

THE TRUE NON-CONFORMIST

Scriptures: Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

In their book *Resident Aliens* Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon compare being a Christian to being an immigrant in a foreign culture. Willimon writes,

One of our former parishes was next door to the synagogue. One day over coffee, the rabbi remarked, “It’s tough to be a Jew in Greenville [South Carolina]. We are forever telling our children, ‘That’s fine for everyone else, but it’s not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You are a Jew. You have a different story. A different set of values.’”

“Rabbi, you are probably not going to believe this,” I said, “but I heard very much that same statement made in a young couples’ church school class right here in Bible-belt Greenville the other day.” Pastors who listen to their members, particularly young parents, will hear them saying to their own children, with increasing regularity, “Such behavior is fine for everyone else, but not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You have a different story. You have a different set of values. You are a Christian” (p. 18).

In Romans 12 the apostle Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” To be a follower of Jesus means to be different. You cannot follow Jesus and be just like everyone else at work or school.

Now I don’t mean this in the superficial way it has sometimes been described in the past. Some of you may have seen the article in the *Spokesman-Review* last December about Billy Sunday. Billy Sunday was a famous evangelist who held a series of revival meetings in Spokane in 1909. Here is one of Billy Sunday’s more striking statements: “Many a boy and girl trained in the home by their mother to abhor cards have been ruined by going to board in some good-for-nothing, no account, beer-drinking, card-playing, dancing Presbyterian family” (*Spokesman-Review*, Dec. 21, 2008). I’ve never heard us sound so exciting. Ironically, we have an announcement in our bulletin this morning for dance classes. I guess we Presbyterians have tended not to be overly concerned about beer-drinking, card-playing, or dancing unless you are battling alcoholism, gambling or sexual immorality, in which case they could be huge issues.

But if you notice, drinking beer, playing cards, or dancing are not mentioned in our scripture reading this morning. Instead Paul describes deeper and more fundamental ways in which following Jesus will put you at odds with your culture.

Turn to Romans 12 (NT, p. 161-162), and let’s look at some examples. In verse 10 Paul says, “Love one another with mutual affection; out do one another in showing honor.” Do you realize how counter-cultural that is? In our culture we try to out do one another in gaining honor. Isn’t that what *American Idol* is all about? Isn’t that what competitive sports are all about? Isn’t that what we strive for when we try to get into the best college or land the most prestigious job?

But following Jesus turns that whole idea on its head. As Christians we try to out do one another in showing honor.

This is related to another example. Look at verse 15: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” I thought about this verse when I watched the Superbowl last week. It was such a dramatic game. The Arizona Cardinals were behind by four points with three minutes left, but they scored on a dramatic 64 yard touchdown pass to Larry Fitzgerald to take the lead 23-20. After a play like that the cameras always show close ups of the players on the sidelines. There were all the Arizona players cheering and waving towels, hugging each other and jumping up and down. On the Pittsburgh side you saw players with towels draped over their heads or glancing up at the scoreboard with a grim look on their faces. No one on the Pittsburgh side was rejoicing with those who rejoice. No one on the Arizona side was weeping with those who weep.

Of course a few minutes later the whole thing turned around. The Pittsburgh Steelers drove 78 yards in two minutes and scored with 35 second left on an acrobatic touchdown catch by Antonio Holmes. Suddenly there was wild cheering and towel waving on the Pittsburgh side, and slumped shoulders and head-draped towels for Arizona. No one on the Arizona side was rejoicing with those who rejoice. No one on the Pittsburgh side was weeping with those who weep. Do you see how counter-cultural that scripture is?

Here is another example—look at verse 13: “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Our culture has no problem with the first part of that verse. Paul uses the word “saints” to refer to people within the church. We all believe in helping out people in our church or even people in our community who have fallen on hard times. The counter-cultural idea comes in the second half of the verse: “Extend hospitality to strangers.” Our culture emphasizes hospitality to people we know. Ask yourself: Are you more likely after to church to go up and say hi to someone you know or someone you have never seen before? Or to push the issue a little further, are you more likely to help a needy person in Spokane or a needy person in Pakistan?

Please understand: I am not against saying hi to people you know. Seeing friends here on Sunday morning is a wonderful thing. Nor am I against helping people in our own city. But for followers of Jesus that isn't the whole story. We are also called to welcome and help out strangers. That's why when we send out mission teams from our church, we sometimes send them to the House of Charity or to the Mission Community Outreach Center, and sometimes we send them to New Orleans. That's why when we divide up the mission giving of our church—the 20% of pledges that goes to benevolence—we give a large amount of it to mission needs in our own community, but we give some of it to the world mission of the Presbyterian Church to use in places like Pakistan. The culture tells us to take care of our own, which we should do, but we are also told to care for strangers. That is just how it is for a follower of Jesus.

One last example—verse 17: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” The culture's view of this is expressed by a bumper sticker I saw a few years ago. It said, “I don't get mad, I get even.” When someone hurts us or treats us unfairly, our instinctive response is retaliation. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” the

Old Testament says, though as Tevye says in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and soon we will all be blind and toothless.” Believing in Jesus—believing that we are all saved by grace—gives us a different view of these things. We still try to stop evil from happening. We still take thought for what is good. We still believe in justice and courts, prisons, and proper reparations. But we do not count on healing to come to our lives or our world through revenge; we count on it to come through grace.

Four years ago there was a fascinating story in *Parade Magazine* about a high school coach named Joe Ehrmann. Joe is a former pro football player for the Baltimore Colts who now coaches a high school football team. The article begins in the locker room minutes before a game. This is *Friday Night Lights* with a twist.

Standing before the Greyhounds of Gilman School in Baltimore, Erhmann does not need a whistle. “What is our job as coaches?” Erhmann asks. “To love us!” the Gilman boys yell back in unison. “What is *your* job?” Erhmann shouts back. “To love each other!” the boys respond. The words are spoken with the commitment of an oath, the enthusiasm of a pep rally. This is football? It is with Ehrmann. It is when the whole purpose of being here is to totally redefine what it means to be a man.

The article goes on.

The first step is to tear down what Ehrmann says are the standard criteria—athletic ability, sexual conquest, and economic success—that are constantly held up in our culture as measures of manhood. “Those are the three lies that make up what I call ‘false masculinity,’” Ehrmann says. . . . “As a young boy, I’m going to compare my athletic ability to yours and compete for whatever attention that brings. When I get older, I’m going to compare my girlfriend to yours and compete for whatever status I can acquire by being with the prettiest or the coolest or the best girl I can get. Ultimately, as adults, we compare bank accounts and job titles, houses and cars, and we compete for the amount of security and power that those represent. We compare, we compete. That’s all we ever do. It leaves most men feeling isolated and alone. And it destroys any concept of community.” . . .

To counter these cultural lies Ehrmann teaches his players these positive principles:

1. Allow yourself to love and be loved.
2. Accept responsibility, lead courageously and enact justice on behalf of others.
3. Learn the importance of serving others.
4. Develop a cause beyond yourself.

(Jeffrey Marx, “He Turns Boys into Men,” *Parade Magazine*, Aug. 29, 2004, pp. 4-5).

That is not a bad description of what Paul means when he says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Only I would add one more to Ehrmann’s list: Learn what it means to be saved by grace. But that is the subject for next week.

- Ken Onstot
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