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A GENUINE CHRISTIAN NON-CONFORMITY

Romans 12:2

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By definition it can be said that Christianity is at once a doctrine, an ethic, and a life. It involves creed, character and conduct. Or to put it another way, it consists of believing, behaving, and becoming. Any emphasis on any one of these to the exclusion of the others produces a lopsidedness of character, a freakness of deportment, and a confusion of understanding. If there is emphasis upon doctrine to the exclusion of life and ethic, the result is antinomianism. If the emphasis is on ethic to the exclusion of doctrine and life, the result is legalism. If the emphasis is upon life to the exclusion of doctrine and ethic, the result is modernism.

The duty of a theological seminary is to bring all three of these into focus. This is the purpose of Grace Theological Seminary. But by virtue of its very nature, a theological seminary is predominately theoretical. It lays its emphasis upon doctrine, and life and ethic are sometimes slighted. Professors and students labor long hours in the impartation and acquisition of learning. Its application to conduct and its inculcation in character are often short-changed, at least from the standpoint of the amount of time devoted to them. The pressure is on to pass the examinations that professors will be giving at stated intervals. In this context, it would seem, there is no other imperative.

Hence the danger is that this sort of approach will produce professionalism. Christianity may deteriorate in the thinking of the individual into mere doctrine apart from performance and personality. The peril of mere professionalism issues in a walk that is far from God and a life that resembles less and less the person of Christ whose name has been called over one at the moment of conversion. As ethic and life grow dim in the consciousness, under the pressure to pass examinations involving doctrine, the realization is gradually lost that there are more rigid examinations dealing with ethic and life. And failure to pass these examinations can spell failure in the essential purpose of all life.

It was the possibility of this defection that led the apostle Paul to address these words to the believers in Rome and through them to believers everywhere. Most assuredly they come to us who, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, have elected to serve the Lord as leaders of His

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people. Like prophet, like people; like priest, like people. It cannot be expected that the people will make progress beyond the point of their leadership. But in addition, for the personal benefit of each student and teacher, it seems worthwhile to consider the meaning of these words. In this passage of Scripture there is gathered up the meaning and purpose of Grace Theological Seminary.

In the development of this passage of Scripture I will use the theme of non-conformity, and I will develop this theme in a series of five movements of thought: the act, the age, the art, the aid, and the aim of non-conformity.

I. THE ACT OF NON-CONFORMITY COVERS A PATTERN OF PERFORMANCE

"And be not conformed"

An analysis of these words will demonstrate that they contain at least three things. In the first place believers are delivered a prohibition. The negative with the imperative made in the present tense means to stop doing something. In the second place they were engaged in a process or practice, as indicated by the present tense of the verb. In the third place, they were following a pattern of performance. That is the essential meaning of the verb.

The application of these words to believers constitutes a command to stop a pattern of performance in which they were engaged. This undoubtedly means that the course of life in which they were engaged had not changed after they made the transition from the old life to the new life. Things went on pretty much as usual without any radical transformation. This cannot have reference to the faith, for he commends this in them at the very outset of the epistle (1:8). This undoubtedly does not have reference to some of the grosser forms of sin. But it does have reference to a pattern of conduct like that of the world. Chapters 12-16 clearly indicate what Paul has in mind, as for instance, the lack of sobriety in the evaluation of self (12:3), insubordination to government (13:1), the lack of sympathy toward weaker brethren (14:13), the absence of singleness of heart in relation to God (15:6), and the failure in separation from divisiveness (16:17).

Argument of the apostle is that they should stop being conformed to the world. Quite evidently it is the very nature of mankind to follow the patterns about them. They are bound to imitate. The word translated "conformed" means to put a form on the outside that is unrelated to the nature on the inside. This sort of an outward form thus obscures the true nature within. It is temporary because it is purely external. It is trifling because it is dissociated from the internal. And it is treacherous because it deceives. This is the pattern of performance employed by Satan. In outward appearance and operation he transforms himself into an angel of light, when in reality on the inside he is full of darkness (II Cor. 11:14). Satan's ministers also follow the same pattern (11:15). It is the reverse of this among true believers to which Paul calls a halt. Believers with a new nature should not be obscuring that nature with patterns of conduct that belong to an old nature.

II. THE AGE OF NON-CONFORMITY COMPRISES THIS PRESENT PERIOD

"To this world"

This period is marked by the use of the word "world." In the original Greek language it is the word aiōn referring to an age of time. From the English text one might imagine that the original language would carry the word kosmos indicating an order or arrangement of things. But this is not the case, and this fact is significant in relation to the prohibition.

