Conformed or Transformed?
Romans 11:33-12:8

Summer is almost over. Roads are filling up again, and Ames is transforming from the quiet, slower-paced summer Ames back into full of students Ames. It's a wonderful time, with new beginnings and new possibilities. It's also a time of realizing all those summer projects that didn't get completed and the challenges that a new school year brings.

As Paul begins the closing section of his letter to the Romans, he talks to them about transformation. After spending the first half of the letter pointing out their sin and then showing them their need for a savior, reminding them that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and after pointing out how God's promises to Israel continued into the church, Paul reaches this last section where he writes about transformation. And he begins with the contrast of being transformed and conforming.

The early Christians in Rome great pressure to conform to their world. Jewish Christians were pressured to keep following all of the commands of the Torah, even those Jesus and Paul and others taught no longer applied. Gentile Christians faced pressure, also, to keep following their family traditions. All of them faced the pressure of living in the capital city of the greatest empire of the day. Rome's public spaces were filled with monuments, arches, forums, and images honoring military victories and the imperial family. There were temples for worshipping not only gods and goddesses but even past leaders who were now proclaimed gods. Everything that surrounded them pressured them to conform to the world around them.

We face the same kind of pressure to conform. Even though it's been twenty years since it was first published, I keep coming back to the book *unChristian* and its description of how Christians are viewed. In the chapter on how Christians are often viewed as hypocritical, the authors write:

> In virtually every study we conduct, representing thousands of interviews every year, born-again Christians fail to display much attitudinal or behavioral evidence of transformed lives. For instance, based on a study released in 2007, we found that most of the lifestyle activities of born-again Christians were statistically equivalent to those of non-born-agains. When asked to identify their activities over the last 30 days, born-again believers were just as likely to bet or gamble, to visit a pornographic website, to take something that did not belong to them, to consult a medium or psychic, to physically fight or abuse someone, to have consumed enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, to have used an illegal, nonprescription drug, to have said something to someone that was not true, to have gotten back at someone for something he or she did, and to have said mean things behind another person's back. … Among young [non-Christians], 84 percent say they personally know at least one committed Christian. Yet just 15 percent thought the lifestyles of those Christ followers were significantly different from the norm.

Twenty years later, things haven't gotten any better. It often looks like Christians are

conforming to the way of the world. It's still far too easy to let the world dictate its expectations on us. It's still far too easy to think, speak, and act as people who are of the world, not just in the world. It's still far too easy to forget that we are citizens of heaven, not just citizens of this world. It's easy to be molded and shaped and formed by forces outside of us, forces hostile to God.

There's lots of dangers to conform for college students. There's pressure to conform to the stereotypes of college life, of drinking and drugs. There's pressure to conform in being a good student, which can lead to temptations of plagiarism or using AI to do the work instead of just helping to understand the work. If you've been told over and over — by parents and politicians, by news media and social media, perhaps by the college itself — to see your studies as little more than means to an economic end, you'll use AI as much as possible to minimize your academic labor.

Those pressures don't end when you graduate. Temptations to conform to the economic, technological, and other patterns of this age don't end. They just change. There's the pressure to conform in your possessions, keeping up with the Joneses with a new house, new car, new furniture, etc. There's the pressure to conform to having your kid so involved in club sports or travel teams that you're never home on the weekends, or rarely in church. There's the pressure to conform by reaching retirement and focusing on what you can do for yourself now.

As Paul writes to the Romans, he tells them "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2). And to help them do that, Paul offers a list that contrasts greatly with the story Rome told. Paul celebrates the small, seemingly inconsequential ways of God. Acts of brotherly affection. Caring for the needs of the saints. Taking notice of the lowly. And even loving one's enemies. Offering a cup of water or a gift of food to an enemy who is thirsty and hungering. These are the ways of the kingdom of God.

Those are the ways Jesus lived out his life. He didn't conform to the world, but instead worked to transform it. He loved genuinely. He blessed those who persecuted him, even praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He overcame evil with good. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we're forgiven even when we conform to the world. But Jesus calls us to follow him in living a different way.

If we just look at Paul's exhortations, if we just look at this list of words as something to put into action, it would be easy to feel exhausted. To wonder if the Holy Spirit could ever form within us all of these desires of God. Paul's list is overwhelming and leaves us wondering, "Where do we start? What should we pay attention to?"

One of my seminary professors had one way of trying to look at the true extent of this list. He proposed that you were to take one exhortation a day and really work on that one. So, for Monday, you take "Let love be genuine" and all day, you try to demonstrate genuine love. Passing by someone in the hall at work or on the sidewalk on campus, you say, "how are you doing?" only this time you stop to listen and then you respond to what's going on in her life. For that day, you live out the fact that love is more than the words of a casual greeting. It

involves action and interaction, genuinely experienced and genuinely expressed. Tuesday you move to the next exhortation and work on "Abhor what is evil." If you were to do this for every one of these exhortations, it would take you almost a month to get through the list. And that would be spending only one day on each one and assuming that you could actually do these things. Paul's list of how to live a transformed life is overwhelming.

When encountered as a list, a series of exhortations that come over us all at once, these words can be confusing and challenging. We don't know where to start. But when encountered as a community, a way in which God's Spirit works through flesh and blood in this world, these words are comforting and encouraging. They open our eyes to see the ways in which God is near us, very near us in daily life. Once you hear these words from Paul, you begin to see God at work among his people all the time. And the vision, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, can bring you an eternal joy.

We need to encounter these words as a community because that's the way Paul intended for them to be encountered. All of the verbal forms are plural. The words are a window on what life in Christ looks like in community. We can imagine Paul saying with his syntax, "Don't try this alone." Like this whole letter, his advice is addressed to a bunch of people, and much of it concerns their shared life.

For a Christian the daily activities of home, work, school, and social contacts conform to the spirit of the Gospel. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." As Christians we pray that our lives might be upright, honest, and marked by dependability and integrity. We also pray that our lives might be marked as those who stand for what is right and that we might be ready to be counted as standing on the side of Christ in every issue which arises in life.

That's why we begin and end every semester here with that affirmation of vocation we'll say at the end of the service. We're reminded of what God has called us to do. The callings God has on our work, our studies, our place in our families, our place in society. In all those things, we can be tempted to conform to the expectations of the world. Or, instead, we can live transformed lives and let God work through us to restore the world and make it a better place.

Look around you at the people God has gathered in this place. Your brothers and sisters in Christ. Here, God is at work in love. He has called you in Christ to be his people. He has forgiven you and made you his own. And now he works in you and through you by the power of his Holy Spirit. God is at work in small stories of self-sacrifice and everyday acts of love. God is at work transforming the world through us, making the world conform to His design. God helps us to live in love with Him and each other.

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