

Transformed, but Not Conformed

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Romans 12: 1-8

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A while back, I was watching a tv show that had a social experiment. In this experiment, there was a guy in a shopping mall who stood behind of a rope line. You know those velvet ropes they have at movie theaters and concerts that you have to wait behind. Well, he was standing behind one of those. Well, the guy stood there for a long time and then eventually a second person came and stood behind him, after another long wait, a third person came and stood behind him. And now that there were three people lined up, people started coming faster. Eventually ten, twenty, thirty people got in the line. And what were they waiting for? Movie tickets? Concert tickets? The Grand Opening of some new store or restaurant? Actually they didn't know. And as it turned out, it was absolutely nothing. They were just standing in line because other people were standing in line. They were just following the crowd. I remember back in the 80s Pepsi had an advertising campaign where they talked about the Pepsi generation. Do you remember that? It was a ridiculous campaign. As if to say what is the most important thing about a generation is not their attitudes or values or their impact on history but what kind of fizzy sugar water they drink. But it was a way of saying you should drink Pepsi for no other reason than other people are drinking it too. Because for some reason we figure that the fact that other people are doing something is a good enough reason for us to do it. Now, sometimes, of course, that's true. Try surviving for long if you decide to drive on the left side of the road instead of the right side. Or try driving southbound on a northbound interstate. The fact that everyone else is driving in one direction is a pretty good reason for you to do it, too. Or try speaking a language that no one else in the world speaks, and only speaking a

language that no one else speaks. I promise you wouldn't last too long doing that either. If we expect to go through this world communicating with other people and surviving in one piece, we have to drive the way other people drive and speak the way other people speak.

But apart from the need to have some kind of order when it comes to traffic and communication, I wonder how much you've thought about how people tend to go along with the crowd just for the sake of going along with the crowd. Take fashion, for example. Thin ties are in style now. I always like it when wide ties are in style because I'm always spilling things on my shirt and the wide ties cover more of my shirt, so I like them because they're like little bibs you can wear at any age. But why do you have to wear a thin tie, why can't you wear a wide tie. Because wide ties are out of style and no one wants to be out of style, even though being in style just means is doing what other people are doing.

And then what about manners. I have to confess to you that I don't like it whenever I see people sit down to eat in a restaurant and they have their hat on. In the past ten years or so I've seen people doing this more and more. I was always taught that you don't do that. You take your hat off when you sit down to eat. But then I started to think about it, and I asked myself, who decided that this was a rule. You're not hurting anybody when you wear a hat to the table. People just make up rules like these and everyone's supposed to follow them just because everybody says so, and nobody wants to be rude.

There is a lot of pressure in this world to be conformed to what other people are doing, but Paul says that for those who follow Christ we are not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by a renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what

is good and acceptable and perfect. Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed. In other words, one thing Paul says about us in the church is that we stand out. If you want to go along and blend in you have come to the wrong place because we aren't like the rest of the world, Paul tells us. And it is because of these words that I have to tell you that I am always bothered by people who say things like Christians are just like everyone else. No we're not just like everyone else. And if you think Christians are like everyone else, then you haven't been a Christian for very long. Christians should stand out and be different. But in what way? In what way do we stand out? Well, I personally don't think there is anything wrong with following the manners the rest of the world follows or following the fashion the rest of the world follows. That's ok. But if you want to know how to follow Jesus with your life, then the place to look to see how that is done is not to be found in the way the world is living, because the way the world lives isn't always the way that Jesus would have us live.

There is a problem with talking this way, though. The problem is that this may sound to you like the language of cult leaders. There was once a man when I was young who told everyone to follow him if they wanted to get closer to God and to cut themselves off from the world because the world was completely evil and corrupt, and people did follow him, they followed him all the way to the point where he told them all to commit suicide by drinking poison. There was another man out in Texas some years later who said follow me because the world is evil and corrupt and again people did, and they ended up followed him all the way to their death in a fiery inferno.

