



# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"THE SOUND OF A DIFFERENT DRUMMER"

Sunday Morning, October 15, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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Scriptural Reference: Romans 12:1-2

Dr. Henry Hitt Crane once preached a sermon with a most unusual title. He called it "Thermometers and Thermostats." Such terminology sounds far removed from the categories of the Bible; however, on closer inspection, these familiar objects turn out to be very apt symbols for some familiar words of Saint Paul. Many centuries ago in writing to the church at Rome, he had this to say: "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds that you may discern the will of God; that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). The very fact that this truth can be so easily adapted to the images of our day is certainly indicative of its eternal relevance. Therefore, this morning I would direct your attention to it.

Paul here sets forth life in the context of pressure. He pictures existence as a bombardment of forces from many directions. Just as the atmosphere exerts pressure on our physical organism, so there are spiritual pressures that are exerted upon our hearts. In light of this situation, Paul has some words of direct guidance. He says there is one kind of pressure which we must resist; there is another pressure to which we must respond. He speaks here a word of caution and then a word of commendation. The crucial meaning of the passage turns on these two verbs: conform and transform. Let us look at these as the two "life pressures."

First of all, there is the horizontal pressure of life. This is what the word "conform" literally means. It is "to be formed with" - to be formed by that which lies about - to be controlled by one's environment and immediate surroundings. I think that Dr. Crane is right in saying that there is no better illustration of this than the little instrument that we call a thermometer. A thermometer reflects its immediate surroundings. Any change in the thermometer is caused by a change in that which lies about it. There is no inward control, but rather it simply responds to and reflects whatever is going on about it. Thus, what we might call "thermometric living" is living that is controlled by one's environment. One seeks to conform with his situation and become like that which lies about him.

Now I need not labor the point that this is the prevalent practice in our culture today. In fact, in every age the easiest way to live has been to fit in with the pattern of that which is going on and become absorbed in the outward circumstances. We are familiar with it on every hand. We know what it is to "keep up with the Joneses." We rationalize every action by saying: "But everybody's doing it!" We feel the tremendous pressure to regiment our lives and to be exactly like everyone else. For the past weeks all of our country has been saddened at the knowledge that Mr. Sam Rayburn is in the last stages of cancer and is going to die.

Not long ago a reporter was interviewing "Mr. Sam" and asked him how he could account for his phenomenal political career. The answer that he gave was quite significant. He said this: "In order to get along, go along." It had been left for "Mr. Sam" to give in perfect simplicity the statement of thermometric living: If you want to get along, go along. Success is our modern American god, conformity is the best way to achieve it. I need say no more to any of you who live in modern American society about the pressures to conform.

But why is this pressure such a powerful thing? My answer would be the desire to conform is rooted in a real part of human nature. We are, by our very constitution, social creatures who desire and need the approval of others. We long to have that feeling of "acceptance" - to be "on the inside"; on the other side of the coin, we abhor being left out or rejected by the group. There is a familiar phrase among us - something that is different "stands out like a sore thumb." This is simply a colloquial way of saying: "It is painful to be different; to stand out over against a crowd; to attract attention because you are not marching in the same step; to be somehow apart from those whose acceptance you long for and whose approval you desire." This is one of the most excruciating experiences of life. Every time I think about the dynamics of conformity I cannot help but relive something that happened to me several years ago. It occurred during my senior year in college and when I was just beginning to date the one who is now my wife. I did not know her too well and was anxious to impress her, so I invited her to go with me to a football game. There was a custom there at Baylor that an escort sent his date a big yellow chrysanthemum with some kind of football emblem upon it. So early in the week I made this arrangement, had it delivered to her house, and went by just before the game to pick her up. But when she came out my heart literally sank to my shoes. For instead of there being a fresh yellow chrysanthemum, she wore a dried-up flower that was so withered and brown that it looked like it was part of last year's crop. I did not know her well enough to say anything about it; she did not know me well enough to do anything but to wear what I had sent. So off we went to the stadium. Here were forty thousand people with fresh golden mums, and here was my date with a shriveled-up corsage that everybody knew that I had sent to her. I cannot begin to tell you what happened at the football game, for I thought every eye was trained on us. Finally after the half I got my courage up and said, "I don't know what has happened, but please for my sake take off that corsage." This broke the tension, and she explained what had happened. You see, the flower had been delivered fresh and yellow, just like it should have been, and she put it in the deepfreeze and had forgotten it. It had frozen and when she had taken it out it had withered under the intense heat. But the point was that we were different, and this was a painful experience. Therefore, whatever I say this morning about conformity, let me admit at the very outset: this is one of the most powerful dynamics of life. Because we want to be approved by other people and because it is painful to stand out against them, one of the greatest pressures that any of us will ever know is the pressure of thermometric living - to be like everybody else.

