

Faith in the Public Square

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The Challenge of Nonconforming

Paul admonished the Christians in Rome with these words:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2).

As I have been called upon by our Convention and the other regional Conventions and Unions which comprise Canadian Baptist Ministries, to offer leadership on the marriage issue, this passage has challenged and inspired me. It seems that the path of truth and the way of freedom is a narrow path indeed.

As I consider the question of transformation of our minds, I wonder if we have fallen into a trap of being so focused on doctrinal issues – in this case, the proper biblical understanding of homosexual practice – that we have lost sight of the larger issue. That is, are we so intent on protecting our rights and our religious freedoms in our rights-based society, that we have missed the point?

Jesus came to pay our sin debt and to offer spiritual transformation. He did not come to free God's people from political oppression and, as far as I can tell, He invested no effort at all in political reform while He lived on earth, despite the obvious moral problems of the day. Jesus has entrusted to us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the continuation of the ministry He began. Thus, it seems that God does not call us to a ministry of political reform but to a ministry of spiritual reconciliation.

On the night that He was betrayed, Jesus prayed for His disciples, saying to the Father:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it (John 17:14-17).

We, as Christ's disciples, are to be in the world but not of it. We are to be His ambassadors, spreading salt and light to a world where we are aliens and strangers - holy misfits - offering hope and access to an imperishable inheritance, even citizenship in the Kingdom of God and the right to be joint heirs with Christ.

When we get drawn into arguments over rights – our rights versus the rights of some other individual or some other group – are we representing Christ or are we conforming to the pattern of this world? Are we thinking with the mind of Christ, or are we reacting to a threat to our comfort zone?

Do we forget that God did not call us to a life of comfort? Have we forgotten that all but one of the disciples was martyred and that globally, thousands of believers today are persecuted and killed for their faith? Do we not know that the enemy (the ruler of this dark world) is a master of disguise, the ultimate deceiver, and a brilliant strategist?

In Canada today, the marriage issue is dividing Christians. And Satan is gloating.

After several warnings about being deceived, there is a little verse at the end of the first chapter of James that says this:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to **keep oneself from being polluted by the world** (James 1:27).

No mention of fixing the world – ridding it of the sin which so easily entangles - or even of warning the world of God's wrath. Come to think of it, Jesus Himself, though He was never soft on sin, demonstrated a perfect balance between truth and grace. He spoke the truth in love. He was neither defiant nor belligerent, but full of mercy and grace – all the way to the cross. And he tells His disciples in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

In a sort of preamble to what we call the "Great Commission", Jesus claims that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). We go into the world to make disciples and to teach those disciples to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us. We go under Jesus' authority but we must not claim His authority for our own. We do not have authority to forgive sin or even to grant peace. We are not called to draw lines or to take political stands – if I understand the gospels correctly, Jesus spent His entire ministry erasing lines so that **all** may come to God through Christ. Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Our principle task as we go forth in Jesus' name is to offer hope and to share the good news. As we participate as citizens in Canadian society, seeking to be salt and light in the public square, let us be careful that we do not conform to the pattern of this world in our understanding of sin and its consequences. But, let us also examine ourselves and ensure that we are not conforming to the pattern of this world in our response to sin.