

# DO NOT BE CONFORMED

12:21 Series (Part 1) | Romans 12:1-2

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## The Danger of Conformity

I'd like to begin today a series of reflection on how you and I can live in a God-honoring, people-blessing way amidst these painfully conflicted times. It is no secret to you that our country, communities, and even our families, have often been bitterly divided over a host of disputes. We've titled this message series with the palindrome, **12:21**, to suggest something of the oppositional nature of these times. 12:21 also fits because it can frankly feel like it is after midnight in America and we are late in fixing what ails us. The optimist in me observes that 12:21 also happens to be the date of the winter solstice, the moment when the light begins to grow brighter and brighter. But the main reason we chose this title is because we are going to be studying the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's Letter to the Church at Rome – and the last verse, Romans 12:21, is especially significant for Christians. It's the call to overcome evil with good.

In Romans 13, Paul supplies a brief lesson in Christian Civics that's also worth noting. He calls upon Christians to pray for political leaders, to obey the rule of law, and to respect the role God gave to governments to establish the public order required to restrain evil and promote the good. Think how hard it must have been for first century Christians to follow those instructions given how cruelly their government was treating them. It's a reminder that, as Christians, we are not to descend into contempt toward politicians or flout law and order, even when they fail us. Paul, notably, doesn't put his focus on the behavior of politicians but on the character of Christians as the more important topic. In fact, Romans 12 is Paul's attempt to spell out the key behaviors Christians are called to bring to public life, no matter what sort of government they had. These, I think, are so relevant for our time.

Historians tell us that the early Christian church drew people from all of the different sorts of backgrounds and points of view that make for political and cultural conflicts. The church included the wealthy and the poor. It had young and old, women and men, the powerful and also the enslaved. Some were likely quite conservative and others progressive. But what made the church a different sort of community within the society is that all this diversity was bound together into a larger sense of unity. Christians were people whose primary sense of identity didn't come from their race, ethnicity, age-group, or party but from being "in Christ" (2 Cor 5:17). They were people who lived to advance his Kingdom above any human Empire.

But what made Paul write Romans 12 is that this distinctive characteristic was in danger of being lost – as I worry it is in our time too. Which is why Paul writes: **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Rom 12:1).**

To put it bluntly, Paul was concerned that the people of the church were losing their Christian mind. They were getting fuzzy on what the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus was. They were losing sight of the values and the behaviors of that new kind of Kingdom that Jesus had modeled and preached and pictured in parables and called them to extend. To put it another way, rather than focusing on the Kingdom, their minds were being taken over by the very powerful and pervasive storylines of the Empire. It was the Roman Empire in their time. I wonder what Empire it is in ours?

### **Deafening Storylines**

One of the most fascinating books I've read in recent days was published last month by InterVarsity Press entitled, THE LITURGY OF POLITICS. It's author is a 26 year-old woman named, Kaitlyn Schiess, who is a student at the conservative Dallas Theological Seminary and a former undergraduate at Liberty University, of Jerry Falwell fame. In her book, Ms. Schiess describes hearing Bernie Sanders speak to a gathering of students and faculty at Liberty. An avowed socialist and non-religionist, Sanders knew he was not on sympathetic soil. Nonetheless, Sanders made an earnest plea for the common ground he felt he and his audience would share. Your biblical tradition, Sanders contended, certainly makes you concerned about caring for vulnerable people. Can we talk about how we might do this together? Kaitlyn listened in astonishment as the audience largely rejected Sanders' outstretched hand.

A short time later, the conservative Christian author, Anne Voskamp, also visited campus. In her address, Voskamp also made an appeal, from biblical grounds, to concern for people on the other side of the wall. Voskamp was NOT talking about a border wall, but rather the other partitions that keep us from authentic relationship with one another. Ms. Schiess was stunned at how the audience reacted similarly to this very traditional person who, one would think, would have been seen as a friendly voice. But the very use of the word "Wall" closed people's minds to what Voskamp was saying.

And then it clicked for Kaitlyn. There's a filter through which people are listening to both Sanders and Voskamp. We're living in a time where certain terms and storylines have become so powerful and pervasive that they are winning out in people's minds over the language and values of the biblical story. As church attendance has declined, local churches have weakened, and the voice of the media has separated into a Red and Blue Industrial Complex, it has become more and more challenging for disciples of Jesus to think clearly and independently about the nature of the Gospel message and the kind of society that the values of the Kingdom of God might create. Instead, we are continually being seduced by worldviews that have some nominal correspondence with the Kingdom of God. They might even co-opt some of the same language. But upon close examination they are seen to be far more about the Empires of Man.

I think it is important that Christians think about this as we head into the upcoming election and every one that follows after this. We certainly ought to evaluate the mental competency and character of both presidential candidates. We ought to pay attention to each candidate's actual record. We ought to do our best to project how the policies they espouse will advance what we consider to be good. But, if we are followers of Jesus above all, it seems to me that the most important questions to ask of our politicians and our media voices and even our own spiritual lives is: "What is the story I am buying into? How consistent is that story with what Jesus teaches about the Kingdom and where is it really about the Empire of Man?"

### **The Gospel's Competition**

Human Empires – which is just another way of saying "political systems" -- specialize in creating storylines designed to win people over and make them subjects. Kaitlyn Schiess suggests that there are a number of very powerful storylines to which Christians today can easily become "conformed." I would add a few others to her list. But it may be worth thinking about where you or I have bought into these False Gospels instead of the transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is, for example, the Gospel of PROSPERITY. The storyline there is that if you work hard enough, long enough, you'll win. There's a religious version of that and a political version – Heaven or America will work for you, if you work hard. This is partly true. The Bible puts a lot of emphasis on personal initiative and hard work are reaping what you sow. The notion that people ought to simply be handed the fruit of real labor is the worst possible thing for human thriving. Socialism (and communism) has been historically proven to range from disappointing to disaster.