But what about this as a pattern of life? Is it a satisfactory criterion by which all decisions should be made? I think not! In fact, as I analyze the whole process, it seems to me that there are three outstanding weaknesses that must be pointed out. Before one gives in to this tremendous power to be like the crowd, let me warn you of these inherent flaws.

The first weakness is that conformity relegates moral reality to a secondary level. The conformist does not ask first of all, "Is it right or is it wrong?" He rather asks, "What is everybody doing?" Therefore, he takes the primary issues

and "downgrades" them and allows his decision to be controlled by a factor that ignores the moral context in which he lives. Now I must confess my rigid conservatism at this point. I firmly believe that we live in a structure of moral reality. I do not think that we vote in right and wrong by a majority opinion; I think it is part of "the Given" in which we live and move and have our being. I think the difference between right and wrong is rooted in the universe, and is objectively real, apart from any subjective opinions that we may have about it. Now we are quick to recognize the presence of physical realities within which we have to live. For example, there is a law of gravity. We know that if we are to live in this kind of world, we have to measure our physical movements in accord with this real principle. A man working on a high scaffolding, who simply forgot the law of gravity and began to move around according to other principles, would probably quickly plunge to his death. And if you and I begin to make our moral decisions on bases other than what is intrinsically right, we are just like that man! We do not destroy moral laws by denying them; we do not eliminate these by ignoring them. When we go against the grain of the universe, as Kenneth Speakman says, "we always get splinters." So it is that the conformist has real trouble at the point of moral reality, for his decisions are not consistent with the primary moral realities, but rather are based on something else. And whenever you take your eye off what is right and wrong and begin to decide for reasons other than these, you are in real danger of committing spiritual suicide.

The second thing that is wrong with conformity is that it breeds insecurity. When you offer up the control of your life to public opinion, you are at the mercy of that of which you cannot be sure and on which you cannot depend. You are letting your life be dominated by that which is always changing and never stable and thus are doomed to frustration and continual uncertainty. Just a look about us indicates that there is nothing more influx than the realm of public opinion. A fad will be on us one day and gone the next, and he who lives solely for that which goes on about him has no basis of peace and contentment. He is always haunted by the fear: "Is what I have really in style? Am I keeping up with the crowd?" As soon as he gets one thing it becomes obsolete; as soon as he does one thing it is no longer popular to do it, and life is forever "the rat-race," always running to keep up but never arriving anywhere. I think it was Will Rogers who characterized his generation in these words: "They are spending money they do not have, to buy things they do not need, to impress people they do not like." This is certainly not the formula for happiness, yet it is a description of life that is controlled by conformity.

The third thing that is wrong with this pattern of life is by far the most serious for us: the act of conformity is a drastic violation of one's basic Christian commitment. Now I know that it is hard to arrive at ultimate definitions, but if I had to summarize in a short sentence what it means to be a Christian, I would put it this way: a Christian is one for whom Jesus Christ is ultimate. He is one who has brought all of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ. If this is true, then it is obvious that one cannot march to the cadence of the crowd and at the same time be a follower of Jesus. One cannot be controlled by the power of conformity and at the same time be true to the demands of Christ. The allegiance that Christ requests is an utterly exclusive thing. When He says that "no man can serve two masters," He is not making an arbitrary statement; He is simply describing life as it has to be. You cannot walk in two directions at the same time; you cannot say two words at the same time; you cannot serve two different powers and let each one have absolute sway. Therefore with a painful exclusiveness, Jesus says: "You will either be for Me or against Me. You will either be gathering up or you will be scattering"; you cannot march in the cadence to the crowd and at the same time

be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, for these three reasons I think there is real point to the warning of Saint Paul. He says to his fellow Christians in the church in Rome: "Be not conformed to this world." Do not yield to that tremendous horizontal pressure that seeks to make all of life a reflection of that which is going on about you. In other words, he says: "Do not succumb to that subtle temptation: in order to get along, go along."

