

"Transformed Nonconformist"

Nov 1954

[November 1954]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

Shortly after being installed as Dexter's twentieth pastor, King preached a sermon he would deliver frequently later in his ministry.¹ He draws on James E. Will's thematically similar "Men Who Live Differently," a copy of which he filed in the same folder as this sermon.² In his remarks, King observes, "I have seen many white people who sincerely oppose segregation and [discrimination], but they never took a [real] stand against it because of fear of standing alone."

"And be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2

"We are a colony of heaven" Philippians 3:20³

{We must not be "astronomically intimidated"}

Both of these passages suggest that every true Christian is a citizen of two worlds: the world of time and the world of eternity.⁴ The Christian finds himself in the paradoxical situation of having to be in the world yet not of the world.⁵ Indeed this is what is meant by one of the passages just read in which Christians are referred to as a colony of heaven. This figure of speech should have special relevance for us in America, since the early days of our nation's history were days of colonialism. Thirteen of the states of our union were originally British colonies. Although our forefathers had relative freedom in forming their institutions and systems of law, their ultimate allegiance was to the King of England. And so although the Christian finds himself in the colony of time, his ultimate allegiance is to the empire of eternity. In other words, the Christian owes his ultimate allegiance to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will, it is the Christian's duty to revolt against it.

1 Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Program, "The installation of Rev. Martin L. King, Jr. as pastor," 31 October 1954. On the inside of the file folder containing this sermon, King wrote "TN Preached at Dexter, Nov. 1954." For a more developed version of this sermon, see King, Draft of Chapter II, "Transformed Nonconformist," July 1962–March 1963, pp. 466–476 in this volume.

2 Will, *The Pulpit* 22 (July 1951): 5–7. Will's sermon included the subheading "Transformed Nonconformists." James E. Will was assistant pastor of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Aurora, Illinois, and was also attending Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville, Illinois, at the time of the sermon's publication. He preached this sermon at the Chicago Sunday Evening Club on 27 May 1951 as its "Seminar Sermon of 1951."

3 Cf. Philippians 3:20 (MOFFATT).

4 This theme was prominent in Reinhold Niebuhr's writings. A few months before preaching this sermon, King referred to this theme in a paper presented to the dialectical society in Boston on "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr." "Eternity is always relevant to, and yet ever tensionally set against earth at every moment of time. Eternity may never be identified with earth, but earth may never declare independence from eternity" (King, April 1953–June 1954, in *Papers* 2:270). For more of King's writings on Niebuhr, see also King, "Reinhold Niebuhr," 2 April 1952, and "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," 9 May 1952, in *Papers* 2:139–152.

5 Cf. John 17:14–16.

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Now there can be no doubt that the command of our text—do not conform—is difficult advice for any modern person. The pressure of the herd is ever strong upon us.⁶ Even our intellectual disciplines attempt to convince us on the necessity of conforming. Some of our philosophical sociologists have gone so far as to tell us that morality is merely group consensus. In sociological lingo, this means that there is little difference between mores and morals. In plain language, it means that you tell the difference between right and wrong by a sort of Gallop poll method of finding what the majority thinks. The answer of certain psychologists to all maladjusted people is, simply, to learn to conform to this world. If we only dress and act and think like other people, then we shall be happy and mentally healthy.⁷

Yet the command of our texts still stand before us with glaring urgency. "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." As Christians we are a colony of heaven thrown out, as pioneers, in the midst of an unchristian world to represent the ideals and way of living of a nobler realm until the earth should be the Lord's and the fullness thereof. I'm sure that many of you have had the experience of dealing with thermometers and thermostats. The thermometer merely records the temperature. If it is seventy or eighty degrees it registers that and that is all. On the other hand the thermostat changes the temperature. If it is too cool in the house you simply push the thermostat up a little and it makes it warmer. And so the Christian is called upon not to be like a thermometer conforming to the temperature of his society, but he must be like a thermostat serving to transform the temperature of his society.⁸

In spite of this imperative demand to live differently we are producing a generation of the mass mind. We have moved from the extreme of rugged individualism to the even greater extreme of rugged collectivism. Instead of making history we are made by history. The philosopher Nietzsche once said that every man is a hammer or an anvil, that is to say every man either molds society or is molded by society.⁹ Who can doubt that most men today are anvils continually being molded by the patterns of the majority.

Along with this has grown a deep worship of bigness. Especially in this country many people are impressed by nothing that is not big—big cities, big churches, big corporations. We all are tempted to worship size. We live in an age of "Jumboism" whose men find security in that which is large in number and extensive in size.¹⁰

6 Will, *The Pulpit*, p. 5. "The pressure of the herd is ever strong upon us."

7 Will, *The Pulpit*, p. 5. "Some of our philosophical sociologists have gone even further and have told us that morality is only group consensus. In sociological lingo, this means that there is little difference between folkways and morals. In plain language, it means that you tell the difference between right and wrong by a sort of Gallop poll method of finding what the majority thinks. The answer of certain psychologists to all maladjusted people is, similarly, to learn to conform to this world. If we only will dress and act and think like other people, then we shall be happy and mentally healthy."

