

THERMOMETERS VERSUS THERMOSTATS

"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." Romans 12:2.

The first verse of chapter twelve is the turning point between the two sections of this epistle. Up to this point Paul has been dealing with doctrine, and here he deals with deportment. There is always a vital connection between position and practice. The "therefore" of verse one links the doctrines of the first eleven chapters with the duties of the last five. Note the tender and winsome entreaty of the words, "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." Such a dedication will make a tremendous difference in any life.

In the second verse of this chapter Paul enunciated a truth which needs to be repeated until it is reproduced in the lives of God's children. He said, "And be not conformed to this age, 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." In a present-day application of this text we are led to think of the subject, "Thermometers Versus Thermostats." How they differ!

Essentially, the thermometer is merely an instrument which reveals, records or registers its environment by unhesitatingly responding to it. No matter how hot or how cold the temperature, the thermometer immediately reflects it. The smallest fluctuation in external conditions is immediately recognized by the thermometer in its expansive or contractive reaction. It conforms completely to the situation in which it finds itself. Its behavior is definitely determined from without.

On the other hand, the thermostat is an instrument with all of the characteristics of the thermometer plus one enormously significant factor, namely, the element of control. It responds to its environment, and then, if the temperature does not correspond with the particular degree designated by the standard set by the thermostat itself, that instrument immediately puts into operation certain unapparent but potent forces which change the outside temperature. Soon it is made to conform to the "ideal" maintained by the pointer on the calibration of the thermostat.

If the room is too cold in terms of the temperature standard suggested by the thermostat, the fire is started and the room is warmed to the desired temperature. Then, when that degree is attained, the heat is shut off. Also, in a properly air-conditioned area, when the weather is too hot, the cooling system is put in operation, and the temperature is brought down to the prescribed degree.

The thermometer adjusts to its external environment and exigencies. This is the dominant characteristic of all subhuman life. All organisms of the lower order, all plants and animals, survive largely by their capacity to adjust themselves to their surroundings. In all subhuman existence survival value largely depends upon the ability to be conformed to this world.

In man there is a new factor, namely, control. Man has imagination. He can dream dreams and see visions of what ought to be. He has the power to reason, to believe and to act on various assumptions. He can call upon various sources of power and put them into effective operation.

Refusing to be controlled by his environment, man can determine what his environment shall be. When he is what his Maker obviously intended him to be, he is not a thermometer; he is a thermostat.

Thermometer people are those who act as though their chief object in life is to do whatever is "being done." Their major passion is to be popular with the crowd, or at least with their own set. Chameleonlike they change their color according to their surroundings. Any uniqueness is abhorrent to them. They think, act and live according to the dictates of custom. Their first and final justification for their tastes in fashions, conversation and amusement is the silly statement that "everybody is doing it." They have no convictions except the inane belief that to succeed one must conform. Little do they realize that whoever gauges and models himself after the crowd is on the road to deterioration and eventually ruin. Therefore, in order that each may do his best for the sake of the rest, he is supposed to be a thermostat -- to do his own thinking, to express his own convictions, to adhere to his highest ideals and to obey God rather than man.

Paul did just that and then wrote the admonition, "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." In effect he said, "Don't be thermometers; be thermostats."

I. Do Not Be A Thermometer.

"Be not conformed to this world." The word which is translated "world" in this verse is literally "age." The word "cosmos," which is translated "world," sometimes means the material world, sometimes the existing generation of men, and sometimes the unsaved portion of humanity. The word "aion," which is translated "age," is used to represent the course and current of this world's affairs, especially in a bad sense. It includes all that floating mass of thoughts, speculations, views, opinions, impulses, aims, pursuits and hopes which are current at any time in the world. "Conformed" means to be "made alike." It means to take shape, so far as conduct is concerned, from the ideals and practices of the age in which one lives.

The spirit of the age in which Paul lived and wrote was evil. The world around him lay in spiritual darkness. The Jews had rejected Christ and were trusting for their acceptance with God in a righteousness which was altogether false. The Gentiles were given to superstition and vice. The world in that age was emphatically wicked, alienated from God and enslaved by Satan. The actions of the masses were determined by "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." Paul lived in an age of hollow splendors and gilded fashions, corrupt minds and withered hearts, unblushing licentiousness and undisguised knavery, pride and hypocrisy. He exhorted his readers to refrain from regulating their lives by the spirit of their age. The spirit of our own age is one of absolute selfishness as contrasted with divine love. Its object is the gratification of self rather than the doing of the will of God, and its authority springs from Satan because it has rejected the one true Ruler of the universe.

If it were not for the fact that something is wrong with our age, we would not be forbidden to be conformed to it. The command comes to us in unmistakable language, "Be not conformed." The present tense, passive voice and imperative mood are used in this word. The idea expressed is "stop being fashioned or do not have the habit of being fashioned" according to the spirit of the age. Do not take this age as your fashion plate.

This age is not the pattern for the Christian life. God calls upon us to walk the path of separation from it. We can never bear effective testimony if we compromise with evil. This does not mean that we are not to associate with the world, otherwise we could not bear any witness to it, but we are not to be conformed to it. Conformity to the fashions and the trends of the times in which we live is to follow the line of least resistance and to float along upon the current of the popular trend, rather than to take a stand, in the power of the Lord, against the character of our age.

