

Conforming Ourselves To Death.

Now that's a little dramatic, isn't it? Conforming Ourselves To Death.

My title is an allusion to a oft-quoted book written in 1985 by Neil Postman, a professor at New York University who died in October of 2003. His book "Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business" focuses attention on the shift in our culture from what he calls the Age of Typography or Exposition to the Age of Show Business.

In my sermon title, what I borrow from Postman for our purposes is the idea that you can do something somewhat innocently or in a "somewhat-not-paying attention-to" way for so long that you could kill something.

Who would think that a little conformity to the ideas and priorities of our age could lead to our death or the death of a culture?

But some things in small and increasing doses over a long period of time that we are not paying close enough attention to can really hurt us.

I'm reminded of that illustration of the frog in the kettle. If you place a frog in hot water, he jumps out. But if you warm the water slowly over time, you are able to cook the frog thoroughly.

He never knows what gets him. I assume he or she thinks that the lily pad-soaking tub was just an entertaining experience, that is, until he croaked.

Now to our text this morning in Romans 12.

Starting a little farther back for the sheer power there is in reminding ourselves of who God is, we read in Romans 11:33 and forward:

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

"Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Of all the things that Paul might say, after he has spent 11 chapters waxing eloquently on the primary ideas of the Christian faith in the letter to the Roman church, he gets to the word at the beginning of Chapter 12 of “Therefore” and he gives us three directives and one of these is stated in the negative.. do not conform.

We will discuss at another time the directives in the positive, that is... present your bodies as a living sacrifice and transform yourselves by renewing your mind and testing.

Paul’s command “Do not conform to the world” is the judgement on his part that the world around those believers, from it’s ideas to it’s inclinations to it’s passions to it’s actions to it’s culture as a whole... that world or age was opposed and is now still opposed to the things of God, His will, His character, His priorities, His kingdom.

And by virtue of the fact that out of the blue he raises the issue of conformity in the form of a command should clue us in that in his mind... as He speaks the mind of God to the church at Rome and coming forward speaking to us the body of Faith Presbyterian... that this is a major problem.

So the primary question before us is this:

Are you and I being cooked to our detriment in an unnoticeable way by the beliefs of our culture to conform ourselves to first the philosophic ideas and then the resulting practices of the age in which we live?

When looking at the verb here, “conform”, the word picture from the Greek word is of something being pushed and squeezed into a mold.

When I was about 12 or so, I got to visit a friend’s dad’s business. He was in plastics. His plant was a smallish metal building with a two story interior. with an office and a large room where there was this one big machine. It seemed huge to me.

At one end were some barrels of little plastic pellets that got poured in on one side. Out from the side came some plastic piece or toy.

The machine was blowing off steam and making all this noise, and call me sheltered, but I had never seen something so cool. When I asked the question that every kid is going to ask, “how does it work?”... they showed me a mold and explained to me how the pellets are melted and then injected into the mold under high pressure and if everything goes right, bam, out pops the plastic piece.

My mother has always told people not to let me around mechanical stuff because when heads are turned I will try to take it apart and that will be a problem because she can't ever remember seeing me actually put back together something I've taken apart.

But I didn't try that on the big injection machine. That thing was a monster.

So do you have the picture that the apostle wants us to see?

The shape of the mold is the non-believing world's ideas and values.
So are we being injected into that mold?

But it gets more interesting in this short phrase, “Do not be conformed to the world”.

It's who is doing the injecting. Is the world trying to inject us or someone else?

The verb “conform” whose roots could be translated possibly as “with fashion” is in an interesting form in the Greek. It is in the 2nd person plural, imperative, and middle voice.

With middle voice, the person doing the action is doing it to themselves.

So as a command the Apostle is saying, “Harvey, don't you, conform yourself to the world. Don't you inject yourself into the world's mold. Don't you look into that attractive but deadly mold and stuff yourself into it.

By the mercies of God, don't you do that Harv!”

So what does the mold look like?

What are those fundamental ideas that our post-Christian and atheistic culture holds supreme in 2005?

It seems the ideas are at least these three and they are listed in your bulletin:

There is only opinion.
There is only stuff.
There is only me and/or mine.

“There is only opinion.”

Truth with a capital “T” is dead.

At best, Christianity is a collection of noble religious ideas among a cafeteria of other competing ideas, some more noble than others.

So one is left with only our opinions. There are no absolutes in any sphere of life... except perhaps that we are certain that time and chance has brought us to this moment.

“There is only stuff.”

What our senses can comprehend and what can be observed and/or measured is all that exists.

As the bumper sticker says, “He who dies with the most toys wins”.

And by the way, because the world is random in its progress, uncertain at best, and humans have needs, and stuff helps with those needs,

Then it only makes pragmatic, utilitarian sense to gather as much as possible in as short a period of time as possible and lock it down as tight as possible so that your lifestyle is as secure as possible for as long as possible because there is no one else around to look after you in a closed universe with no God that competes for all resources and is prone to fall apart randomly.

