

Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization

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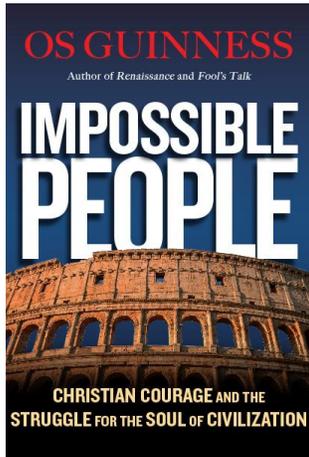
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Finding a Fresh Articulation of the Faith

More than ever, Christians must resist the negative cultural forces of our day with fortitude and winsomeness. We need followers of Christ who are willing to face reality without flinching and respond with a faithfulness that is unwavering. Os Guinness describes these Christians as “impossible people,” those who have “hearts that can melt with compassion, but with faces like flint and backbones of steel who are unmanipulable, unbribeable, undeterrable and unclubbable, without ever losing the gentleness, the mercy, the grace and the compassion of our Lord.” Guinness argues in *Impossible People* that we must engage secularism and atheism in new ways, confronting competing ideas with discernment and fresh articulation of the faith.

- What are the possible outcomes for the Western church as it stands today?
- What in our history has made the Christian faith culturally weak?
- How can the Western church avoid the outcomes of the German church caving in during Nazi reign, or other similar situations?
- Why do you think people outside the Western church see Christians as “cut off from their roots?”
- You write that Christians are to have “no fear.” What do you mean by that?
- Can you explain the “ABC moment” (Anything But Christianity)? Why do you think this mentality has taken hold in the West?
- You quote a British cabinet member describing the outcome of the ABC trend as this: “If we’re Roman Catholics, we’re accessories to child abuse. If we’re Anglo-Catholics, we’re homophobic bigots curiously attached to velvet and lace, if we’re liberal Anglicans, we’re pointless hand-wringing conscience-hawkers, and if we’re Evangelicals we’re creepy obsessives who are uncomfortable with anyone enjoying anything more louche than a slice of Battenberg.” How can the church in the West combat these preconceived notions?
- You reference the Tower of Babel in regard to the broader culture’s obsession with biotechnology and the information age. What do you think Christians can learn from that specific passage that applies today?
- You quote a historian as saying the Christian faith in California is “privately engaging, publicly irrelevant.” Where do you see this happening beyond America’s vast suburbia?
- Why do you think an emphasis on the history of ideas is so important for solving the problems of the Western church?



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"Every time I sit down to read the prophetic words of Os Guinness, I feel my spine strengthen and my mind perk up. His clear writing and earned wisdom bring both courage and uncertainty; for while we can't predict where our culture will head, we can rely on the truth that guides and emboldens every generation to meet the moment for which we've been called."

— Gabe Lyons, founder of Q,
author of *Good Faith*

Why "Impossible People?"

The term *impossible man* was used to describe the eleventh-century Benedictine reformer Peter Damian (c. 1007-1073). Dante placed Damian in the highest circle of paradise as a saint and the predecessor of Francis of Assisi. A thousand years ago, as in our own time, there was little regard for truth or for the integrity and purity of the Christian faith. Nor was there much sense of the gravity of sin, so the church was easygoing, corruption was rife and the moral and theological rot was as pervasive among the clergy and the leaders of the church as among ordinary people. (As in the times of the Hebrew prophets, so among Evangelicals today, it is too often the pastors, the shepherds, who are leading the people astray – though *celebrity shepherds* is surely a contradiction in terms.) Above all, Damian called for reform against the most prominent evils. In particular, he attacked the widespread practice of simony, the selling of church positions for money, and the equally widespread acceptance of homosexuality, pedophilia and pederasty, especially among the clergy.

In recognition of his reforming fervor, Damian was later canonized by the Catholic Church as St. Peter Damian. Criticized in his time for being fanatical and purely negative, he was in fact passionate about the church's "welfare of souls" and about faithfulness to Jesus and the truth of the gospel. Yet it was these positive passions that made him severe and unsparing in his denunciation of all forms of corruption and immorality, and in attacking them he could not be swayed by either obstacles or opposition. His commitment to Jesus alone was so fierce that he won the reputation for being *unmanipulable, unbribeable, undeterrable* and, in George Orwell's later term of approval, *unclubbable* ("clubbable" being the ultimate in coercion through comfortable conformity).

Unquestionably, the term *impossible man* was ambiguous. It could be taken either as a compliment or an insult. Doubtless, many of Peter Damian's generation admired him for his stand, just as many hated him for his fervor, and many were frustrated and made uncomfortable by what they saw as his intransigence. In other words, the same term could express either admiration or exasperation, as it will again today. But all that was irrelevant to Peter Damian. He spoke, wrote and acted solely with an eye to the audience of One. He could not be deterred by other voices. He was faithful to Jesus alone and above all. His faith had a backbone of steel. He was the impossible man.