The other way that he does commend is bound up in this word transform. Now here we have pressure from an entirely different direction. This is what I would call vertical pressure, for the word "transform" literally means: "to be formed from beyond" - to be formed by that which breaks in from above. Instead of reflecting that which goes on all about, one is shaped and molded by that which breaks in from above. If a thermometer is a good illustration of life that is based on conformity, then I think again Dr. Crane is right in saying that a thermostat is a good illustration of life that is keyed to transformation. For a thermostat is a little instrument that involves a mechanism that can be set from without, and once that dial is set, it seeks to change its environment instead of being changed by it. In other words, it reflects not what is going on about it but the will of the hand that has broken in from above. And if conformity is the violation of the essence of Christianity, I would say that "thermostatic living" is its very fulfillment. For a Christian is one, the dial of whose life has been set by the revelation in Jesus Christ. In Him we see how life was meant to be lived; in Him we have our Absolute. And when we have our lives set to imitate Him, then we seek through this transformation to be a transforming power in the situation about us. The history of the church is the story of men who have been transformed by Jesus Christ and then become instruments of transformation. God would set the dial of our life at Jesus Christ, and then through us would transform those that are about us and the very situation in which we live. Therefore, a thermostat, which seeks to control the atmosphere instead of being controlled by it, is a fitting symbol of what it means to be a Christian in our kind of world.

Whenever I think of an individual who has first been transformed by Christ and then becomes the instrument of transformation, I think of one of the most impressive men I have ever met - Dr. Clarence Jordan of Americus, Georgia. He was born to a tenant family in the red clay hills of Georgia. He went to college and then on to the Seminary, where he was possessed by the concept of the Kingdom of God. When he graduated, he decided to express his ministry in a different way - by going back to Georgia and starting a model farm and unique Christian community. So the Koinonia Farm was begun, and the finest agricultural methods were introduced to this backward area. In many ways they varied with the pattern of that locale; they did not observe all the racial customs; they paid their laborers far more than they were usually paid; they did many things that were different, and because of this, the community became quite antagonistic. They resorted to violence - bombed the fruitstand, refused to sell the farm gasoline, even fired shots into the group of children that was playing on the playground. They did everything in their power to oust this different one. Dr. Jordan was called to Washington to testify before a committee and made such an impression that afterward he was interviewed by some reporters. When they asked him the question: "Are you bitter toward your fellow Georgians for the way they have treated you?", this man said: "No, I am not bitter toward them. You see, I understand how they feel. I would be just like them if I had never met Jesus." Here was the difference: his "dial" had been set at Jesus Christ. But that is not the end of the story. They tell me that even though it has been a hard and difficult way, through the influence of that farm and that

fellowship of people the whole area around Americus, Georgia will never be the same. It is being transformed by the permeating influence of suffering love. Here is one who was transformed and became the instrument of transformation. Did not Jesus speak of us as the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world"? Did not He command those who had been changed to go out into the world and be the instruments of further change? Is not "thermostatic living" the very heart of the Christian gospel? Having been redeemed by Jesus Christ, we must become the instruments of redemption that others may know Him - "whom to know aright is life everlasting."

Therefore, I think that the words of Paul are marching orders to the church. He says to us in our context of pressure: "Do not respond to those horizontal forces that would make you just like themselves. Respond rather to that vertical force - Jesus Christ, that you may be a changed and changing instrument of His purpose." To put his truth in modern form: "Don't be a thermometer - controlled by that which is going on about you, but by the grace of Christ be a thermostat - one through whom the redemption of our Lord can take place!"

In the last century Henry David Thoreau wrote some words that are now quite famous: "If a man does not walk in the same step with his contemporaries, perhaps it is because he hears the sound of a different drummer. Let every man march to the music that he hears, however measured and far away!" Jesus Christ can take those words this morning and use them as He speaks to Christians in 1961. If we do not march in step with all of our contemporaries, I hope it is because we have heard "the sound of a different drummer." And with that drummer - who is Christ - beating out the cadence of suffering love, may we march to that measured, far-off melody, and as we march, be the instruments of His transformation!

Listen! It is the sound of a different drummer - Jesus Christ! He calls to us, the church, and says: "Forward, march!"