

## BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD – Part 1

*This essay, written by Benjamin L. Sommer was originally published in 1929 along with a collection of essays in a booklet entitled "The Fascination of the Race", which is available from Apostolic Christian Publications. It will appear in two parts.*

The apostle John says, "The whole world lieth in wickedness." (1 John 5.19) It is therefore easy to see that we should not be like the world, as Paul admonishes the Romans: "Be not conformed to this world." (Rom 12.2)

But wherein shall our life and conduct differ from that of the world? Wherein and how shall we distinguish ourselves as Christians? Upon our correct answer to this question depends whether we live the true Christian life or a miserable imitation of it, which not only is an offense to the world but works *against* rather than *to* the glory of God.

Of course a Christian cannot be conformed to the unregenerate and sinful world, but the first thing we must understand is that there is no virtue whatever in mere non-conformity, in merely being different and peculiar. Paul makes this very plain where he admonishes: "Be not conformed to this world," by adding, "But be ye transformed by the renewing of the mind'."

The question is, whether we are peculiar according to the peculiarity of Christ; whether we have received "the renewing of the mind" and have continued in it. But even if we have once been truly regenerated and renewed in mind and heart, we must not forget that "Many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4.1) and many "seducing spirits" (1 Tim 4.1) attempt to exert their influence upon us, to confuse us and to mislead us even after we have found the true light in Christ. When we add to this our own feebleness of understanding and proneness to error, we can easily understand why Christ says, "Watch and pray" (Matt 26.41), and again, "And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch!" (Mark 13.37)

This knowledge of our proneness to error and of the many deceptions that are abroad shall ever keep a true Christian humble, watchful, and on his guard. It shall ever give us occasion to measure ourselves with the yardstick of Christ's teachings; to see whether the fruits we bear are the fruits of the Spirit of Christ and whether the peculiarities we show, are the peculiarities of Christ or whether we have gotten into the error of thinking to see virtue in peculiarities which are *our own* or which might belong to some nationality or to a former day.

The fashions and customs of twenty-five or fifty years ago are no more sacred than those of today, although, to human eyes they seem to be hallowed by time. Many sects and religious orders go to great lengths in laying stress upon certain customs and upon manner of dress out of all proportion to the true value of such customs. How often have we heard Paul's admonishment, "Be not conformed to this world," used as though it applied almost exclusively to dress and such external matters, instead of to our state of mind and, consequently, to our whole attitude toward life. This passage has often been used by those who believe there is virtue in mere separateness from this world - that is, an exclusiveness whereby the believers have as little contact with the world as possible, living wholly within their own small circle, cherishing various customs - such as peculiarity of dress - thinking these to be the characteristic earmarks of a true Christian. In their zeal for the maintenance of these customs and peculiarities they often forget completely to show forth the characteristics and peculiarities of Christ, but give themselves, in spite of much outward appearance of piety, to such carnal vices and worldliness as conceit, greed, envy, evil surmising, evil speaking, and hardness of heart.

To place great value upon strict observance of certain customs of self-righteousness is characteristic of the Pharisee and not of Christ. It is because Christ freely taught and acted against this attitude of the Pharisees that He brought their wrath down upon Him so that they hated Him unto death.

Someone might say that if there is no virtue in the observance of these customs of outward peculiarity and non-conformity to the world, there is at least no harm in them. Would to God this were true! On the contrary there is great danger and harm in them.

Have you never heard men say in a joking way, when taking leave from each other: "Well, don't take any bad money." In our day and land, under a well ordered government, we are not in much danger of being cheated by receiving counterfeit money. Counterfeiting is considered a great crime and is severely punished by the government, so there is not much of it. But put yourself into the position of a man who had labored hard and long in a strange country and when he tried to use the money he received as wages to buy a ticket

home, he found it worthless counterfeit. Not only does he fail to reach home, but all his hopes as to how he might at home enjoy the fruits of his labor are blasted, and he is a poor, homeless, penniless wretch.

In a similar state, spiritually speaking, is he who thought to have laid up treasures in heaven and to have earned the crown of righteousness through the keeping of peculiarities which Christ has not commanded. As Brother Froehlich once expressed it, he has a false good conscience. He thought to have gained a wealth of virtue, but *the Day* reveals that he was only a slave to the commandments of men and that the virtue he thought to possess was a worthless counterfeit and has no value in the eyes of God.

Christ says: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5.20)

But not only is he who places value upon customs and traditions, which have no value, in danger of losing his own salvation; there is another important effect. These customs and peculiarities which are not according to Christ form a serious obstacle to such a man in spreading the Gospel. For one who places value in them seeks first to convert the world to his own peculiarity and then to Christ. But sincere souls seeking God are repelled when an effort is made to subject them to human traditions. So these traditions and customs can form an almost insurmountable obstacle to one who would otherwise be able to spread the true Gospel.

Having concluded not only that there is no virtue in mere non-conformity, in mere peculiarity, or in mere separateness from the world, but that there is great danger in these, it will be worth our while to consider what kind of non-conformity to the world is of value in God's sight.

.....*This article will be continued next month.*