“There is only me or mine.”

Only me and/or my family exist. The individual should never concern himself or herself with a community, a group of people. My first and primary allegiance is to myself and my own needs or my families needs, particularly material needs. I am not connected to a larger context; I am not supposed to be. I am responsible only to myself. To thine own self be true.

Only opinion, only stuff, and only me... the messages of our age.

Now how would I know if those generally non-biblical ideas have come into my life as cardinal assumptions?

Well, just monitor my speech, the use of my time, and the use of my money long enough and you would be able to discern what Harvey Kirkpatrick really believes at his core.

And I see much of this poison in my life. I not only have observed it from an early age, but I fear that I have mentored and infected others in my modelling.

Would this be true of you?

There is only opinion.

There is only stuff.

There is only me or me and mine.

These are the answers of a post-Christian culture.

The ideas can't carry the weight for human beings in a fallen world.

If it has a smell to it, it would be the scent of death.

Our task this morning is to think through the current degree to which we are conforming ourselves both in thought and action to the falsehood and tyranny of our age. In addition to being poison to our systems and an offense to God Himself, they are counterfeits... somewhat working like the real thing, but devoid of any lasting value to God, to us, and to those about whom we care.

And after we have reflected, we must repent in mind and action. We need to turn and walk away from the sirens of opinion, stuff, and me.

But let's relook at these wrong ideas again one at a time.

(I. There is only opinion.)

Pick any context, moral truth, i.e., right and wrong, truth about our origins and how we got here, truth about human nature and how we relate or what our purpose is here, truth about anything outside of ourselves. When there is no possibility of universal or absolute truth, we are only left with opinion... your opinion and my opinion.

If you can, read Nancy Pearcey's book "Total Truth". I have some sample copies out in the right side foyer, and I'll order you one if you like. You may recognize her name from helping Chuck Colson write several of his books. Mrs. Pearcey has successfully picked up the mantle of Francis Schaeffer who spent 40 years trying to point out to Christians that you cannot take Christ as Savior without throwing your life onto Christianity as truth. You cannot have a Christian name tag and live like an atheist or just pick and choose whatever parts of Christianity suit the real drives of your life.

In the first chapter of her book, she relates a story about a Christian lady named Sarah who worked in a Planned Parenthood clinic because she wanted to show compassion to young girls.

Pearcy writes: (p.32)

“Sarah’s story illustrates how even sincere believers may find themselves drawn into a secular worldview- while remaining orthodox in their theological beliefs.” So how did she end up working for Planned Parenthood and referring women for abortion? Something happened to Sarah when she went off to college. There she immersed in the liberal relativism taught on most campuses today. In courses on sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, it was simply assumed that truth is culturally relative... And Christianity? It was treated as irrelevant to the world of scholarship.

Sarah recalled, “It was as though Christianity were so irrational, it didn’t even merit being listed alongside the other moral theories”.

Yet Sarah had no idea how to respond to these assaults on her faith. Her church had helped her find assurance of salvation, but it had not provided her with any intellectual resources to challenge the ideologies taught in her classes. The church’s teaching had assumed a sharp divide between the sacred and secular realms, addressing itself solely to Sarah’s religious life. As a result, over time she found herself absorbing the secular outlook taught in her classes. ...

Sarah explained... ‘My Christianity was reduced to a thin veneer over the core of a secular worldview. It was almost like having a split personality.’ (Sarah’s) mind had absorbed the divided concepts of truth characteristic of Western culture: sacred vs. secular; fact vs. value; public vs. Private.

Though her faith was sincere, it was reduced to purely private experience, while public knowledge was defined in terms of secular naturalism. ...

she lacked any sense of how Christianity functions as a unified, overarching system of truth that applies to social issues, history, politics, anthropology, and all the other subject areas. In short, she lacked a Christian worldview. She held to Christianity as a collection of truths, but not as Truth (with a capital “T”).”

I had this same ephipany as a young Christian in college. Someone invited me to a film on a Friday night in Greenville, S.C. in a high-school gym. I saw three 30 minute films with a little man narating dressed in knickers with white hair and a whitish goatee. It was Francis Schaeffer, and the film series was “How Shall We Then Live”.

He was talking about Western civilization and how history is really “His story”.

And like the force of a hammer, I was struck with the realization that Christianity is not just fire insurance to keep me out of hell, but truth that demanded my obedience to every bit of Scripture that related to every bit of life. Only Christianity described reality accurately . Everything else falls miserably short.

Honestly, I know far too many Christian people, especially teens, college-age, and young adults who are just floating in life, clueless that a strong current is taking them somewhere bad downstream. Christianity is old news to them. It gets them heaven like something you need to pick up at the store. Otherwise, it is simply boring and uninteresting.

Christianity, is as rich and as beautiful and as exhilarating and captivating as the deepest ocean is deep. At least it is when you see that it is Truth with a capital "T" and the most awesome explanation of reality.