8 A probable source of this illustration is a sermon by Henry H. Crane (Crane, "Thermometers Versus Thermostats," in *These Prophetic Voices* [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942], pp. 26-40).

9 Frederick Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Thomas Common, trans.), p. 123. "Ye know only the sparks of the spirit but ye do not see the anvil which it is, and the cruelty of its hammer!" See also Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Hyperion* (1892). "In this world a man must either be anvil or hammer."

10 Fosdick, "The Hope of the World in Its Minorities," in *The Hope of the World*, p. 4. "Again, this truth of Jesus is deflected from many modern minds because of our worship of bigness. One of my friends calls it 'Jumboism.'"

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Men are afraid to stand alone for their convictions. There are those who have high and noble ideals, but they never reveal them because they are afraid of being non-conformist. I have seen many white people who sincerely oppose segregation and discrimination, but they never took a real stand against it because of fear of standing alone. I have seen many young people and older people alike develop undesirable habits not because they wanted to do it in the beginning, not even because they enjoyed it, but because they were ashamed of saying "no" when the rest of the group was saying "yes." Even the Christian church has often been afraid to stand up for what is right because the majority didn't sanction it. The church has too often been an institution serving to crystalize and conserve the patterns of the crowd. The mere fact that slavery, segregation, war, and economic exploitation have been sanctioned by the church is a fit testimony to the fact that the church has too often conformed to the authority of the world rather than conforming to the authority of God. Even we preachers have manifested our fear of being non-conformist. So many of us turn into showmen and even clowns, distorting the real meaning of the gospel, in an attempt to conform to the crowd. How many ministers of Jesus Christ have sacrificed their precious ideals and cherished convictions on the altar of the crowd. O how many people today are caught in the shackles of the crowd. Many of us think we find a sort of security in conforming to the ideas of the mob. But my friends it is the nonconformists that have made history, not those who always look to see which way the majority is going before they make a decision, not those who are afraid to say no when everybody else is saying yes, but history has been made by those who could stand up before the crowd and not bow. The great creative insights have come from men who were in a minority. It was the minority that fought for religious liberty, it was the minority that brought about the freedom of scientific research. In any cause that concerns the progress of mankind, put your faith in the nonconformist.

Now let us make it clear that non-conformity in itself might not be good. There is a type of bad nonconformity. There is no virtue in being a nonconformist just to be a nonconformist. Some people are nonconformist just to get attention and to be different. So Paul gives us a formula for constructive nonconformity which is found in the second half of the text. In order to discern the true will of God and become constructive nonconformist we must accept a new mental outlook. We must be transformed. Jesus' phrase for this experience was the new birth.¹¹ And so only when we have been born again can we be true nonconformist. We are called upon to be transformed nonconformist. This is our eternal challenge as Christians.

The courage of three Hebrew boys—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is still a challenge to us today. The King Nebuchadnezzar had ordered that all were to bow down and worship the golden image. But there stood in the midst three Hebrew boys who were determined not to bow down and serve the golden image and they said to the King, if it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, but if not we will not bow.¹² Who today can stand up and refuse to bow in a crowd where everybody else is bowing.

¹¹ Cf. John 3:3-7

¹² Daniel 3

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The spiritual strength and moral courage of Jesus amid the temptation in the wilderness is our eternal challenge.¹³ Jesus was born at a time when the majority of people thought of the Kingdom as a political Kingdom and thought of the Messiah as the one who would restore this political kingdom with all of his power and pomp and riches. And all of the temptations that Satan offered Christ were temptations to fall in line with this type of material political kingdom. In other words he was urging Christ to conform to wishes of the mob. But in the midst of such a plea we can hear Christ saying in no uncertain terms "Get thee behind me Satan."¹⁴ As if to say, "I will not bow, for I have orders from an authority not of this world to build a new kind of kingdom, a kingdom that will one day rock the world, a kingdom that will shake the hinges from the gates of the Roman Empire. It will not be a kingdom political in structure and materialistic in outlook, it will be a kingdom of the spirit. I realize that at this time this type of kingdom does not conform to the majority opinion. But I will not bow."

Who will take the attitude of Jesus and be a sincere nonconformist. Today we stand on the brink of moral and physical destruction and the great need of the hour is sincere nonconformist. Men who will stand amid a world of materialism and treat all men as brothers, men who will stand up in a world that attempts to solve its problems by war and declare that he who lives by the sword will die by the sword.

Who this afternoon will go away with the determination not to be a slave to the crowd and not to bow to the desires of the mob.¹⁵ Remember Christian friends we are now in the colony of time, but our ultimate allegiance is to the empire of eternity. "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

{NonConformity is costly I must admit this}

{Close with John Oxman}¹⁶}

TAD CSKC Sermon file, folder 14, "Transformed Non-Conformist"

13 Jesus is tempted in the wilderness in Luke 4:1-13

14 Cf. Matthew 16:23

15 In an outline of this sermon, King continues "The need of the hour is sincere non-conformist (1) Against materialism (2) nationalism (3) militarism" ("Transformed Nonconformist," Sermon outline, November 1954)

16 King probably refers to John Oxenham's poem "The Ways" (1916), as he does in "Creating the Abundant Life," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 26 September 1954, p. 191 in this volume