

We have a tendency to conform. Yet, God calls each of us to be transformed into new beings in Christ. For Paul, worship and the Christian life is a full-bodied experience. It is tangible, manifest in every part of our lives. We represent Christ when we are with our friends, at the store, at school or work, running errands, or at church. The faith journey impacts our relationships, the way we spend our time and money, and the way we think.

We move from the way we were to the way God wants us to be. This transformation is not a glum experience, but a vibrant transition into a rich, colorful life—one that is worth living. I can say, from personal experience, that this new life in Christ is one that enriches every, single day. It does not impact our bottom line. This is not some fallacious prosperity gospel. When I say, it impacts every day, I mean it changes our approach to problems and our sense of self. Conforming is what the world wants. It is not God's calling.

Consider the Paul's life. He was born in Tarsus as a Roman citizen. He had Jewish parents, so he was full-blooded Jew. Paul's life began in conformity. He went to Jerusalem. This would be like following your parents' footsteps and attending their alma mater. Paul's parents must have been proud. He studied the Torah under Gamaliel. We have no way of knowing if he had a family connection there, but it seems that this would be like taking classes under your parents' favorite professor. They were ready to burst. He became a Pharisee. His parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins probably celebrated. His teacher was proud. His parents' neighbors were even proud. *The kid done good*, they said.

We all have pressure to conform. We have pressure to meet certain expectations. My friend Larry DiPaul was a Catholic priest. He was saying his prayers one night and felt God calling him to leave the priesthood. Up to that point, Larry's life had been one of both following God and conforming to his world's expectations. But, to leave the priesthood was a radical step that took him away from his life of conformity. Larry took the step of following when God called him and left the priesthood. He had some ups and downs. A couple of years later, he was praying and felt God saying that there was a new calling ahead of him. The next day, he ran into a friend who said, "Larry, I've been trying to reach you. Would you be willing to be the new director of the Romero Center for Social Justice?" This would be a hard job in Camden, NJ, in one of the roughest areas of the city. He knew that it would be hard work. He would work with some of the poorest people in the country, dealing with hopeless problems. He knew that it would be thankless work and he might encounter violence. It was the exact thing he knew God was calling him to do. Larry looked up at the sky and said, "See? This is why people don't pray anymore!"

If Larry had continued in his life of conformity, he would have missed the rich calling of working with people at the Romero Center. The Apostle Paul conformed to his calling. He walked to Damascus. His work as a Pharisee led him to persecute a band of dissidents who followed an itinerant rabbi named Jesus. The blinding light on the Damascus road gave him a choice: continue conforming or be transformed. Paul said yes to God. He stopped

conforming to this life and following God on a new path. How would his parents (and everyone else) feel about this new calling?

Our culture inundates us with messages telling us to conform to the world. In Romans, Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this age." A different Paul, Paul Tillich, writes, "This warning of Paul is significant for all periods in history. It is urgently needed in our period. It applies to each of us, to our civilization, to humanity as a whole."<sup>1</sup> Tillich wrote that in 1963. It is no less true today. In our age, marketers want us to conform to trends, so that we have the latest clothing, phones, cars, and other material possessions. There was a radio advertisement for donating one's car for public radio. The pitch was, "Stop embarrassing your kids when you pick them up from school with that old car. Donate yours and buy a new one."<sup>2</sup> Our act of conforming to this age extends to every aspect of our lives. Relationships become disposable. Community ceases to be interpersonal and is often limited to a virtual reality, which is a contradiction in terms. *Reality* is the world or the state of things as they actually exist, and *virtual* is almost or nearly as described. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this age." Another Paul, Paul Achtemeier, writes:

It is clear from the opening verse that grace is to affect the whole of human life. In language, reminiscent of 6:12-13..., Paul tells his readers that their proper response to their Creator is the shaping of their total lives by [God's] gracious will. Like the burnt offering given [entirely] to God, the Christian is to be a total sacrifice to God, and that sacrifice is to consist of the whole of life. That, says Paul, is the logical response... to the history of God's grace...<sup>3</sup>

"Do not be conformed." These four, simple words challenge our entire civilization. We depend on conformity. Yet, God wants transformation. People can be conformed not only to a group, but also to themselves. A fitness buff can become so accustomed to working out that she loses her freedom and becomes a conformist to fitness. This is a kind of slavery to self. And, it can happen in any hobby, interest, vocation, or relationship.<sup>4</sup>

What is Paul's problem with conforming? When we conform to this world, we put something above God. Paul wants Christians to give their entire self to God. The faith journey involves our entire self. "Life under the lordship of God means a life under the structuring power of grace."<sup>5</sup> Grace overcomes slavery to self, liberating us for a life of faith.

A few years ago, my friend Larry DiPaul was diagnosed with cancer. After struggling for less than a year, he died. If he had not listened to God and been open to transformation, he would have missed some incredible joy. The Apostle Paul echoes Larry's joy in faith. From the depth of prison, he and Silas sang hymns. These were not songs of regret. They were songs of praise to God. They were not songs of conforming to the world, but songs of transformation. Let us be so changed in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now: Sermons* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 115.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/npr-extra/2013/11/14/244829934/turn-your-car-even-a-lemon-into-the-public-radio-programs-you-love> N.B. This story does not include the quote above, but I heard it on the radio.

<sup>3</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), 195.

<sup>4</sup> Tillich, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Achtemeier, 195.