Moreover the present age is specified as over against some other age. It is referred to as "this" age. Inasmuch as the Bible names only two ages, the present age and the age to come (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30), it seems proper to identify this age with that period which began with Adam and will conclude with the coming of Christ. The apostle is therefore commanding the saints to stop following the pattern of this present age as opposed to the age to come.

It is a principle of operation that concerns him. Since he used the word age (aiōn) as over against order (kosmos) he is concerned not with design but disposition, not with shape but motive, not with arrangement but purpose. One thing characterizes the nature and disposition of this age. That is sin. So Paul refers to this period of time as "this present evil world" (aiōn, Gal. 1:4). Salvation is to provide the saints with a new incentive, a new dynamic, a new principle of operation.

The present order and arrangement of things is not necessarily evil in itself. But this order is temporary and transitory and if made the object of affection as though it were permanent no good can result. Therefore "they that use this world" should do so as not abusing it (I Cor. 7:31), and the guiding principle is to do everything for the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). This excludes the motivation of self which characterizes this present evil age from the sin of Satan to the last insurgent at the revelation of Christ.

There are those who pride themselves on being non-conformists. But in the strictest sense of the word there are no such people in the Biblical sense, except Christians. The non-conformist of this world merely shifts from one pattern of this present age to another and is motivated by the same selfish principle. Unfortunately some believers also imagine they are being non-conformists in the Biblical sense when they adopt the strict methods of mere asceticism apart from the guiding principle of the glory of God. The decisive point of non-conformity for the believer is not the present arrangement but the principle of operation. This is further explained in the words which follow.

III. THE ART OF NON-CONFORMITY CONSTITUTES TRANSFORMATION

"But be ye transformed"

By contrast transformation is commanded for believers as the controlling principle of life. The strongest adversative in the Greek language is used to impress this upon the reader, and it is translated by the word "but." Since outward form without concern for inner nature has

been the controlling principle for the people of the world, then in contrast with this, a new and a different controlling principle should be adopted. This is set forth in the word "transformed."

The character of this transformation is the key to the Christian life. This strikes at the very heart of the problem that confronts every child of God. The word "transform" is a translation of the Greek word metamorphoō. This is a compound word. The root describes a form that is put on the outside that represents the nature on the inside. The preposition marks the transition of this form from within to the outside. From this word comes the English word "metamorphosis." Doubtless you have met this word in the course of your study of biology. But even if you have not, you have some conception of the process.

Already you have been seeing that upholstered worm crawling about, known as the caterpillar. Actually, this worm has a butterfly nature. But this would never be suspected from the fuzzy externals. But this fall, he will build a cocoon, and during the winter months will undergo metamorphosis. This means that the inner nature will produce a gradual change penetrating to the externals, and in the spring he will come out of the cocoon in all the delicate hues and intricate framework of a butterfly.

It is this sort of transformation that constitutes the controlling principle of life for the believer. Christ has been formed within by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Now from this inner presence there should proceed the pattern and the power of life. This is merely another way of saying that the believer should be filled with the Holy Spirit, and under His constant control. This will stand in diametric opposition to the controlling principle of sin, which puts on a multitude of outward forms, some of them noble and pious in outward appearance, but inwardly motivated by the same selfish and rebellious spirit.

The continuity of this transformation is clearly indicated by the tense of the verb. It is a present tense, and could therefore be translated, "Be in the process of being transformed." This indicates that the transformation does not take place all at once. It will be progressive, extending over all the years of this life. This guards one against the many false panaceas that suggest that some crisis experience can suddenly transport one from spiritual infancy to mature manhood. This is a warning against any sort of perfectionism until the coming of Christ. It is a safeguard against false experience that leaves one in doubt and often leads to despair. It is the way of real victory and true happiness.

IV. THE AID TO NON-CONFORMITY COMPREHENDS THE WORD OF GOD

"By the renewing of your mind"

The controlling center of life is the mind. That explains why Paul refers in this verse to the mind. It is in the mind where the motives are generated, where movement begins, and where conduct is rationalized. It is here that influence is brought to bear for good or for ill. Whatever thoughts possess the mind and condition the thinking, these same thoughts create motives, coerce the will, and compel conduct. Is it any wonder that Paul in another context urges "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever

things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Phil. 4:8). For as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he (Pro. 23:7). Therefore keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life (Pro. 4:23).

Right here a corrective process is advised by the apostle. It is that of renewing the mind. This can only mean that the mind left solely to itself is no safe guide. There is the constant necessity of making this instrument of guidance new again. Since the mind is ever sensitive to the shifting winds of thought, it can easily be magnetized in the wrong direction. Corrosion can build up on this delicate instrument. This can produce a lack of comprehension, and a resulting confusion. In the face of this ever present peril, the mind must be made new again; there must be the constant infusion of thought from another source than self and the world round about.

