

“Do Not Be Conformed”

(Romans 12.1-8)

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Introduction

Many years ago now, Paul was ‘rescued’ for me by a simple reorientation of focus. I’d been taught he was writing doctrine – rules, regulations and propositions that had to be *believed* if you wanted to be called a Christian. But then a mentor said... ‘No that’s not him at all. Paul is the great guide to the spiritual path. He’s writing about *how* the freedom of Christ grows in those willing to take the journey.’ That’s what we’re hearing today...

Do Not Be Conformed

“Do not be conformed to this world...”

When Paul uses the word ‘*world*’ he doesn’t mean the creation... Yes, there *were* early Christians called *Gnostics* who believed you had to ‘escape’ the world, and live as if this earthy stuff didn’t exist – so, no engagement with work, marriage, family, body, sex, pleasure, things etc.... But orthodox Christianity rejected that way¹... and Paul *isn’t* arguing that. Richard Rohr translates ‘world’ as ‘the system’... meaning the established value system of the economic and political order. Eugene Peterson translates it ‘*culture*’... and so... *“Do not be conformed to this world...”* becomes *“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without ever thinking.”*

So in Paul’s time, Greco-Roman culture, there was a range of *normal* activities that a person stopped being part of when they became a Christian. As an example, one of these were the *games* that happened in the arenas that dotted all the sizeable towns of the Empire – where slaves fought savage animals or each other to the death, for the entertainment of the crowds. That was part of the culture a new Christian would no longer attend, because the values it promoted and encouraged in a person, were not consonant with the values and vision of Christ Jesus. They would block a person’s way into a closer connection with God.

¹ Gnosticism was rejected as heresy.

The consumerist individualist culture of our time, while different from ancient society, is similarly a powerful force... and it's by no means benign. Kathryn and I are currently spending (way too much) time in the 'world' of real estate... and boy, does that ever have a distinct and overwhelming culture.

- It's a culture of scarcity... *'There's very few properties like this around and if you don't rush, don't pay over-the-odds, you'll miss out.'*
- It's a culture of competition... us against all the rest!
- It's a culture of self-indulgence... *'Look at these magnificent Swedish appliances – why shouldn't you have the very best!'*

It's so strong that it gets inside my head and heart. I find myself really anxious and on edge... *(We'll never find a house. They'll be gone!)* I find myself glowering at the other house-inspectors... *(What are you doing here!)* And I get greedier and greedier... needing more and more and more! I actually start to see reality according to the culture/the world of the real estate business... and that can't be healthy!

Paul says, *'Don't be conformed to this world... Don't become so habituated to the surrounding culture that you start to fit into it without ever thinking... without ever questioning whether it's real or true or healthy.'* For the Christian faith sees reality in a totally opposite way. True life has nothing to do with scarcity, competition or greed. So much our 21st century consumerist individualist culture is completely antithetical to the vision and way of Christ Jesus. We've got to challenge this life-denying nonsense! Call it out for the rubbish it is!

But Be Transformed

"... but be transformed by the renewing of your minds..."

Paul describes faith as a process of *transformation*. It's that BIG! It's not a process of comforting or improving or tinkering cosmetically... but transformation. We should expect our faith journey to be about radical growth and change... and if it's not... something's wrong (our end)... and needs attention.

"... be transformed by the renewing of your minds..."

Paul sees the process of faith as our True Selves gradually emerging... more and more like Christ. It is like the Spirit of Christ invading us from the *inside*... and working Her way through our whole

person... occupying every space... so that we actually come to *see* reality like Christ... to *think* like Christ... to *feel deep connection* to God like Christ. And so our minds are renewed according to the reality of Christ... instead of being filled and clogged with the madness of the surrounding culture. It's a total and complete change... *"You'll be changed from the inside out."* (MSG)

Note that he uses the word *renewing*... This transformation is a process of *renewal* – we are being returned to our true created beauty... to who God created us to be... our true self... not that anxious needy false self that's a construct of the culture.

Maturity

*"So that you may discern what is the will of God
what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Eugene Peterson translates this...

*"You'll readily recognise what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it.
Unlike the culture around you
always dragging you down to its level of immaturity,
God brings the best out of you,
develops well-formed maturity in you."*

Kathryn's nephew is appearing on the current series of *Australian Survivor*. If you're not familiar with this TV franchise it goes like this... A mixed group are put on a tropical island and split into two teams that compete against each other for various prizes... Meanwhile everyday someone is voted *off* the island by their team-mates... until only one *survivor* remains... who is then given lots of money as the winner. You '*win*' – so the narrative goes – by being dishonest, cunning, manipulative, malicious, cruel and selfish. We've never watched it before... and we're horrified that such a display of human *awfulness* can be considered entertaining... and that these values are portrayed as *normal*. I felt even worse when I realised that the commercials – and there are a lot of them – try to cultivate and push the exact same values in me as are being displayed on the show. *Unbridled egotism and greed* would be a sufficient summary. I can hear Paul's words...

*"Unlike the culture around you
always dragging you down to its level of immaturity..."*

That's exactly what's happening... As a watcher I'm imbibing poison... a toxic brew that works to make me less loving, less generous...less human.

“Don’t be conformed to this world...”

On *Australian Survivor* is a young man who describes himself as Christian – indeed he says it’s very important to him – but he happily (almost proudly) says he’s *put that to one side for the show...* so he can play the game to win. In fact, he says, being known as a Christian is a great disguise... because the others assume he’ll be honest and good... whereas he intends to play just as dirty and selfishly as everyone else. He apparently sees no problem with this...

“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without ever thinking.”

Challenge it! Don’t indulge it! Don’t conform!

Conclusion

“Instead... (Paul says)... fix your attention on God.”

If we truly value our faith... if we truly desire the freedom and life Christ promises, it’s time we radically shifted our focus.

“Instead (of all that consumerist rubbish)...fix your attention on God.” And *“be transformed by the renewing of your minds...”*

Let *‘God bring the best out of us...’* Let the Spirit go to work in us, developing the full beauty of human maturity, that is our God-created birth-right.