evangelicals today. Modern evangelicals are the heirs of the theology, values and practices of previous generations. We have received from our ancestors the bent toward piety and passion, as well as the tendencies toward anti-intellectualism and pragmatism.

Piety and passion. Evangelicalism continues to be primarily a religion of the heart. Personal piety can be beautiful and transformative, but sometimes our commitment to a “childlike faith” leads us to have an enthusiastic spirit that is intellectually and emotionally simple. Our historical roots in the Great Awakenings have led to an emphasis on overt, demonstrative, experiential displays of devotion.

This stress on public expressions of faith can set up a false model for what all “real” spiritual experience should look like, and it contributes to our evangelical verbosity. Henri Nouwen’s words about this are sobering: “Sometimes it seems that our many words are more an expression of our doubt than our faith. It is as if we are not sure that God’s Spirit can touch the hearts of people: we have to help him out and with many words, convince others of his power. But it is precisely this wordy unbelief which quenches the fire.”¹³ Sometimes words are a verbal mask for a spiritual void.

We might say that modern evangelicalism has a hearing problem. We often preach before we seek to understand a situation or before we sit in prayerful silence. Our verbal effusiveness can devolve into breezy clichés, hollow sound bites and repetitive song lyrics, things that don’t honor the uniqueness, complexity and beauty of each person.

Anti-intellectualism and pragmatism. Though the intellectual climate of evangelicalism is changing, many remain skeptical of the role of the mind in Christian faith and are suspicious of academia and elite learning institutions. Mark Noll summarizes this part of

evangelical culture: “To put it most simply, the evangelical ethos is activist, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian. It allows little space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment.”¹⁴

The pragmatism that we have inherited fosters an action-oriented culture. Evangelicalism values the doer over the thinker. The evangelical God has a big agenda. It’s as if the moment we surrender our lives to Christ we are issued a flashing neon sign that says “GO!” There is a restless energy to evangelicalism that leads to a full schedule and a fast pace. Some have said that, in Christian culture, busyness is next to godliness. We are always in motion, constantly growing, ever expanding.

I’ll never forget the statements a senior pastor of a 300-member congregation uttered when I interviewed for an associate pastor position: “This is a really high-octane environment. We’re looking for someone who is excitable and high energy. You have to be totally sold out to work here. We work full throttle.”

I double-checked my surroundings to make certain I was at a church and hadn’t stumbled into an interview for the pit crew at the Indianapolis Speedway. I would have laughed at his statements if I wasn’t so mortified. I was reminded of Eugene Peterson’s indictment of our brand of Christianity: “American religion is conspicuous for its messianically pretentious energy, its embarrassingly banal prose, and its impatiently hustling ambition.”¹⁵

The innovativeness of evangelicals has shaped the landscape of American religious life in ways that testify to this motion, growth and expansion. We invented the religious twentieth-century landmark: the megachurch—an expression of the church that introduced the paradox of people worshiping together in anonymity. At its best, the church growth movement has reached thousands of people with the gospel and shrewdly connected with the surrounding culture. At its worst, it has produced a superficial, consumerist mold of Christianity that has sold the gospel like a commodity.

Many evangelical megachurches, in their hope to create comfortable environments for seekers, have stripped their sanctuaries and worship services of any sense of mystery and the sacred. Their fast moving, high production events may entertain us and their avid employment of modern technology may dazzle us, but many times, they cannot help us hear the still, small voice of God.

The megachurch has fed our American preoccupations with size and celebrity, and some of the largest implications have come for our models of leadership. At the center of most megachurches is a big personality: a dynamic, larger-than-life pastor who is able to hold everything together with his charisma. *Time* magazine and various Christian publications now release lists of the most influential evangelicals, so fame and stardom have crept into evangelical culture. As churches rush to imitate the success of others, they go for what they think is the guaranteed recipe for prosperity, starting with finding a pastor with big presence and star power. The description of George Whitefield above might be the description of the ideal candidate for an evangelical pastor—except for, perhaps, his profuse weeping from the pulpit.

Implications for introverts. Not all pastors of megachurches are extroverts, though a recent Barna study of 627 senior pastors of Protestant churches found that 75 percent of them are. And human limitations often lead to pastors forming congregations in their own image, presenting a picture of Jesus and of discipleship that matches their own patterns. It is not surprising then that extroverted pastors are prone to encourage extroversion in their churches.

Even introverted pastors, though, feel the pressure to act like extroverts. A well-known pastor of a large congregation acknowledged that social interaction drains him and that he prefers not to be in the spotlight. Yet the social demands of his job are staggering. He lamented that, in his congregation, he is expected to be the “lead socializer”—the first one on the church patio and the last one to leave. All the interviews I conducted with introverted pastors yielded

one commonality: the coffee hour after worship is one of their least favorite hours of the week. They love their people, but after expending a tremendous amount of emotional energy to preach, they would prefer to disappear into their offices than mingle.