It would be tempting to underscore that we especially need Christian leaders like that. The story is told that a Roman praetorian prefect was so offended by St. Basil's outspoken statements that he declared that he had never been addressed like that in his life. "No doubt," St. Basil replied, "you have never met a bishop." (Clearly he was speaking in a day when bishops were not yet political appointees and to be a bishop was not what it became: a position with the promise of power and personal advancement. The church will never be free so long as we continue to have that kind of bishop appointed for reasons other than

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churchly.) But the challenge today goes far wider than leaders. All who would be faithful followers of Jesus in our advanced modern world are facing similar challenges and seductions, and we too must become impossible people – Christians with hearts that can melt with compassion, but with faces like flint and backbones of steel who are unmanipulable, unbribeable, undeterrable and unclubbable, without ever losing the gentleness, the mercy, the grace and the compassion of our Lord. Whether we are Evangelicals, Catholics, Orthodox or Pentecostals, we must have a rock solid allegiance to Jesus alone, above all and despite everyone and everything. “Jesus is Lord” is our allegiance, our confession, our authority and our standard and rule of life. Whoever and whatever contradicts him summons us again to count the cost and to take our stand. Christians today need to be broad-shouldered – made so by carrying the weight of the cross as we were commanded.

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Impossible People is a companion to my earlier book *Renaissance*, which came first for a reason. In that book I explored the reasons for our response of assured faith in the gospel – which must be forever unshakeable – and it concluded with hope. I deliberately reversed the normal order of “challenge and response” and put the response before the challenge. Such is the character and record of the gospel of Jesus that we may trust it absolutely however dark the times and however bleak the challenge. Doom, gloom, alarmism and fear are never the way for the people of God. We are to have “no fear.” *Impossible People* addresses the challenges we face and the subjective side that is our response to these challenges – the gospel carries its own inherent transforming power, but we need to trust it, obey it and live it – against all the odds and at any cost. We need to respond to the gospel with courage and conviction, in order to live faithfully according to the call of Jesus and the good news of his kingdom in today’s world.

We need never have qualms about the objective side of the challenge. The gospel of Jesus may be trusted to be the transforming power that it is. It is, after all, the very power of God for the saving of humanity, and the record of its impact in history is glorious and undeniable. Our allegiance to it is the concern today. We have to rise to the challenge that the gospel raises to all who say that they believe it – we must demonstrate our confidence in the gospel by a courage that is prepared to break with all that contradicts with what God says. In short, by faith we must be prepared to wager our comfort, our livelihood, our honor and our very lives on God and his Word against all other claims and authorities. We must therefore live as we have been called to live: to take up our crosses and to count the cost of living lives that are true to the gospel and to the lordship of Jesus, regardless of the cost and the consequences in our day – and so be worthy of the great cloud of witnesses behind us in history and around us in the world today.

– Taken from the introduction, “*Found Faithful: Unclubbable*”



Os Guinness, author of
*Impossible People: Christian
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Soul of Civilization*

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Social Critic, Influential Speaker, Writer

Os Guinness (DPhil, Oxford) is a prolific writer, speaker and social critic. He is the author or editor of more than thirty books, including *Fool's Talk*, *Renaissance*, *A Free People's Suicide*, *Unspeakable*, *The Call*, *Time for Truth* and *The Case for Civility*. Previously Guinness was a freelance reporter with the BBC, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies.

Born in China to missionary parents, he is the great-great-great-grandson of Arthur Guinness, the Dublin brewer. After witnessing the climax of the Chinese revolution in 1949, he was expelled with many other foreigners in 1951 and returned to England where he was educated and served as a freelance reporter with the BBC. Since coming to the US in 1984, he has been a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies and a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution.

From 1986 to 1989, Guinness served as executive director of the Williamsburg Charter Foundation, a bicentennial celebration of the First Amendment. In this position he helped to draft "The Williamsburg Charter" and later "The Global Charter of Conscience," which was published at the European Union Parliament in 2012. He also coauthored the public school curriculum *Living With Our Deepest Differences*.

A prominent social critic, Guinness is the founder of the Trinity Forum and was senior fellow there until 2004, conducting seminars for leaders around the world and publishing seven major curricula. He has been a frequent speaker and seminar leader at political and business conferences in both Europe and the United States, and has addressed audiences from the British House of Commons to the United States Congress. He has also been the subject of numerous media interviews, appearing on programs such as C-SPAN's *Booknotes*. His countless addresses at leading universities worldwide have helped to influence an entire generation of thinkers.

"I read everything Os Guinness writes because he always challenges my thinking and enlarges my perspective," writes Rick Warren of Guinness's newest book. "*Impossible People* may be his most important work. Read it, then buy five copies for friends and discuss it together. The message is that important. This could be the most important book you read this year."

Guinness has had a lifelong passion to make sense of our extraordinary modern world and to stand between the worlds of scholarship and ordinary life, helping each to understand the other — particularly when advanced modern life touches on the profound issues of faith. He lives with his wife Jenny in McLean, Virginia near Washington, D.C.

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