

Another Resolution for the New Year

(From *the Epistle*: Romans xii. 1 ff.)

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. 3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

Today's Epistle offers excellent instruction. In particular, it clearly expresses that the Church, *one body*, is made up of a certain kind of individual. Just as a house solidly constructed must make use of the best possible materials, the Church can never survive and thrive unless its "materials", which are the *members* from which it is built --meaning you and I-- are of the highest quality. St. Paul sets it out in no uncertain terms exactly what that means: we are to...

...present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

This morning I want to focus especially on this one phrase: *be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.*

What does this mean? When I was a teenager, I used to prize myself as a nonconformist, which, even if there was merit in the idea of not "going along with the crowd", often rendered me, I daresay, a bit obnoxious. But it was typical of those days... the "Sixties", when nonconformity was, at least for many of the youth, the new standard to which we were desperate to conform. And so the hair grew long, the clothing became bizarre and outrageous, the lifestyles boldly revolutionary, and beliefs exotic and unconventional. As we know, that form of nonconformity eventually won the day, and the old order was indeed thoroughly replaced by the new, with many consequences, some good, and many, bad.

But St. Paul's injunction to us is of a far more serious nature. Our pledge to nonconformity is not out of the mere impulse to be "different", to be in-your-face toward the prevailing norms and customs. No, it is an absolutely firm commitment of will to refuse to adopt standards and attitudes which, although they are the watchword by which the world lives and functions, have nothing whatsoever to do with the Kingdom of God and its principles. This, in a culture as anti-Christian and debased as the one in which we find ourselves, is a desperately heroic stance. This fact cannot be stressed enough.

Some religious groups, in an effort to promote separation from the world, have turned to externals to assist the process: they wear different clothing, for example, to which none are permitted exception, and they restrict themselves to communities whose invisible boundaries,

though rules and regulations, are carefully guarded. Apparently such outward shows of nonconformity are helpful to them in the fulfilling the biblical call to be different, and it would be wrong to needlessly criticize those who adopt such means. But the Apostle's prescription to the church must be primarily internal, one *of the heart*, because an outward show of piety may never go any deeper than just that... *outward*. It easily degenerates into pride and hypocrisy: "Look how religious I am! See how much closer I am to God than you are!" There is great spiritual triumph and victory, however, in making one's rejection of the world system an inner discipline, constantly maintained, wherever one walks, in whatever circumstances God places one in, and no matter how dark. I suspect that such roads are the ones most of us normally traverse every day, rather than the predictable, safe paths that some Christian communities are able to maintain.

I spoke of our calling as "heroic" for certain reasons. Chief among them is that the world of today, more, perhaps, than ever, is reaching out to grab the believer by the throat and force compromise upon him, in one form or another. The means it uses are numerous, and sadly, we are complicit in the process. The values promoted by the media, for example, defy the law of God, and urge us to do the same. And yet we often immerse ourselves in the media indiscriminately. That would be alright, if doing so was neutral in its effect. But it isn't. We are either propelled a bit forward, or a bit backward, by whatever we imbibe. And bits add up. It's as if the world is desperate to make sure that even we as believers don't break through to our God, and remain in touch with Him. It has little to fear from the masses already within its sway, kept effectively paralyzed in countless from moving even slightly toward the Lord.

What precisely is the agenda of *this world*, as it seeks to command conformity to itself? To begin with, it glorifies the temporal: whatever is here, and now, and of immediate significance. The entire concentration is on my *experience* of the moment: am I excited, thrilled, engaged, stimulated, involved? This reduces life to the sensory. It robs men of the slower and more contemplative processes of meditation, and thought, and the savoring of beautiful, lasting things, like ideas, or truths, or carefully laid plans for the future. It forces speed and haste and superficiality, and most significantly, in the spiritual realm, works against prayer to God. It turns the minds of men away from heaven and practically jerks their focus downward to earth.

The consequence of this is indifference toward God that will eventually express itself even in hostility toward all things Christian. The world's agenda cannot function without restraint unless all possible contenders are removed or effectively neutralized, and obviously the Church is principal..., at least it's *supposed* to be principal, among those. The Apostle John reduced the elements of the world to three: *...the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...*(1 Jn 2:16). Holy Scripture, with the Gospel, proclaimed through the Holy Spirit by

the Church, is the only flashing, red light of warning that exists to prevent any who are willing from being caught up in the rush to destruction which is the endpoint of the world's trajectory.

Our Epistle offers only one course of action for us in response. We are to...

...present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service..., and be transformed by the renewing of our mind, that we may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

As human beings we consist both of bodies and minds. In *presenting our bodies unto God*, we are saying to Him: "I am donating all that I am, every part of me, without reservation, to You and Your service. I am giving myself completely to You, just as if I were a whole, burnt sacrificial offering as described in the Old Testament. And in being *transformed by the renewing of my mind*, I am rejecting all of my old attitudes and ways of thinking in favor of thoroughly and completely adopting Yours as they are made known to me in Scripture." To use a modern figure, I am subjecting the old "hard drive" of my mind and heart, affected and ruined as they were by the "virus of sin", to be purged and purified by the "antiviral software" of God's Spirit.

This is no passive process. I may be able to purge my computer of bugs by running a program that works by itself, while I sit and wait for its completion. But *renewing my mind, that I might prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God*, means, among many things, that I must know what the *will of God* is, which is laid out in no other place other than in my Bible. Studying Scripture places tools in God's hands that He can use to refashion me. This is also the purpose of the Lectionary of the Book of Common Prayer: to provide us exposure to the Word of God.

As I noted earlier, the consequence of God's people following the Apostle's rule will be the building up of the Church: *For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.* If our churches are ever to become something more than merely gatherings of people who share the same values and sympathies and convictions, as good as that may be, and to actually constitute a living church, empowered by God's Spirit, bringing the Gospel to our families and communities, shining as brightly as a searchlight in the deepening spiritual darkness that is spreading across the land, there will be a price we must pay.

If we find that price easy to pay, then something is wrong. We have either fooled ourselves about the price, or deceived ourselves about what is *acceptable unto God*. No, it is the highest of prices. It is ourselves. And the standards of what is acceptable have been determined by the final Determiner of standards... God, Himself.

At the beginning of a new year, let's seriously consider these things as we move forward as individual believers, and together, in loving fellowship, as a church.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.