The command comes to us in unmistakable language, "Be not conformed to this age: 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." The negative and the positive supplement each other in this verse and complete the picture. It is much more pleasant to urge the latter; nevertheless, we must warn against the evil as well as work for the right. These two statements are like the wings of a bird, both are necessary for flight. "Conformed" and "transformed" are words which are similar in form and accent, but varying widely in significance when applied to the spiritual life. Conformed is from without. Transformed is from within. Conformed is dead and mechanical. Transformed is living and natural. Conformity is easy. It does not call for any resistance. It simply means gliding with the stream. Transformation requires watchfulness, prayer and effort to resist the molding influences of one's surroundings. Do not be a thermometer.

II. Be a thermostat.

"Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." Instead of being a conformer, be a transformer. What a mighty difference a single syllable makes! "conformed" and "transformed." Each of them implies a change. Each implies assuming another shape or character. But the contrast is far greater than the likeness. One means a change which is only superficial, external and imitative; the other is inward, deep, and growing from the inner life to the outer. A piece of clay is conformed when you take it into your hands and deftly turn it into some other figure, but a seed of grain is transformed when the life within it grows into a flower-bearing plant.

The word which is here translated "transformed" is the very same word which is used of the transfiguration of our Lord. That glory which the disciples saw when they were with Christ on the mount came not upon Him but out of Him. "He was transfigured." That means that the fashion of His countenance was altered.

Did you ever consider the beauty of the blossom of a water lily? It is one of the leveliest of flowers. But it grows in the dirtiest of mud. It is pure white, but it makes its whiteness out of the slime and mire

at the bottom of the lake. It is not conformed to the soil in which it grows, but it is transformed into a far higher beauty. Are you a conformer or a transformer, a thermometer or a thermostat?

It is folly to seek contentment, joy and victory in the externalities. They are but bursting bubbles. Goethe said, "He who is plenteously provided for within needs but little from without."

The only way to prevent the outward shape of our lives from being fashioned like that of this age is to take care that our inward spirits are transformed by the renewing of our minds. By the "mind" here is meant "the faculty by which the soul perceives and discerns the good and the true." It is the Holy Spirit alone Who can renew in us this faculty of mental and moral perception. By reason of sin this faculty is naturally under the power of the flesh, but when delivered and controlled by the Holy Spirit it recovers its power of discernment and is enabled to realize what is true and right. There must be a renewal of the mind before there can be a transformation of the life. Men live from the inside, hence, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

The transformed life follows upon the inward renewal. When Christ was transfigured His deity came to the surface and was made visible. In like manner, from within to the outward surface of the believers life, this renewed mind is revealed, irradiating the face with divine beauty, softening the voice, sweetening the temper, and making gracious and lovely the disposition. If there is an inward change, an outward transformation will certainly reveal it. The face will reflect the heart. No man or woman can reach the thirtieth year without having the past sculptured on the face. The sculptor that fashions the face is thought. The cause of the right mind is this renewing by the indwelling, possessing, directing and mastering Holy Spirit.

Note that this verb which is translated, "be ye transformed," is in the imperative mood and the passive voice. This fact teaches us clearly that, while it is our responsibility to be transformed, we cannot do the transforming. The work is not ours, but the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and does for us what we never could do for ourselves. When our minds are brought into line with the mind of God the transformation takes place. When we yield our lives to Him He does the work in and through us. This is a blessed, practical and fruitful lesson for us to learn. The Holy Spirit works through the renewing of the mind, causing us to want to please the Lord, and enabling us to do so.

God's will is perfect. How could it be otherwise? It is always right and unalterable. It ought to be acceptable to all the creatures whom the Lord has made and saved, no matter what it is. There ought to be but one supreme object before any finite being, namely, doing His will. The will of the Lord be done. If I am well, His will be done. If I am sick, let His will be done. If my day must be eclipsed in the meridian, His will be done. What is the source of all our complaints, murmurings and rebellious feelings against God? They all grow out of the fact that we say, "Let my will be done rather than God's will." It all grows out of the desire in the heart to subordinate God to man.

The will of God, which covers every circumstance and incident in life, has a threefold characteristic. It is always good or beneficial in its effect upon us. We need never fear the consequences of living in

accordance with His will. It is also acceptable. When we yield to His blessed will, it will never be obnoxious to us, but it will always be acceptable. Thirdly, it is perfect. Nothing is lacking about it and nothing is wrong with His will. Doing His will guarantees a victorious, joyous and useful Christian experience.

Sir Titus Salt, a man of millions, one Sunday heard a preacher teach that soul rest and satisfaction are to be found in Christ alone. The minister said that he had sat in his garden and watched the caterpillars climbing the painted sticks; he had seen them reach the top and look this way and that in search of some juicy twig on which to feed, only to be disappointed, and to return slowly and wearily to the ground again. "There are the painted sticks of pleasure, wealth, power and fame. All these are calling to men and saying, 'Climb me, and you will achieve the desire of your heart ... Climb me, and so find satisfaction'." Afterward the millionaire said to the preacher, "I want to tell you that I have been climbing painted sticks, and am today a weary man. Is there any rest for a weary millionaire?" The preacher assured him that there was, and he found it that day in Jesus Christ. Unsaved person, receive Christ as your Saviour now and be a thermostat for Him as long as He permits you to live on this earth.