

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Conformity or Transformation
Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual^[a] act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)

The Apostle Paul penned some powerful words in our passage from Romans that challenge every generation of followers of Jesus. He says in Romans 12:2, **“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”** Will we be conformed to the world and its way of thinking?

“The ‘world’ of which Paul speaks is not the physical or geographical location in which we live. Rather it is ‘the age’ of which we are a part in contrast to ‘the age which is to come.’ Believers have the unique privilege and tension-filled opportunity to live in the present ‘evil age’ as members of the age to come...” (D. Stuart Briscoe, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Romans*, pp. 215-216)

William Barclay writes concerning what Paul says here: “...Don’t be like a chameleon which takes its colour from its surroundings; don’t go with the world; don’t let the world decide what you are going to be like.’ The word he uses for being *transformed* from the world...means... that an inward change has happened; ...now he [a person] lives, not a self-centered, but a Christ-centered life. This must happen, Paul says, by the renewal of your mind... When Christ comes into a man’s life he is a new man; the centre of his being is different; the driving power of his life is different; his mind is different; for the mind of Christ is in him.” (William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, pp. 169-171)

When our minds are transformed, we see the following changes:

First, our attitude is changed. We no longer see things as the world sees them—especially how the world views people and treats people. Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 5:16**, **“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.”**

Peter says in **1 Peter 2:17**, **“Show proper respect to everyone.”**

The world may look down on people in how they dress or their nationality or race or the type of job they do. Christians, however, treat all people with dignity and respect.

Several years ago I heard about a Christian businessman who every day as he left his office to get his car from the parking garage would chat with the parking garage attendant. He was always kind to the attendant and asked how he was doing. The businessman didn’t know it, but every day this attendant would observe this Christian businessman. He was so different from the others who passed by this booth. The attendant also noticed that the businessman carried a Bible.

So the attendant decided to get a Bible himself and started to read it.

Several months later, one day the businessman paid his parking fee and chatted with the attendant as usual. The attendant said to him, “I am a Christian because of you.” The businessman looked surprised because he had never shared the Gospel with the attendant or

given him a tract. The attendant said, “Everyday you would stop and talk with me. You were always kind. You always smiled. I noticed you had a Bible. So I got one and began reading it because I figured that the Bible may have something to do with how you treat me, because almost all my other customers treat me like I don’t exist or like a slave. When I started reading the Bible, I discovered Jesus and gave my life to Him. So now I am a Christian, too.”

What the attendant noticed in the Christian businessman was a life that was different from those he met everyday. He saw a life that was not conformed to the world, but transformed by Jesus.

Recently, I heard some disturbing comments from Christians concerning President Elect Obama—comments that reflect an attitude more of the world than of people who claim to follow Jesus. The comment was, “I’ll pray for our country, but I won’t pray for President Elect Obama.” There is no excuse for this kind of remark or attitude by any Christian. If the candidate we voted for loses the election, we are not to be sore losers or vindictive toward those who win. That’s the attitude of the world. No Christian can justify not praying for any elected official. Nowhere does the Bible ever tell us to not pray for someone or deny prayer for someone.

The Bible is very clear about praying for those in authority. In **1 Timothy 2:1-2**, Paul writes, **“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”** Peter writes in **1 Peter 2:12-17**, **“Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”**

The emperor at the time these words were penned (“pray for those in authority and honor the king”) was Nero, one of the worst and most evil persecutors of Christians in the Roman Empire. Yet Paul and Peter tell Christians to pray for and honor this man.

Barack Obama needs the prayers of all Christians. Not to do so is to be disobedient to what God’s Word teaches.

May God renew our minds so our attitude does not reflect that of the world in our love, concern and even our prayers for others.

Second, transformation of the mind also leads to a transformation of values. Paul expresses it well in **Philippians 3:8**, **“What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”** Jesus is of supreme value above all things. We clash with the culture on Jesus Christ and His teachings above all.

The world’s values conflict with us. For example, the New York Times in an editorial letter calls for a reversal of a “law that has long allowed doctors and nurses to refuse to participate in abortion” based on their conscience or religious beliefs. If the New York Times has its way, all medical personnel could no longer on religious or ethical grounds refuse to participate in an abortion. They would have to do it. (“A Parting Shot at Women’s Rights,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2008) In two weeks when I preach on the sanctity of life, you’ll see the grave opposition of this view to God’s view of all human life.

Another contrast between Christians and the world involves the area of money and material goods.

For example, in December, the CEO of Merrill Lynch which lost tons of money in 2008 and received bailout money from the government had the audacity to ask for a \$10 million bonus. The three automaker executives showed a complete lack of sensitivity to those in need or respect to the American tax payer, and little understanding of how the rest of the world lives by flying to Washington in their private jets to ask Congress for a bailout.

