

CONFORMITY, A SNARE IN RELIGION

by Dr. A. W. Tozer in "Alliance Witness"

Conformity is the virtue of the slave, and can become the vice of the saint.

It is a gloomy lesson of history that whole populations will often enslave themselves to the will of an ambitious political leader, if he can promise them security and a few pennies more wages per day. And as often as not, after they have sold their birthright to him by conformity, they find that they get the few extra pennies only by longer hours of toil, and that the security they need most is protection from their protector.

The dictator, whether he be a political or a religious one, must be able to distribute little favours to the faithful, and these he always manages to have at hand. These favours are like the fish tossed to the performing seal, or like the salt lick of early American days placed near the shooting blind to entice the wary deer within range of the old muzzle-loader. But conformity is what the dictator must have if he is to do any dictating worth speaking of.

LIMITED CONFORMITY

Now, conformity within limits is a good thing. The musician must conform to the laws of harmony, the engineer to the laws of physics, and the farmer to the law of growing things. If I would learn a new language, I must bow to its grammar, its vocabulary, and its idiom. And civilised society is possible only because the majority of citizens conform quietly to the rules of civilised life.

When this has been said in praise of conformity, there is not much left to say about it that is good. From there on, it is almost wholly evil because it can be, and often is, used by the dominant few to enslave the pliable many.

Almost every great soul has been a nonconformist. Millions of us less gifted persons may thank God for the sturdy dissenters who fought our battles for us, often long before we were born, by daring to rise up and challenge the status quo.

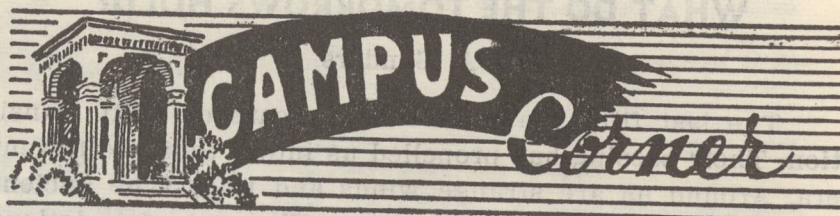
Every gain made in the field of government was made, not by the masses, but by a few nonconformists who put their lives on the line and refused to accept the leadership of men unworthy to lead. The curators of the status quo rolled horrified eyes to heaven, and appealed to the God they conceived to be the protector of the comfortable to save their unearned positions and their well-lined nests from these vulgar mal-contents. But their prayers were not heard. God was on the side of the dissenters. The measure of freedom we of the Western world enjoy today is a gift to us from God—and from our nonconforming forebears.

We Protestants owe our religious freedom and the blessing of an open Bible to men whose sepulchres we now delight to build, but whom we might not so willingly have aided if we had lived at the time when the outcome of their struggles was in doubt.

Conformity to the Word of God is always right, but obedience to religious leaders is good only if those leaders prove themselves worthy to lead. Leadership in the church of Christ is a spiritual thing, and should be so understood by everyone. It takes more than a ballot to make a leader.

There is great danger in our present-day evangelical circles that we place too great importance on conformity to authorities within the churches, and so stifle whatever originality and daring there may be among us. That denomination is in grave peril when the only virtue required of its ministers is conformity, and the only unforgiveable ecclesiastical sin is insubordination.

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FALSE AND TRUE LEADERS

This situation develops when church authorities are placed in office by machinery instead of being commissioned by the Holy Spirit. To stay in the ascendancy, these leaders must demand and get conformity to protective rules on the part of those under them. Such as these would far rather preside over a denomination of mediocre conformists than to be embarrassed by the presence of anointed men of vision who might unwittingly steal the hearts of the people from them. Thus, when a head appears slightly above the dead level of flat conformity, it is gently lopped off, ostensibly to protect the work of the Lord, but actually to retain control of the ecclesiastical machine.

No Spirit-led man is afraid of losing his position in a Spirit-filled church. Where the church is conceived to be no more than an institution, then every man honoured by a place on the hierarchial totem pole will seek to preserve his treasured niche, or to secure a higher one. Then he will look for a technique for survival, and over the years imposed conformity has been the one most frequently employed by the largest number.

If the church is to prosper spiritually, she must have spiritual leadership, not leadership by majority vote. It is highly significant that when the apostle Paul found it necessary to ask for obedience among the young churches, he never appealed to them on the grounds that he had been duly elected to office. He asserted his authority as an apostle appointed by the Head of the church. He held his position by right of sheer spiritual ascendancy, the only earthly right that should be honoured among the children of the new creation.

In the church or denomination where the Holy Spirit is in control there will be no imposed conformity, but there will be happy co-operation with the anointed leaders on the part of all. The rank-and-file soldiers of the King will recognise their true leaders; they will be the ones not with the epaulets on their shoulders, but with the oil on their foreheads.