But story after story in the Bible (and in real life) make it clear that personal effort will not always be enough. Some people are up against challenges that make it statistically improbable that they will succeed without the intervention of more resourceful people. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan is all about this? If I've never been in a seat where I couldn't win by my efforts alone, it will be hard to get this. Which is why I need the Bible to remind me that every one of us is in need of grace (Rom 3:23; 6:23). A genuinely Christian politics will not condemn the prosperity of the few but declare God's concern for the flourishing for all his children. Our role is to picture a kingdom where everyone does their best and love stretches out to cover where we fall short. What party today – except the Church – truly has that agenda?

Another one of the big stories of our time is the Gospel of PATRIOTISM or nationalism. I was raised on this myself. America was chosen by God to be the New Israel. We are a Christian country. We are the world's savior. The very worst day in America is better than any other nation on earth. There is some truth in this storyline. Our country has been blessed with unusual resources. We are a destination toward which many in the world aspire. It is an historical fact that the Christian vision played a crucial part in the

development of our nation and the quality of its life. If we cancel the Christian voice from our land we will hurt America profoundly.

But we need to make sure that ours is a genuinely Christian voice and not just the voice of a prideful nationalism. I've lived outside this country (as some of you have) and there are some pretty great days in other parts of the world too. If America is in any way the New Israel then, as students of the Bible, you'd think we'd be the first ones who acknowledge that God regularly has to call Israel to repentance from her sins. As Christians, it's OK for us to admit that our nation's history – for all its great parts -- has contained some pretty big moral misses, and still does. The God we meet in scripture is not friendly toward any country who says: "Our nation first" – whether that be China or America. The scrap heap of history is filled with nations who lost sight of God's intention for the flourishing of all people. In the kingdom of God, privilege is always linked to humility and servanthood.

Then, there is the Gospel of SECURITY that seems ascendent in our time. We hear so often today of all the people who want to blow us up, the murderers and rapists who want to come over our borders, the looters who want to steal our stuff, the people in my college or workplace who will offend my dignity with all their micro-aggressions. "We're SO threatened by those people" is one of the major storylines of our time.

And it's partially true. Yes, there is sin and evil and risk in life. I don't know about you, but I've seen multiple murders, rape, and theft in my family's life. I lost a treasured colleague to the terrorism of 9/11. I own a Ring doorbell system and am a trained, licensed gun owner who respects others who are. But, as Christians, it seems like we could all agree on this: We can't buy enough cameras and guns... We can't build enough fences and walls... to void the thing Jesus said about life. **"In this world you will suffer, but be brave for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).**

Christians are people who are realistic about life, but not primarily driven by fear. We are the people who faced lions rather than deny our faith. We are the people who stayed behind in the face of the bubonic plague and cared for the dying. We are the people in this society who believe that we are in God's hands, no matter how bad things get. Go home and read 2 Corinthians 4. We may be wounded for awhile, but we believe that through Christ, we will ultimately be victorious (2 Cor 4:1-17).

Our politics today is also influenced by the Gospel of SUPREMACY – the notion that Northern European culture is superior to all others. But the Bible teaches that there is good and bad in every culture. I have to keep reminding myself that the Son of God himself was not white or European; I don't think even went to Yale! I love my particular culture. We can and ought to talk about the virtues of particular cultural forms. But for Bible-based Christians, it's the values of the Kingdom of God and it's "other-embracing" ethic that must be supreme (Col 1:15-18).

I wish we had time to reflect deeply on the Gospel of INDIVIDUALISM – the idea advanced in the politics of our day that everything would get better if all of us were simply free to follow every one of our own desires, choices, and tastes. Go read Genesis 3 to see how that worked out and how God feels about it.

Some of the politics of our time are big on the gospel of Gospel of PATERNALISM – the notion that a Bigger and More Benevolent State could be our salvation. States can and do provide many benefits. But, as Christians, we know there is one Savior. When he is #1 in our lives it moves us toward wiser moral choices and deeper community with others that diminishes the need for so many of the massive structures of State Empires.

### **Be Transformed By the Renewing of Your Mind**

I guess what I am trying to say in closing is that the storylines of prosperity, nationalism, security, individualism, or paternalism will always be highly powerful. They are being touted all over the political landscape today. Appealing to those powerful storylines helps build the popular following needed to create Empires. Empires aren't all bad. I think we live in a pretty good one. But Paul reminds us that you and I are not to be conformed to it. We are meant to be witnesses and advocates for a balance of values and a vision that no one party or candidate is going to have a corner on.

At the end of the day, each of us is going to have to cast our vote for an imperfect Emperor, but hopefully it will not be according to the False Gospels they may represent but rather on the basis of the Kingdom values we think they will advance. In the meantime, and to paraphrase Kaitlyn Schiess' helpful suggestion: *Evaluate the voices in your life in this political season, and ask yourself: "What is forming me?"* Even if I'm still tuning in to the news (and we should stay as informed as we can) *"What am I being asked love, fear, or hate, and what kind of good life is it describing."* The trick is to be deeply enough immersed in the Bible to know whether what you are being called to is an Empire or the Kingdom. **Do not conform 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. (Rom 12:2)**