Several weeks ago on the Travel Channel there was a show on yachts built by the rich and famous. They were huge, expensive, and had every comfort you could think of, even 24

karat gold plated faucets! Jesus said in **Luke 12:48**, **“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”** Such lavishness is not what He expects from those who have been given much.

The world sees money as a form of power and control as seen on a bumper sticker that says, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The Christian response to this is, “He who dies with the most toys loses.” Jesus said in **Luke 9:28**, **“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”** The world sees money as something to keep for ones self. The Christian view is that God gives money to bless others. We read in **Acts 20:35**, **“In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' ”**

Yet the world’s views on values are creeping into the Body of Christ. Listen to these facts: “ 2 cents was the amount spent on overseas missions (in 2005) for every dollar donated to a congregation, in a survey of 28 Protestant denominations, while 10 cents was the amount spent on overseas missions for every dollar donated in 1920.” (*Christianity Today*, December 2005)

The church is slowly being conformed more to the world than being transformed in its view on money if we hold it to ourselves and don’t bless others with it.

Several years ago I heard of a Presbyterian pastor who accepted a call to a large church in Texas. Shortly after he arrived one of the members who is an extremely wealthy man, whose name we’d all know, made an appointment to see the pastor. As they talked, the wealthy Texan offered to help the pastor by giving a large sum of money to the church to cover expenses, deficits, and new buildings. The caveat was that the wealthy Texan would have a significant say in church matters. The pastor wisely and graciously refused the offer.

All money belongs to God. Therefore, money is never to be used to gain favor, power or control over people or the church. God owns all we have. It’s His, not ours, and should never be used to show favor or as a form of power or control.

James writes, **“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here's a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”**

May God continue to transform the minds of His people concerning their values so we avoid the values of the world.

Finally, a transformed mind leads to transformed living. It takes to heart, for example, God’s commands for us to be holy. In **Leviticus 19:2** God says, “... **'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'**” And in **1 Peter 2:9** Peter says, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”**

And this holiness is not just personal holiness, but social holiness as well. “John Wesley famously said there is no holiness apart from social holiness.” (Chuck Colson, *The Faith*, p. 166)

We in America are failing in such moral and social issues as corruption in the world of business and finance and government; excessive CEO compensation; the erosion of truth and absolutes; the attacks on marriage and the family; the rise of Islamic extremism; and a list of other evils in the world. Our culture and age needs to be changed, and Jesus Christ will do it through His people if we will allow His continual transformation in our lives.

We as Christians living in America cannot run and hide from these issues or wish they’d go away or just go along with them. One author wrote, “It is relatively easy for Christians who

are aware of the tension to handle it by withdrawing from their contemporary society and protecting their spirituality by developing a ghetto mentality....Conversely, others simply identify with their age and culture without thought or question and become totally indistinguishable from the pagans among whom they live... The committed life, however, is shown by the degree in which the believer stays in the secular world without being trapped by it and without failing to witness to it.” (D. Stuart Briscoe, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Romans*, pp. 215-216)

We are also contending with a secular way of thinking that has infiltrated the mainline church and increasingly evangelical churches and Christians. The church and Christians in America desperately need the Holy Spirit to transform our minds so we are no longer conformed to the thinking of this world. May we have the mind of Christ— a mind that reflects His attitudes, His values, His standards of holy and courageous living.

Chuck Colson writes the following about a period in history where Christians believing in holy living transformed society. He said, “The great British parliamentarian who brought an end to the slave trade, William Wilberforce (1759-1833) [whom June mentioned last week], was driven in that noble undertaking by his passion for holiness. He wrote about this in *Real Christianity*. Throughout the book, Wilberforce argues for the holy, righteous life to be lived out in society. Along with other members of Wilberforce’s intentional community, the “Clapham sect,” Wilberforce modeled it, praying for three hours a day that justice would reign in Britain....

“He realized that he needed not only to end the slave trade by law but to lead a spiritual renewal that would counter the sin motivating it...

“This argument for renewal and holiness couldn’t have come at a more critical time. Industrialization in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had displaced millions from village life and left them vulnerable to exploitation. The newly wealthy factory and mine owners too often thought only of profit. The governing classes were blind to those in misery... King George IV took legions of mistresses and the aristocracy followed his lead in...frivolity. Marital fidelity was regarded with scorn. The Anglican Church had been decimated by Enlightenment rationalism, her message reduced to a bland moralism unrelated to everyday concerns. Bishops took mistresses as perks of office.

“God began to open the eyes of His people to the poor and the destitute, however, beginning in the generation before Wilberforce, with John Wesley and George Whitefield. Both Wesley and Whitefield preached not only conversion—you must be born again—for which they are best remembered, but compassion for the disenfranchised and moral reform. Whitefield founded institutions to educate blacks and orphans in America. The Wesleyan movement aimed at a “reformation not of opinions...but of men’s tempers and lives.” Under their influence whole towns changed their dissolute ways...