A therapist I know who frequently works with pastors said that many of her introverted clients struggle to find balance in their lives and often wrestle with depression. It seems that many introverts pay a high cost to be in ministry. They feel unable to meet the social expectations placed on them by their congregations, and they frequently lack adequate boundaries to enable them to find rest and to recharge their introverted batteries. Because of these challenges, one friend, who was part of a pastoral nominating committee, observed that the group's unspoken mantra was "if your personality starts with the letter 'I,' you need not apply."

All of these factors of mainstream evangelicalism combine to create an environment that can be marginalizing and even exclusive of introverts. For example, the up-front piety of evangelicalism, and the expectations for outward, emotional displays of faith, can feel invasive and artificial to introverts. Meanwhile, the anti-intellectual stream can alienate some introverted thinkers who find that their love of ideas, comfort in solitude and powers of concentration translate into a life of intellectual pursuits. Furthermore, the pragmatism that seeks measurable, tangible gauges for success strikes many introverts, who appreciate depth, as superficial and oversimplistic, and our action-oriented culture does not always value people who are thoughtful and reflective.¹⁶

THE INTROVERTED CHURCH

Versions of the word *introvert* are indelicately used in evangelical thought to refer to an ingrown, self-centered version of the church:

An introverted church, turned in on itself, preoccupied with its own survival, has virtually forfeited the right to be a

church, for it is denying a major part of its own being.¹⁷

The extrovert God of John 3:16 does not beget an introvert people. There is a terrible tendency to make the gospel serve us, to use it as a protection against the realities of life as though Christ died to preserve the status quo.¹⁸

But the introverted church wants to secure the church doors against divine surprises and unannounced entrances by the King.¹⁹

The explicit and direct command [the Great Commission] to Matthew's Jewish readers may represent a challenge to their tendency toward introversion . . . the introversion that was an exception in the first century has now become commonplace in contemporary Western churches.²⁰

To these writers and many others, "introversion" is equated with disobedience. In their minds, the "introverted" version of the church lacks a missional identity; it is self-preoccupied and exclusive, worried about polishing the walls that separate it from the world, rather than seeking to tear down the walls that distance people from the love of God. God the "extrovert" has his eye on all the world, and therefore the mark of his true people must obviously be extroversion.

Without doubt, the nature of the churches described by these quotations is a distortion of what Jesus had in mind when he called his followers to make disciples of all nations. A church that is self-focused and insular is a social club, not a church. While the authors are not referring to introverted individuals, to apply the term *introverted* to this kind of church is only to heap coal on the fire of an already-damaged introverted psyche. By way of analogy, imagine if we were to critique the church as soft, domestic and comfortable, and then we labeled it the "feminine" church. That would be insulting to women and to the feminine qualities in all of us. So to

call the isolated church “introverted” only reinforces stereotypes that plague people who are properly called introverts.

Further, I’m not convinced that the “extroverted” church would be any more faithful to the biblical vision. If a church, turning away from self-protection and parochialism, committed itself to being an “extroverted” community, the opposite imbalance could easily occur. If we are broadly defining the extroverted church as “outwardly oriented,” then a wholly extroverted church is liable to lose its center, lapsing into spiritual compromise and excessive cultural accommodation. Just as a church that is turned in on itself is stunted, a community that is thoroughly turned outward could lose its internal cohesion and disintegrate. Furthermore, as I will discuss, one of the ways we discover the compassion that lies at the heart of mission is to look inward. I believe that the truly healthy church is a combination of introverted and extroverted qualities that fluidly move together. Only in that partnership can we capture both the depth and breadth of God’s mission.

Introverted ancestors. The marginalization of introverts in Christian communities is a relatively new phenomenon when we consider the history of the church. There have been many periods in which solitary, contemplative believers have been among the most esteemed figures. In the fourth and fifth centuries, a group of men and women retreated away from the wealth and ostentation of newly established Christendom—which was a far cry from the persecuted underground of early Christianity—and moved into the Egyptian desert. These spiritual refugees, known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, lived in radical solitude to do battle with the forces of temptation and sin that besieged their souls. They sought unencumbered encounter with God through contemplation and unceasing prayer.

Even though these monastics (from the Greek word for “solitary”) wanted to remove themselves from society, over time they

became the conscience and the de facto moral leadership of the church. Eager apprentices from the cities followed them into their holes for wisdom and instruction, and even priests and bishops inquired after their counsel and blessing. Though they initially sought the isolated refuge of the desert, they came to understand their responsibility for teaching others, and they gave birth to monastic communities committed to spiritual discipline, work and mission. Through their devotion, they actually changed the ecclesiastical structures of the church. Formerly known for their eccentricity, the Desert Fathers and Mothers became revered for their holiness, humility and contemplative knowledge of God.

In our day, I am convinced that introverts are an important ingredient in the antidote to what ails evangelicalism. Our slower pace of life, our thoughtfulness, our spiritual and intellectual depth, and our listening abilities are prophetic qualities for the evangelical community, calling us to a renewed understanding of God and a fresh reading on the abundant life Jesus came to give us. Yet because of the extroverted bias in many of our churches, introverts are leading double lives. We are masquerading as extroverts in order to find acceptance, yet we feel displaced and confused. We are weary of fighting our introversion, and we long to live faithfully as the people we were created to be.