

It’s funny how one person can have a bad idea, and pretty soon others follow. We all think everyone ought to obey the law, but if you’re on a busy highway and everyone’s breaking the speed limit by ten miles per hour, the odds are you will too. If a lie (or a hurtful truth) about a celebrity or politician is spoken on television or at the coffee shop, others begin to repeat it. Perhaps you do too.

John Muir, who convinced Congress to establish Yosemite National Park, wrote in his diary while he was traveling in Yosemite with a shepherd and a large flock of sheep. John Muir had tremendous admiration for the wildlife, but he noted in *My First Summer in the Sierra* that “A sheep can hardly be called an animal: an entire flock is required to make one foolish individual” (p. 62). Or as Menander, the Greek dramatist, once wrote (later quoted by the Apostle Paul), “Bad company ruins good morals.” That’s not just a pithy saying, its proven science.

There’s a branch of statistics known as “information cascade theory,” which simply states that in the company of folks making bad choices, people will do the same even when they know better. An information “cascade” occurs when a person observes the actions of others and then—despite contradictions to their own personal preference—engages in the same behavior. It’s sometimes compared to “herd behavior.” To state it crassly, cascade theory demonstrates that in bad company the odds are good that we’ll be stampeded into sharing the opinion of people who are fools. Bad choices are contagious.

One sees this in the hysteria that sometimes follows a national trauma. The very real danger of World War II led Americans into the hysterical act of herding loyal Japanese Americans into detention centers. Americans traumatized (justifiably so) by 9/11 came to believe Iraq was not only the source of terror but also possessed weapons of mass destruction, perhaps nuclear weapons. Sometimes the sky is really falling. Sometimes we’re just listening to Chicken Little.

The very long mathematical algorithm that undergirds information cascade theory proves that the answer to your mother’s exaggerated question, “If all your friends went and jumped off a bridge, would you jump too?” is “Yes!” Writing to the Romans, and to all Christians, Paul pleads with us to answer our mother’s question with an unwavering “No!”

One of the reasons Paul wrote to the Romans was because of pressure to conform to different cultural values. Jewish Christians encouraged Gentile Christians to conform to their cultural practices. Roman society, which was strictly stratified with regard to segregation of slave and free, rich and poor, male and female, along with other categories, pressured Christians to separate along those same lines.

But the Apostle has been encouraging believers in this most cosmopolitan of cities to create one body of Christ by combining their God-given individuality, not negating it. So in this passage he invites all of us to take a long look at ourselves. On the one hand he urges us, “*Do not to think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith that God has distributed to each of you*” (Rom.12:3).

His central theme, however, is a flat warning against giving into the cascade. Listen. “*Do not conform,*” he writes, “*to the pattern of this world.*” Although translated “world” in the NIV, the word refers to the

mindset of the times, wherever and whenever we are living. He tells us all to be transformed, changed, or morphed “*by the renewing of your mind,*” so that we might discern God’s “*good, pleasing and perfect will*” (12:2).

We are not to think of ourselves, Paul writes, “*more highly than you ought.*” And what better example do we have of this type of lifestyle than Jesus himself? In another letter, written to the Philippians, Paul tells us that Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage, but he made himself nothing, becoming obedient to death on the cross.

Sometimes our society pays lip service to the idea of individuality, but the political sphere, the advertising circles, the peer pressure of every age group, the agreements that set standards in housing developments, the community standards when it comes to something as simple as what colors you may paint your home, these and in many other ways, *there is intense pressure to conform.* It can be very difficult to avoid conforming. When a style takes hold, whether it be the length of men’s summer shorts or the style of women’s blouses, it can be almost impossible to find something of a different style on the racks.

