

NON-CONFORMING TRANSFORMERS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 10, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One of the most fundamental laws of nature is the law of conformity. Everything tends to conform to its surroundings. For example, if we should bring a large block of ice in some suitable container into this auditorium its temperature, normally below freezing, would immediately begin to rise. If we allow the ice to remain here for a period of twenty-four hours or longer, it would no longer be ice and even the water that remained would tend to take on the temperature of the room about it. Similarly, if we should bring into this room a red-hot iron the same process would immediately begin, though the temperature change would be in the opposite direction. Immediately, it would lose its red glow and through a period of hours it would cool until it, too, had taken on something approximating the temperature of the room about it.

This same phenomenon can be seen in the world of living things. There are certain birds and animals and fish that tend to conform to their surroundings in their coloration. I have seen, for example, color photographs of fish that actually change their color as they are moved from a pool with a bottom of one color to other pools whose bottoms are of different colors. We are all familiar with the fact that many animals "lose themselves" in their natural surroundings, in the sense that their skins, feathers and furs are so much like their surroundings that they are hardly visible. Not until there is some movement do we actually see them. The traditional example is the chameleon, which changes its appearance as it changes from one environment to another.

Man, Too, Conforms to His Environment

This same phenomenon can be recognized in the behavior of human beings. It is quite easy to recognize the fact that one changes his accent and general pattern of speech as he moves from one section of the country to another. Similarly, most people follow the current styles of dress. Clothing that was quite adequate a few years ago would be considered completely unacceptable, merely because it is no longer like that being worn by others. Examples could be easily multiplied to demonstrate that mankind has a tendency to want to be like those about him, but further examples seem unnecessary.

Far more basic than these surface considerations is the fact that people tend to conform their living and thinking habits to the behavior that they find around them. There is constant pressure upon the one who is different to fall in line with the crowd. "Everybody's doing it" is hardly an argument, but its force is hard to resist.

It is just here that Christians face one of their most crucial problems, for there are many activities to which they must not conform. It is no virtue to be unique, or peculiar, just in order to be different. It is no virtue simply to be a square peg in a round hole. However, when the thinking and the behavior of the crowd are not Christian, the child of God must have the spiritual stamina to be different. This need is recognized in Christ's words in the sermon on the mount, "Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it." (Matt. 7:13-14). It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said, "Whosoever would be a man must be a non-conformist." The Christian's problem is to know when he conform to the pattern of life about him and when it is necessary for him not to conform.

Our generation is at a time in which certain definite trends are identifiable. I think I can suggest these trends with some degree of accuracy by presenting several pairs of words, or perhaps we should call them dichotomies. The trends of our day include a trend away from discipline and hard work toward irresponsibility and laziness. There is a trend away from self-control toward license. There is a trend away from the virtuous toward the sensuous. There is a trend away from the moral toward the immoral. There is a trend away from such principles as honesty, integrity, and truthfulness toward expediency. There is a trend away from the spiritual toward the material. There is a trend away from the religious toward the secular. There is a trend away from faith toward doubt. Obviously the trends of our day are not in the direction in which Christians ought to go. It is for this reason that conformity to the living and thinking habits of our time would be disastrous to the ongoing of the church and to the eternal salvation of the individual Christian.

Withdrawal

In the early centuries of Christian history this problem of withstanding the evil influences of the world led some to advance the idea of monasticism, a withdrawal from the world. However, it has never been God's wish that his children should withdraw from association with their fellowmen. In John 17:15 we find Christ saying concerning his apostles, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them from the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one." In apostolic times God's children did not withdraw from the world but mingled freely with all men, however, not without careful attention to the problem of being overcome by the evil about them.

A second century *Epistle of Diognetus* reads, "Christians are not different from the rest of men in nationality, speech or customs ... They live, each in his native land--but as though they were not really at home there ... in the flesh as they are, they do not live

according to the flesh. They dwell on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the laws that men make, but their lives are better than the laws ... In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is distributed in every member of the body, and Christians are scattered in every city of the world. The soul dwells in the body, and yet it is not the body. So Christians live in the world, but they are not of the world.” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, pp 306-307).

In this connection we might well read the words of the apostle John, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.” (I John 2:15-17). Another passage of similar emphasis is found in the apostle Paul’s Roman letter, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world (conformed to the world): but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2).

It is quite obvious that in order for the Christian to know when he may conform to the activities about him and when he must not conform, he must have some guide or standard to go by. This standard is, of course, the inspired word of God. Only through the careful reading and study of this book can he know when he must stand firmly against the trends of his day. It is for this reason that regular church attendance, and times of Bible reading, spiritual meditation and prayer are essential for the Christian. Only when the standards set forth in God’s word become the standards in the heart of the Christian can he know how to solve the myriads of problems connected with the pressures of conformity.

A Positive Transforming Influence

It is not enough to stand aloof from the sins of the world, the Christian must exert an influence that will cause others to withstand the influences of evil about them. Jesus described his disciples as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” In Acts 8:4 we find that “They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word.” Later, in Acts 17:6, we read the reaction of the pagans of Thessalonica to the coming of the Christians, “These that have turned the world upside down are coming hither also.” We appreciate their testimony to the positive influence of the early Christians, though we feel that they would have been more accurate in their appraisal if they had described the Christian influences as “turning the world right-side up.” To the Ephesians Paul wrote, “Look therefore carefully how ye walk, not as unwise, but as wise; redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:15-16). The Christian is to redeem the time, rather than conform to the time.

As one reads the story of God’s people, whether in the Old or the New Testament, he is impressed by the fact that God’s men have always stood firm. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews contains a list of a great host who had so great faith that they were willing to trust God’s way, rather than go the way of the world about them. No example is clearer than that of Moses, “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked unto the recompense of reward.” (Heb. 11:214-26).

It would be hard to conceive a situation in which it would have been more difficult to stand, than that in which Joseph found himself in ancient Egypt, Yet we remember that at great immediate cost to himself he stood firm on the principles of God that he had been taught. It would be difficult to think of a more trying circumstance than that in which Daniel found himself in ancient Babylon, yet he likewise stood firm in the face of the pressures of the Chaldeans.

Conclusion

In the beginning we mentioned the tendency of a block of ice and of a red-hot iron to conform to room temperature. These ought not to be the examples that man would wish to follow. Rather, carrying on the analogy, the Christian should think of himself as an air-conditioner or a furnace which change the temperature of the room. An air-conditioner is different from the cake of ice and a furnace is different from a hot iron precisely as a Christian is different from the man of the world. In each case, rather than conform to the conditions about them, they change and improve those conditions.

I think of the Christian as comparable to a policeman who stands in the midst of a downtown street during a heavy rainstorm. He is pelted by the rain from above and splashed by the dirty water of the street as cars and busses pass him on all sides, but he does not become wet or dirty. He is insulated against these elements by his rubber hat and hood, his raincoat, and his rubber boots. But more important than the fact that he does not get wet is the fact that his presence accomplishes good. He directs traffic to the benefit of all concerned. Similarly, the Christian must be insulated from the evils of the world and must be a positive force for good upon those about him. In short, the Christian must strive to be a non-conforming transformer.