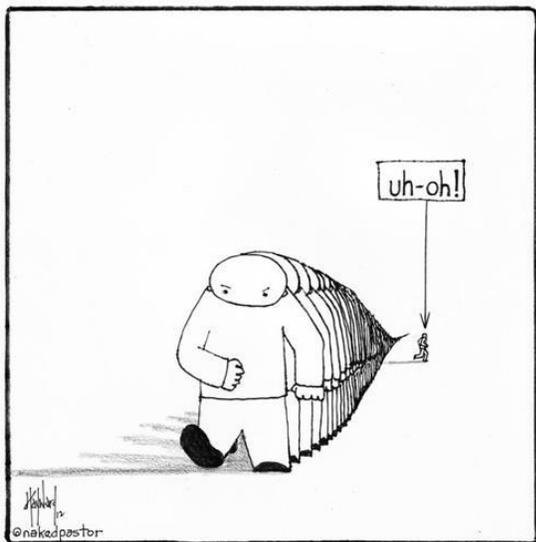


## Gracious Nonconformity



As followers of Jesus we are to be different from others. We are to be, as an often-used phrase puts it, "in the world but not of the world" (John 15:19; 17:14). Our perspective and actions are to reflect something heavenly. It is not that we are to be so "heavenly minded" that we are "no earthly good." But we are committed, as we say in the Lord's Prayer, to God's will being done "on earth as it is in heaven." So if we are not a bit odd in some ways, we are probably not doing discipleship right.

To put it in another way, following Jesus requires that we be nonconformists. "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds that you know what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). But not all nonconformity is equal. As Christians we are not

to be different as an end in itself. Unfortunately, occasionally Christians have been different in ugly ways.

Sometimes Christians and churches get known above all for what they are against. The most publicized small church in the country is the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas. It made its reputation through the crass, over-the-top anti-homosexual protests the church members have staged around the country. They have even picketed military funerals and trampled on American flags, while waving crude signs claiming God "hates" one group of people or another. They even created a song called "God Hates the World," an adaptation of "We Are the World." While the Westboro bunch is the most visibly extreme, they certainly aren't alone.

We who follow Jesus are called to be nonconformists but not because we judge, condemn and hate more than others. The nonconformity we have been called to embody is a sort that is about healing not wounding, including not excluding, loving not despising. It is a redemptive nonconformity to which we have been called. Ours is a life-affirming, hope-filled, gracious nonconformity. This is not to suggest there is nothing we should oppose. We oppose those things that promote hate, callousness and self-centeredness. We oppose attitudes that excuse violence and ignore suffering. We must do so because such things undermine the broad and generous love shown to us in Jesus.

It is not easy to be gracious nonconformists. Tremendous pressure- subtle or overt- is placed on us so that we will align ourselves with the powers-that-be. Fear of rejection and reprisal on the one hand, and hopes of reward on the other, keep us in line. Self-deception allows us to plead ignorance even when we should know better than to go along with those whose interests are too narrow and whose methods are too harsh.

Conforming to the standards of those who are at the center of power and privilege surely has its rewards. But the One we claim to follow was not an advocate of self-interest but a model of self-sacrifice. He reached out to the rejected and reached down to the fallen to the displeasure of the powerful. This One we believe to be God incarnate calls us to follow him. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1-2).