

“Be Not Conformed to This World”

The New Testament portion of our daily readings for today includes the exhortation of Paul:

“... be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

There are two aspects to this verse: 1) be not conformed to the world, and 2) instead be transformed by the renewing of our minds. For our Exhortation this week, we shall consider both aspects.

The admonition not to be like the world around us is a consistent theme in Scripture. To give but two examples:

“Thus saith Yahweh, **Learn not the way of the heathen**, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them” (Jer. 10:2).

“When thou art come into the land which Yahweh thy God giveth thee, **thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations**” (Deut. 18:9).

Israel, however, did not heed the remonstrations of the prophets, or the commandment of Yahweh which they were to observe whilst in the land. Indeed, early on in their history, they sought to be like the nations in having a king set over them:

“then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5).

Samuel tried to reason with them, but it was to no avail:

“Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said Nay: but we will have a king over us; **that we also may be like all the nations**; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:19-20).

It has truly been said that the danger of conformity, is that we become like everyone else – and this was the case in Israel, as they desired to be like the world around them. Interestingly the last phrase in this quote reveals a second motive behind their request: to have a king to fight their battles, like the nations did. Samuel later referred back to this:

“... And when ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us; when Yahweh your God was your king” (1 Sam. 12:12).

Their request – or more accurately their demand – was an implicit denial of Yahweh as being their king and deliverer. They sought a military king, who would save them from their enemies, when it was Yahweh who was their king and commander-in-chief. We must heed their example: Yahweh is our deliverer: He is our Strength and Salvation. Do we reject Him by preferring to go our own way, and be like the nations around us? Nay, he has appointed a captain of our Salvation (Heb. 2:10), and we must accept and embrace the deliverance he will provide. There is no other name under heaven given among men, “whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12) – and so we would reject our King at our peril!

Another example of standing aside from the ways of the world, instead of being conformed to them, is the case of the three men of Daniel chapter 3. In this chapter, the king Nebuchadnezzar had erected an image, all of gold, and commanded all his subjects to bow before it: “and whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace” (Dan. 3:6). But whilst all around them men and women were bowing the knee to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, three men stood tall. Hence the accusation was given:

“there are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-nego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Dan. 3:12).

This is what it means to stand for the Truth – to refuse to worship at the altar of Mammon and keep ourselves holy to the Lord. It is not a matter of being self-righteous, as some accuse us of: rather it is a humble observance of the commandments of our king. We can bow the knee before no other, even if to do so involves resisting unto blood (cp. Heb. 12:4).

These three men refused to conform to the majority all around them, and courageously defied the king’s commandment. Hence they were cast into the burning furnace – which had probably have been used to create the king’s golden image. They were firm in their resolve: “... we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

Notice that these men were not presumptuous: they trusted in the Lord’s will to deliver them – but even if He did not, they would still refuse to worship. Truly, this was a trial of their faith. Though the golden figure was esteemed and worshipped by the majority, their faith was greater in value than the precious metal image. Even so, Peter describes the trials to come upon the believers: “that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7).

The Lord Jesus Christ warns against being like the apostate hypocrites in his day:

“Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (Mat. 6:8).

The true believers are not to be of the world. They have been called out from it, but must change, rather than to be conformed to it (cp. Jno. 15:19). James writes: “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4). We must not covet the approval and praise of men of the world: if we are their friends, we are setting ourselves at odds with the God who is calling out of the Gentiles a people for His Name (Act 15:14). Here is the command: “... come out from among them, and be ye separate saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17). And again: “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11).

BEING TRANSFORMED

In addition to the call for non-conformity, the Apostle speaks of how those who have come out from the unfruitful works of darkness are to change: “... be ye ***transformed by the renewing of your mind***” (Rom. 12:2). The same theme is continued thus:

“... that ye put off concerning the former way of life the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And ***be renewed in the spirit of your mind***; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24).

Notice that in both these places, the renewal is “in the spirit of your mind”. This is important, for it demonstrates the need to have a change in our mind-set. And though we live in an age where Bible Study is disparaged, this is the only means by which we might have such a mental transformation. As Paul addressed the Colossians:

“... ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:9-10).

Here is the importance of Bible study: it is able to change our entire outlook, and way of thinking. Hence the Psalmist has it: “wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word” (Psa. 119:9). If we do not take heed according to the Word therefore, we will not so cleanse our way.

But the renewal in knowledge of which Paul speaks, is to be a transforming influence to conform us to “the image of him that created him”. He also speaks of this same theme elsewhere:

“but we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are ***changed into the same image*** from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

And again:

“for whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29).

This is something that we should be conformed to: the “image” of Christ. Like the three faithful men we considered earlier, we must not conform to the worldly worship of false gods, but rather be conformed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But this transformation of sinners into saints will only be finally accomplished when Christ comes again (cp. Phil. 1:6). Then, those who have cultivated and developed the mind of the Spirit – a mind that was in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5) – will be made like him physically:

“our way of life is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who **shall change** our vile body, that is may be fashioned **like** unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).

Again:

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 Jno. 3:2-3).

We saw earlier, that the friendship of the world is “enmity” with God. The true believers, however, have a friendship and association upon the principles of their acceptance of the Revealed Truth of God. Peter describes them as “them that have obtained like precious faith” (2 Pet. 1:1) – and such a faith can only be found in those who believe and obey the Truth (1 Pet. 1:22). True brethren in Christ dwell together in unity (Psa. 133:1), with those who are like minded. Conformity to the world is certain destruction, but conformity to the image of Christ is peace, salvation, and life.

This spirit is expressed by the Psalmist:

“Blessed is the man that walkieth not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of Yahweh and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Psa. 1:1-2).

Let us apply these words to our own lives, transforming our minds, and enlightening our hearts, so that we might find favour in the day to come. Then we will bear the Divine Image as promised by the Lord, being made like unto him, rejoicing as one spirit throughout the endless ages to come.

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