The correcting chart is the Word of God. If one expects to walk in God's ways, then he must think God's thoughts after Him. And it is utterly unthinkable that a man may attain to those thoughts by himself. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). This means that the believer is absolutely dependent upon revelation to know the thoughts of God. He is absolutely dependent upon the Bible for the source material with which to renew his mind. But in this fact there is also provided an objective chart for his life. Though the power for living the Christian life comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit within, yet this divine power is guided by the objective revelation in the Word of God. Subjective sincerity is thus safeguarded by objective security. And best of all, the believer is not reduced to a mere robot or automaton. He is a person empowered by the Spirit, exercising freedom of the will, and guided by the unerring Word of God.

V. THE AIM OF NON-CONFORMITY CENTERS IN THE WILL OF GOD

"That ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

The master plan for every life is the will of God. As the context reveals, this particular passage has to do with the will of God as it relates to the individual believer (3-6). There is the will of God for the universe, humanity, and Christian people in general. But at this point, the apostle is talking about the will of God for each believer in distinction from every other believer. In this particular sense there is a master plan. And happy is that child of God who finds that plan and conditions his life over that pattern and orders his steps in it.

The major particulars of this master plan are three in number. Specifically stated they are good, acceptable, perfect. Every child of God should be careful to check for these three things in that plan he is following. If the plan does not qualify at these points, he has reason to question whether the plan he is following is the divine plan.

In the first place, the plan should be morally pure, that is, good. And the measure for purity is the holiness of God as set forth in the Bible. God's plan for the believer's life does

not contradict the message of holiness in the Bible. At this point there is no need for prayer, for subjective incantations, for clever rationalization, and the many other methods of subterfuge used to verify God's plan. God has already spoken, and His revelation is in the Bible. The Bible declares that the believer is called to holiness (I Thess. 4:7), and any plan that does not possess this quality at its very outset and in its overall construction is not of God.

In the second place, the plan involves willing performance. The word "acceptable," better translated into English by the term "well-pleasing," is used in verse 1 of the sacrifice of our bodies. The presentation of our bodies as a living sacrifice is well-pleasing to God. The submission of our bodies in the performance of God's will is well-pleasing to God. It is said of Christ that He pleased not himself (Rom. 15:3), but He did please the Father whom He served (John 8:29). It is therefore our responsibility to please the one who called us (II Tim. 2:4). Nothing will place a child of God so near the center of God's will as the willing submission to that particular thing God has for us, that thing that differentiates us from every other child of God. The slightest deviation from that master plan takes us out of the very center of His perfect will.

In the third place, the plan is essentially perfect. The word "perfect" describes that which lacks nothing that it ought to possess. In every aspect and detail the master plan possesses those qualities which God has arranged for us. In this respect it lacks nothing. Any weighing of details with a consequent depreciation of the value of them because they do not quite square with our understanding or fit in with our system of values is playing fast and loose with the plan of God for our lives. Who knows how important a seemingly minor detail may be in the long run? Who knows how important that detail may figure in our future success, or happiness, or to the reward at the Bema Seat of Christ? Anything less than perfection of detail in adopting the plan for our life should be rejected as not of God.

The meticulous proving of the plan of God for our lives is laid upon us as a continuous responsibility. The words "that ye may prove" mean to seek out by careful search that ye may discover that master plan.

The Greek construction means that there must be purposive search involving the exercise of personal responsibility. A do-nothing policy leads nowhere. Discovery depends upon exploration, and that exploration is carefully outlined at the outset of this verse. The believer must stop being conformed to this present age, and in its place he must undergo progressive transformation into the likeness of Christ by the renewing of his mind. This requires the exercise of personal responsibility.

The words also set forth the necessity for a pressing search involving rigorous and intensive discipline. The word "prove" means the application of a severe test. In the case of metals the word often refers to the use of fire. Most certainly at this point the test will often take on the quality of burning. It will burn like fire sometimes to turn the back upon the patterns of conduct in this present evil age. There will be times when it will call for the exercise of every bit of moral energy to continue in the path of transformation into His likeness.

Moreover, these words call for progressive search involving continuous and systematic apprehension of the truth concerning His will. The present tense can mean nothing else. There is no point at which we can sink with ease into a reclining position and sigh with relief as though the last summit of truth had been scaled. Though the truth has been revealed and recorded in the Bible, we have not yet apprehended its full meaning on the mental side, and most certainly we have not incorporated that truth into conduct on the moral side. This progressive search provides for us a constantly receding horizon and an unfolding vista of truth concerning God's will for our lives.

There is just one requirement to experience fulfillment. That is willing submission to this Biblical instruction. It is this that opens to us the path of ever enlarging comprehension, growing usefulness, and fuller enjoyment of the Lord.