

Conformity and Transformation

By Gordon Arthur

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Do not be conformed to this world: the vast majority of Christians worldwide think the Diocese of New Westminster and large parts of the Episcopal Church in the United States have been doing precisely the opposite of this for years. I have to say I agree with them. So let's look at what Paul is saying to the Christians in Rome, and by extension to the whole Church, in this passage. What should we be doing?

The key to understanding what Paul means lies in two rather long compound Greek verbs: *suschēmatizesthai*, to be conformed to, and *metamorphousthai*, to undergo radical change. Understanding these words is important, but I'll try to be as brief about the Greek as possible. The first of these verbs is rather difficult to translate, but it can be broken down into smaller pieces to make it more manageable.

At the heart of the verb is the word *schēma*, which doesn't have exactly the same meaning in the New Testament as it does in English. It doesn't just mean the form or framework within which we work, but it has a much broader meaning, incorporating the whole of our nature and of our inner being. Paul expands this into the verb *schēmatidzō*, which means "to position". The implication is of positioning the core of our being and the whole of our nature alongside something.

That something is usually translated "the world", but in fact Paul says we should not be conformed to this age. There's a double point here: we should neither adopt the thinking of the secular world, and nor should we uncritically embrace the spirit of the age. As Christians, we are called to be distinctly different from secular society, which does not always reflect Godly values. We all know people who are greedy and selfish, many venerate the cult of celebrity, and multitudes are happy to worship at the altar of eternal youth: we only need to read newspapers or watch TV to see plenty of evidence of this.

Not so with us: the Church's agenda is, or at least should be, set by God. We are called to immerse ourselves in Scripture, and to challenge the values of society when they conflict with it. We should also allow Scripture to challenge our own values, and to lead us to repentance where necessary. The Church, in being faithful to Christ, should always lead society, and never follow it.

The spirit of the age may not necessarily reflect Godly values either: Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the US in the McCarthy era spring to mind as examples of times and places with spirits of the age that were unhealthy, to say the least. Even when the spirit of the age has been healthier, it has often adopted the view that anything goes, a view that is flatly contradicted by Scripture. The spirit of the age, of the unredeemed mind, is no guide to the will of God.

Paul's implication, then, when he says that we should not be conformed to this age, is that we should not position our inner being alongside the spirit of the age, or the thinking of secular society. We should not commit ourselves to a secular outlook or worldview. We should not try to match our lives to the fashions of this world, changing our colours like chameleons each new season. Instead, a radical change is needed.

The Greek verb *metamorphousthai* comes from the root of the English word metamorphosis. This transformation, brought about by the Holy Spirit, is as spectacular as the change from a caterpillar to a butterfly, but it's internal, although it has outward effects on our behaviour. If we follow this analogy, the unredeemed are as earthbound as caterpillars, which are largely stuck where they are born, and are mainly occupied with eating. According to Paul, the unredeemed are dominated by human nature at its lowest, indulging the desires of the flesh.

The redeemed, by contrast, live a life centred on Christ. This life is more like that of butterflies, which can fly wherever the Spirit takes them. Instead of staying in one place and eating everything in their paths, they take what sugar they need from plants and produce nectar. Similarly, the lives of redeemed Christians are transformed for the better, as Christ replaces self in their hearts. They begin to bear fruit that will last.

Metamorphousthai also has a spiritual sense that has nothing to do with physical transformation. It is used in Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2 to describe the transformation of Jesus during the Transfiguration, during which He glowed with heavenly radiance. Paul tells us that we can share in this process. The Holy Spirit brings about this change in us: we cannot produce it ourselves.

By this transformation, we move from this age into the age to come. It begins to reverse the effects of the Fall, and we become clearer images of God, whose glory shines through us. We're changed through the renewal of our thinking, and our new moral life in the Spirit allows us to become what we were intended to be. In this context, "renewal" implies a spiritual rebirth, which in Titus 3:5 is linked with the restoration and rebirth of baptism. It's a fundamental change, not just a return to what was there before.

Paul tells us that only after this renewal can we discern the will of God reliably. We're freed from the cages of convention imposed by society, and we can gain fresh and independent insights into moral realities. We can discern what is good and acceptable to God, and also what is perfect, in the sense of promoting and cultivating all the virtues as elements of a fully developed personality. Again, the guide to what is acceptable to God is Scripture, as illuminated by the Holy Spirit, not secular morality. Paul's teaching is thoroughly rooted in the thought of the Old Testament, as illuminated by grace.

The key to achieving this change is repentance, a change of mind to move away from the thought of the world and towards the will of God. When the Church is faithful, it is transformed; when it is unfaithful, it remains conformed to the world. St. James makes this point this rather more forcefully: "Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

In the Revelation to St. John the Divine, the Risen Christ sent messages to the seven Churches of Asia. To the faithful Church, at Philadelphia, He said:

Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth...If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

By contrast, to the unfaithful Church, at Laodicaea, He said:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spew you out of my mouth...I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Which of these messages will we receive? Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Amen.