(III. There is only stuff.)

"There is only stuff" as I mentioned earlier is all about materialism. We talk about it a lot, but it still eats us alive

I see the Bible teaching us that everything we have comes from God. God gives us our needs. He gives us any wealth we have. God made stuff. It was His idea. There is certainly a place for enjoyment in what He has made for us and what He has given us. And on these points, the Bible is positive.

Where the Scripture turns negative and where stuff becomes problematic is when stuff and the pursuit of stuff replaces God.

"Take care, be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" says Jesus in Luke 12:15.

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world-- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions--is not from the Father but is from the world." says John in I John 2:15-16

Stuff replaces God as our security. Stuff replaces God as our life's pursuit. Guarding stuff makes us paranoid about stuff.

And quite sadly, dogged pursuit of stuff helps me break the command of love. People are more important to God than stuff. And when the focus of our life is

pursing or keeping stuff then we have no time for people... no time for the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ, much less any time for those without Christ in the world.

When I pursue stuff doggedly, I not only don't have time, I don't have any money because I have spent it all on finding, getting, securing, and making sure I'm never gonna lose my stuff.

Most likely, and I could be wrong, that you will find that God will bless your socks off materially. He will more than take care of your needs, and He promises on His own honor, to take care of your basic needs.

The only cure for stuff-itis is give-it-away therapy.

God tells us to take care of one another, doesn't he?

“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal 6:2)

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Gal 6:10)

“But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?” (1 John 3:17)

Materialism slowly cooks us alive if we do not vigorously fight it.

(III. There is only me & mine.)

Perhaps the ill of selfishness and the self-centered life is what you thought of when you read “there is only me and/or mine.”

But I was thinking more sociological, more a phenomena of American life that thread by thread unravels a disciple's life and a biblical community.

I was thinking of the dark side of individualism...

A preoccupation with me and my family's life that leaves very little room for the physical, financial, spiritual, and emotional needs that my brother and sister in Christ in the local body has. And even less time and money resources for my non-believing neighbor.

There is no doubt that the Scripture teaches us that we are to be responsible in several areas to God and to our families. To work so that we might eat. To care for mother and father, wife and husband, and children as God-given duties.

But since our founding as a country, we have extended and twisted the notion

of personal responsibility into a way of living that shuts us off from one another. As small, distinct islands in suburban archipelago chains, our individualism has brought us an isolation that is snuffing out our abilities to heal and be healed.

In contrast, that is not the biblical picture of community you see in Acts 2, 1 Corinthians 12, or even right here in Romans 12 just a few sentences from our text in verse 5: “so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others”.

In fact, if we are wondering what Paul might have had in his mind that were the temptations of the church in Rome to which they might be conforming themselves, then we should pay attention to what his admonitions are in the rest of the book of Romans beyond Romans 12: 1 & 2.

More than any other issue, you will find his admonitions are for the members of the church to practically love each other.

But it is not a small surprise that we like being disconnected and individualistic. It is an easier life if I don't know about your problems, your medical bills, your credit issues, your boss' fits of rage, your teenager's substance issues, or how you and your wife's communication is regularly destructive.

In 1985, a book by a University of California-Berkeley sociologist was published that found its way onto the best seller list. Robert Bellah's “Habits of the Heart” looked for the dominant characteristic of Americans and American life and in conclusion echoed what the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his 1835 classic “Democracy in America”... that we are a nation of individualists.

And while that has done us some good, it has done us perhaps even more poorly.

In his 1996 second edition, Bellah closes his 2nd edition foreword ironically enough pointing to the only point of view whose commitments can serve as an antidote for individualism-run-amuck. His closing quotes the Puritan John Winthrop's sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” which was delivered on board ship in 1630 just before the Massachusetts Bay colonists disembarked.

Bellah concludes: (p.xxxv)

“In that sermon Winthrop warned that if we pursue “our pleasures and profits” we will surely perish out of this good land. Rather, what Winthrop, paraphrasing the Apostle Paul, tells us is that we must “entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities (overabundances ; excesses), for the supply of others’ necessities... we must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labour and suffer together, always having before our eyes... our Community as members of the same Body.

Under the conditions of today’s America, we are tempted to ignore Winthrop’s advice, to forget our obligations of solidarity and community, to harden our hearts and look out only for ourselves.”

The Scriptures scream to us that our commitments again and again boil down to truth and love. The truth of God revealed in His scriptures and in His Son and the love of God revealed in His covenants, in the Word made flesh and in a reconciling work on a cross for those He has called and for those even this day He is calling.

This age is completely derailed from real truth and real love in its atheism. The world calls us to stuff ourselves into the mold of “only opinion, only stuff, and only me and mine”.

God, through Paul, says, “Christian, do not conform yourself to that false and evil mold of thought and living.”

May God give us grace to repent and resist for His glory and our benefit.

Let us pray.