“Britain’s nineteenth-century spiritual revolution may have been evangelical Christianity’s finest hour, as God gathered his people into a reforming army. Following his success in abolishing the slave trade, Wilberforce took on sixty-five other causes, starting with prison reform and child labor in the coal mines. Waves of holiness swept across England as God’s people, many of them ordinary Christians, unlike their unbelieving peers, put the needs of their neighbors before their own. God did nothing less than reveal the demands of social justice for an industrial age, in the process saving free market economics from its abusive tendencies [which is what we face in the U.S. today]...

“The ‘reforming army’ of nineteenth century Britain culminated in William Booth’s Salvation Army. Booth was an itinerant evangelist in 1865 when he came to the slums of East London... When he arrived in East London, there were tens of thousands living on the streets, sleeping underneath bridges and in alley ways. Those in the ramshackle, firetrap tenements above were little better off. Everyone was in rags. Men and women and whole families survived

on slices of bread and butter on the days they could find work and went without between times. There were 80,000 prostitutes in London—many of whom had been sold into the trade as young children by their families for as little as five pounds. The rich strolled through this scene of human misery as if the people were so much vermin...

“...After many years of working in the London slums, William Booth wrote “In Darkest England and the Way Out,” beginning with his analogy of “the cab horse ideal of existence.” [Horses that pulled public carriages, like our taxis.] Every cab horse had shelter at night, food to eat, and work to do. Surely the poor deserved as much. So he came forward with his plan ‘to transform the living hell of the homeless into communities of self-helping, self-sustaining families.’...

“When you look at the history of these Christian awakenings and movements, you find one common denominator running through all of them. They did what they did not because it was some noble cause for society or because they believed in some social gospel or because they wanted political influence. They acted because they believed, as God’s holy people, that they were called both to end systemic evil and reform cultural attitudes...

“You’ll find as well that the common denominator running through all of these efforts was a deep passion for the dignity and sanctity of every human life—the kids chained to the loading carts in the mines, the slaves crammed into the holds of ships so tight many died of suffocation, and the poor in East London who were dying wretched deaths on the streets. They were committed to the worth of every single living person, rich, poor, black, white, ill or in good health, at the beginning of life or its end.” (Colson, *The Faith*, pp. 167-170) May Christians and the church of the 21st century regain this same passion for holiness in life and society.

When Mary Jane and I were in Beijing, China in 2004, we attended a Sunday morning worship service at the International Church. The church is for the diplomatic and international business Christian community in Beijing. It is not for the Chinese people because the government doesn’t want Christianity to spread through China. So the only way you can attend a service is if you have a passport.

The Sunday we were there was a taste of the Kingdom of God here on earth. There were Christians from over 80 nations there—different races, plus colors, languages, dress, etc. Yet all were one in Jesus. The worship service was passionate and powerful. We sensed the presence of God in the service.

This past week I heard a very touching and mighty statement of faith called HUMANIFESTO from a worship CD of the worship band of the International Church, given to us by Linda Armbruster-Walden and her daughter, Kelly Dugger, who served as a missionary in China for two years. I end with the words of this statement which I believe express well the importance of not conforming to the world but being transformed by Jesus.

Humanifesto, by Gerard Kelly (copyright 2008)

I want to be a grace guerilla, no longer a chameleon of Karma;
The time has come to stand out from the crowd
I want to give forgiveness a fighting chance of freeing me,
To live in love and live it out loud.
I want to drink deep of the foolishness of wisdom
Instead of swallowing the wisdom of fools
To find a source in the deeper mines of meaning
I want to search out the unsearchable to invoke the invisible
to choose the truths the TV hypnotists aren’t screening.

No camouflage, no entourage, no smoothly fitting in
I want a faith that goes farther than face value
And a beauty that goes deeper than my skin.
I want to be untouched by my possessions
Instead of being possessed by what I touch,
To test the taste of having nothing to call mine.
To hold consumption's cravings back
To be content with luck or lack
To live as well on water as on wine.

I want to spend myself on those I think might need me,
Not spend all I think I need on myself
I want my heart to be willing to make house calls
Let those whose rope is at an end
Find in me a faithful friend.

Let me be known as one who rebuilds broken walls.
No camouflage, no entourage, no smoothly fitting in
I want a faith that goes farther than face value
And a beauty that goes deeper than my skin.
I want to be centered outside the circle.

To be chiseled from a different seam
To be seduced by another story and drawn into a deeper dream.
To be anchored in an undiscovered ocean
To revolve around an unfamiliar sun
A boom box tuned to an alternate station,
A bullet fired from a different gun.

No camouflage, no entourage, no smoothly fitting in
I want a faith that goes farther than face value
And a beauty that goes deeper than my skin.

Amen.