

Romans 12:2
“Handbook for the Non-conformist”
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A look down the magazine isle of Borders at the covers reveals what the world wants us to look like and strive for. We have beauty magazines, health magazines, celebrity magazines, sexy and chic magazines. Today's verse brings us the difficulty of interacting with the world. Caedmon's Call has a song "This World" whose chorus says: "*This world has nothing for me and this world has everything. All that I could want and nothing that I need.*" Christians are often schizophrenic- they don't know if they love the world or hate it.

Today's verse is very short, very direct and very counter-cultural: "Do not be conformed to this world." (NASB) And I'm going to *stay negative* today- next week we'll see the positive side of not conforming, but I don't want to steal Pastor Crenshaw's thunder.

Other translations of this phrase:

"Do not conform yourselves to this age." –American Catholic Bible

"Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you." –Jerusalem Bible

"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world." –New Living Bible

"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." –J.B. Phillips

"Do not let the age in which you live force you into its scheme of thinking and behaving." –James M. Boice

"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking." –The Message

How can we be non-conformists? Many people, particularly teens, who think they're non-conformists have usually just traded in one conformity for another. Ex: Metal heads, skaters, Goths, etc. I was once real into the heavy metal scene. I looked down on "mainstream kids" because they all conformed, but I dressed and acted exactly like all the other metal kids. John Reuben, a contemporary Christian rapper, has lyrics that say: "What is it we don't get? Maybe that empty book bag you sport as a gimmick or the Timberland boots that have never been scuffed... You're just like the rest of them- the only difference is you follow a less popular trend. Tell me how you're gonna dog the mainstream then turn around and do the exact same thing that you're dissin'?" Despite what usually passes for non-conformity, Paul is calling us to be true non-conformists, though, rejecting the world and its ways of thinking.

But before we get too far into our discussion, we need to understand that:

-We can't and shouldn't write the world off entirely.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a very influential book called *Christ and Culture* that had five models of how Christians interact with the world- it showed the spectrum from monasticism (those who totally separate themselves from the world) to chameleon-Christians (who fit right in and look exactly like the world).

We can't separate ourselves from the world for at least two reasons:

- 1) For the world's sake: We can be the link to Jesus for them. We may be the only Christians they know.
- 2) For our sake: The doctrine of "Common grace" teaches that non-Christians are not barred from all truth. "God sends the rain on the just and the unjust." While Christians have revealed truth in the Scriptures, and therefore a better shot at understanding things more truthfully, there is much we can learn from unbelievers. That's why I can watch non-Christian movies, read non-Christians books and have conversations and relationships with non-Christians.

But the danger is to come to the world on its terms and not DISCERN and sort out what's wrong with their thinking. Being conformed to this world means we do wrong and choose ungodly things without even thinking about them, because they have become so ingrained in our way of thinking. We "fit in without even thinking" as the Message says. We have no discernment- I can live my life without thinking how the gospel applies to it, reaching for the same shallow goals of success, materialism and pleasure as my next-door neighbor pagan.

When we are conformed to the world:

- 1) We trade in eternal life and abundant life for fading, unfulfilling life. We have been given a glimpse of eternity; we've been given the treasures of our heavenly Father and yet we trade it for fool's gold. We've basically told Jesus: "What you have is not exciting or fulfilling enough, so I'm going back to the things that I hope will fill me up."
- 2) We turn our Christianity into what our culture values. Throughout history, man has turned Jesus into whatever the culture looked like at the time: Renaissance Jesus, progressive Jesus, revolutionary Jesus, Jesus as CEO, environmental Jesus. "God made us in His image and we return the favor."

We'll take a few minutes and compare the viewpoints of humanism, materialism, hedonism and Christianity. Very basic definitions of the first three look like this:

Humanism- Man is the highest good, there is no God or at least he can't be proven, so you are God.

Materialism- Be as healthy, wealthy and wise as long as you can.

Hedonism- Eat, drink and be merry; enjoy the pleasures of this life.