The problem is that sometimes we should be conformed to this world. Sometimes we should conform not only when it comes to speaking the same language and driving on the same

side of the road but even when it comes to the wisdom of this world. Because as you have probably experienced some time or another God can speak through people in this world who don't believe a single thing that we believe and we are told as much in scripture. Where can I go from your Spirit, or where can I flee from your presence? The psalmist asks. If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. God is at work everywhere in this world, and a God who is not at work everywhere in this world isn't much of a God.

So how do we know when we're supposed to conform to this world and when we're not, Pastor Rich? How do we know when we should listen to the wisdom and advice of people in this world and do as they say and when we shouldn't? How do we know?

Well, I don't know for sure, but I'll tell you what I think. In my judgment, the imperative Be Not Conformed To This World does not mean to stop looking for God being at work in this world, and simply dismissing this entire world as evil. Nor does it mean to stop listening to what people say just because they don't believe what we believe. Nor does it mean living in isolation from the rest of the world. What I think it means is be not conformed just for the sake of conforming, do not go along just for the sake of going along, don't fit in just for the sake of fitting in, and I think all of us need to hear that because the temptation to go along just for the sake of going along is incredibly strong. Just like all the people who stood in line who were waiting for absolutely nothing, the temptation to go along just for the sake of going along is so great that we usually don't stop to ask ourselves if going along is right, or if it's just, or if it's merciful or if it's Christian. And in my mind at least, being a Christian means that before you go

along with whatever the world is doing you should at least stop and ask some questions first. You should at least stop and think should I really be doing this first, should I really be doing this, even if not doing this is going to make me a social outcast, a pariah. You know, a pariah, one of those fish that eats flesh. That's a piranha.

When I teach adult Sunday school classes, one of the things I like to tell people is how much we owe as Christians to people you've probably never heard of. And one of the people you've probably never heard of was a man named Athanasius. People name their kids after Peter and Paul and Mary and Elizabeth, but I've never heard of anyone naming their kid Athanasius. But Athanasius was the fourth century bishop of Alexandria. Well, back in Athanasius' day people had a hard time understanding the gospel. They have a hard time understanding the gospel in every age, but they were especially puzzled about one thing in particular in Athanasius' day. God for the people in Athanasius' day had to be unchanging they thought, but the world all around us is changing, day leads to night, winter leads to summer and you never step in the same river twice as a wise man once said. So how is it that an unchanging God can interact with a changing world? This question puzzled everyone who thought about it back in Athanasius' day, but along came a man named Arius who thought he had a solution. God doesn't interact with a changing world, nor can he, but he sent Jesus who is sort of a half-way house between God and humankind, to do all the interacting he could ever need to do. Now as you can imagine, that seemed like a very nice solution to the problem people had in this time, and this man Arius became quite popular. But Athanasius said no. Athanasius said that's not who Jesus is to him, because to him Jesus wasn't partially God or half-way to God, but fully and completely God. God from God, Light from Light, true God from

true God as we say in the Nicene Creed. Well, old Athanasius didn't make many friends over his opposition to Arius, and he even suffered because of it, as he was exiled a total of five times during his life. Finally, one day Athanasius was made to appear before the emperor Theodosius who tried to set him straight. Theodosius demanded that Athanasius stop his opposition to Arianism. He said Athanasius don't you realize that all the world is against you. Athanasius quickly replied, "then I am against all the world."

Who among us has a faith so strong that we could do that. Who among us could stand alone, all alone against the entire world, if the entire world followed after something that we thought was wrong. Now, we would probably never see that happen, and I don't even think it actually happened then. I don't think the entire world followed after Arius, even though it may have seemed that way to the emperor Theodosius and indeed to Athanasius. But I am not interested in knowing how likely it is to happen. What I'm interested in knowing is what if it did. Sometimes, we need to think about things that may never happen just so we can know ourselves better and know what we're really made of.

Be not conformed to this world, but to be transformed by a renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Don't go along just for the sake of going along, don't follow just to follow, unless in doing so, you're also following in the footsteps of Christ.