Perhaps we should expect this in society at large. But in the church there can be pressure to conform as well. The Apostle Paul encouraged diversity in practice. He chose to practice his Jewish cultural customs, but insisted that Christians from the Greek and Roman world maintain their practices, and he encouraged the churches of Galatia, who conformed neither to the Jewish or Gentile standards, to remain the people they were when they first accepted the gospel. He expected that all would accept Jesus Christ as Lord, as Jesus has accepted us. But beyond that he spoke out against those, even Apostles as respected as Peter, who succumbed to peer pressure to become cookie-cutter Christians.

So why would we want to demand that all Christians dress alike, eat the same food, belong to the same political party, speak the same language, or listen to the same music? On the contrary, this passage from Romans points to the many gifts given to us, and then deliberately uses the word we translate as “*members,*” because that word in the English language refers not to interchangeable units, but to different parts of the body. Listing some of the gifts shared by people—prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and compassion—Paul insists all are necessary to our well-being.

This gift of transformation in order to become one body out of many members, is what Paul calls a “*sober judgment in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you*” and without it, we are not truly God’s people. We are all needed in the body of Christ. We are all welcome. In contrast to a world that attempts to make us conform to ridiculous standards of self-worth, we are loved and welcomed *as we are,* because that is how God sees us. We bring our weaknesses and strengths, and of course our faith, to the work of Jesus Christ. We are *transformed,* so we no longer look at God and each other, as the world does. If you are feeling “out of step” with the world maybe the good news for you is that you’re “in step” with God’s will.

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens is a story that all of you are familiar with. It is a unique story of transformation. When I read the story, it seems that part of the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge comes through children. Scrooge is changed because he sees children in a new light, joining in their celebration and showing compassion for their suffering. That was especially significant for Charles Dickens, who himself felt compassion for the plight of poor children, in part because he had once been in their place.

Children do have a way of thawing icy hearts. Have you ever watched the faces of adults during *Time with the Children* when the children come up to sit beside me on the chancel steps? I've also noticed that some men are trapped in a kind of emotionless machismo until they become fathers. All of a sudden tenderness flows from their hearts, as if by magic. Another example that I remember is when I took my own small children to nursing facilities when I made a visit. Their mere presence brought joyful responses from folks in those facilities.

Of course it doesn't always work this way. Sometimes cranky people are made even crankier by the noisy playfulness of children. So there's no guarantee that exposure to children will work positive change in all people. Most of the time, more is required.

God's Spirit is required to do his work of renewing our minds, moving us to recognize that we belong to God and we belong with each other. "*So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others,*" writes Paul in verse 5. I don't know about you, but I much prefer the body of Christ to what sociologists call Groupthink, because information cascade theory demonstrates that even if we know the right thing, surrounded by others who say and do the wrong thing we'll likely go along with them!

Truth is, transformation very often begins when something interrupts our ordinary life experience. For at least a couple dozen years, Ebenezer Scrooge had been a committed miser, grouch and Christmas-hater. But then something interrupted his otherwise ordinary miserable life. In his case, the interruption was supernatural: the spirit of Jacob Marley and the three Spirits of Christmas past, present, and future. These Spirits forced Scrooge out of his rut and propelled him along a life-changing path.

I've seen this sort of thing happen time and again in real life. People are going along their merry way when all of a sudden something causes them to turn in a new direction. Sometimes it's a new job, or a new relationship, or a move to a new place. Perhaps more commonly, the catalyst for change is something unwelcome, at least at first, such as cancer, marital conflict, or being laid off.

What transformed Ebenezer Scrooge and what will transform each one of us? Paul exhorts us to resist the cascading tide of this world that can deceive us and dehumanize us. Transformed believers in Christ come together in this place to celebrate the power of God to change us for the better—and to use the gifts that all members bring into this transformed community, the body of Christ.

Rather than getting swept up by an information cascade, that drags us into false conformity, we want to encounter the overwhelming tidal wave of Christ's love that transforms us individually and then changes the landscape of the church to one of generosity and love, compassion and peace.

Friends in Christ, the message of Romans 12 is crystal clear: Resist *the pattern of this world* and be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Amen.