How do these different philosophies view situations differently? Take two instances from my life recently: having a baby and having new neighbors:

Having a Baby

Humanism: "A baby might fulfill me- I don't want to be old and alone; they'll certainly take care of me later in life; plus it's great to pass on my good genes and my name."

Materialism: "My kids will have all the best stuff so people will know I'm a good parent and an influential person. Plus I get a tax break!"

Hedonism: "Why the heck would I want a baby? Never be able to party again? I don't think so."

Christian: Children are a gift from God to be loved, cherished and brought up in the ways of the Lord; we fulfill the command to be fruitful and multiply and add children to the covenant family who will ultimately bring much good to the world by obeying God.

Having New Neighbors

Humanism: "I hope they don't bug me or play their music too loud. Maybe we'll be friends if they're nice to me and are trustworthy."

Materialism: "I hope they keep their house and their yard up so our property values don't go down. Hey, I wonder if they'd be interested in a business opportunity?"

Hedonism: "I hope they don't call the police when my parties get too loud. Maybe they have attractive friends or family I can date."

Christian: "I'll try to meet my neighbors' needs, get to know them, earn their trust so that eventually I can share the love of Christ with them."

-Not conforming to this world takes wisdom and discernment.

How does a fish know he's wet? We're so engrossed in American culture, we don't question its ingrained values- we don't know we're "wet." How do we separate what parts of our lives are influenced by our Christian worldview and those influenced by American culture? How do Christians in other cultures separate their shared, cultural values from their biblical ones?

Last week the Elders were praying with and for the Gribbins as they head off to Guatemala. I prayed that this trip would give them the perspective to identify the lies our culture has taught us, but also to see the lies of Guatemalan culture.

1 Corinthians 1:27-28 talks about the wisdom of the world vs. the foolishness of the cross: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things- and the things that are not- to nullify the things that are..."

That's tough- I want to be considered an intelligent person before the world; I don't want to be considered an idiot. But listen to 2:6-7: "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began."

-Not conforming to this world takes courage.

Examples: 1) Patricia Heaton is an actress who plays the wife on Everybody Loves Raymond. She has spoken out in the hostile environment of Hollywood about how she is pro-life and credits Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NY for helping shape her thinking. 2) A.C. Green played basketball for many teams, most going to the NBA Finals with Magic Johnson's Lakers. He held a streak that was possibly more impressive than Cal Ripken, Jr's streak of consecutive games played. His streak was that he was in his mid-30s and had never had sex. He was committed to God's purity before marriage and was very admired for his stand in the modern sports world where athletes succumb to that temptation all the time.

I worked for State Farm right out of college collecting data on houses in South Florida. The first day my partner and I went around to different houses and did what we were supposed to do. After an hour or so of lunch, I got up to get back to work, but she told me to sit back down and hang out a little longer. Most of the workers just sat around at a different restaurant all day eating and talking. I couldn't believe that they were cheating their employers so blatantly. The next day when the afternoon was stretching on and they were all sitting around again, I told my partner that I was leaving to work but that she could stay and talk if she wanted. When I came back at the end of the day, she blew up at me that I was making everybody look bad and acting holier than thou. But it was worth it to me not to cheat at my job and not conform to what these dishonest employees were doing.

But lest you think I always made the right decision, I remember driving with some guys in college down to our rival, Texas A&M. My girlfriend had convinced me it would be fun to steal signs on their campus, so I jumped in for the ride. I knew it was illegal and wrong to steal them, but I went along and watched, not saying a thing, as they dismantled and stole signs all over the A&M campus. I'm ashamed that I didn't speak up or object in any way.

-Not conforming should drive us to our knees in prayer and to the Bible for guidance.

Otherwise we're cut off from the source, we fall prey to the world's enticements. There's no list I can give you of what you should do to avoid conforming to the world, other than the Fruits of the Spirit, the Sermon on the Mount, and the rest of the Scriptures. But Christian freedom teaches us that we must have discernment as to what things are beneficial and what are destructive in our lives. I know very practically

that I don't have cable because I know it would "conform me to the world." But that may not be a weakness for you- you may have other areas that you need to change according to what God and His word are telling you.

I John 1:15-16 says, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."