

Faith: The Final Frontier ~ The Prime Directive

Today we conclude the series of sermons that are a parody of the opening monologue of the TV series, "Star Trek." The Starship Enterprise served under a guiding principle called the Prime Directive of the United Federation of Planets. It prohibited Starfleet personnel from interfering with the natural development of alien civilizations on their five-year mission "to explore strange new worlds, to seek new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before."

I believe the church has a Prime Directive that acts as the guiding principle for its own personnel. But, we need to explore a little background first.

From time-to-time the Starship Enterprise would get in a very difficult situation—so serious that its very survival would be at risk; and were it not for the ingenuity of Captain James T. Kirk, the ship might not have survived.

Today the church in North America is in difficulty. She has been in decline since 1957, and often finds itself focused more on survival than on ministry—more on winning internal disagreements than on reconciling the world to Christ.

I suggest the North American Church of the 21st century is in a kind of exile. How did it happen? Let's start with Romans 12, from The Message Paraphrase:

<p>ROMANS 12:1-6 (MSG) <i>So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. <u>2Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even</u></i></p>	<p><i>thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. <u>You'll be changed from the inside out.</u> CLICK— Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.</i></p>
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Look at that second verse again—this time from the KJV:

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.

And again, from the Good News Bible:

Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God--what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.

And one more version, the New Living Translation:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.

(Any English teachers here? Do you pick up anything significant here?) Note the use of active and passive verbs: don't "conform yourselves"; don't "copy the be-

havior"; don't "become so well-adjusted"—active, transitive. We're doing the acting; and in this case Paul says, "Don't do it."

Instead, "be ye transformed." "let God transform you"; "You'll be changed from the inside out..." —passive tense. Somebody else—in this case, God—is doing the acting to us or for us, because this is something we can't do ourselves.

After more than 57 years in ministry, it is my observation that the North American Church in the 21st century has "conformed to the standards of this world" (GNB); we have not "fixed our attention on God" (MSG); therefore, we have not allowed God to "transform (us) inwardly..." (GNB). You be the judge as to what degree that observation fits this congregation, and you, personally.

Our problem as humans is that we always want to be in control. We want to transform ourselves! We see the beautiful vision. We hear the call of the gospel, and we want to respond. But we want to control both the process of the transformation and the results.

One of the strongest conclusions of the Bible is that we are incapable of transforming ourselves. Only God can do that. But the good news is that God wants to transform us; and God will transform us if we get out of the way.

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. ⁶ In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. ~ PROVERBS 3:5-6 (KJV)

Under our own power we do the only thing we know; therefore, we always end up conforming to the world's standards, because the world has been better at proclaiming its message than we have been at proclaiming and living our message. Let me share some examples, and you decide to what extent this congregation fits:

1. We conform to the world's standard of excellence when we strive for **success** rather than **obedience**.
 - A. We buy the lie that success is found in accumulating ("He who dies with the most toys wins!"). In contrast, Jesus asks, "What does it profit a man if he gains the world, but loses his soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26)
 - B. Our role model is a pre-POTUS Donald Trump, flying his "Apprentice" winners over his kingdom in his private helicopter. By contrast, Jesus is shown "the kingdoms of this world" and says, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 4:10)
2. We conform to the world's standard of value when we accept **Madison Avenue's** gospel rather than Christ's.
 - A. We accept the marketing industry's slogans, "because you're worth it;" "have it your way;" "it's all about you." We put ourselves, instead of God, at the center of the universe.

- B. We accept the marketing industry's motto, "*the customer is always right*", and see the church as a "religion store," where we go when we want some religion; and we assume we are the customers, rather than the servants, of the church.

It is virtually impossible to convince a consumer population that the call to be a servant community is somehow "good news." The public will connect to that gospel in about the same way a restaurant patron might respond if he or she were asked to sweep the floor and bus the table~~after paying the bill.

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The saga of the Hebrew Patriarchs ends with the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son. That favoritism produced so much jealousy among his brothers that they would have killed him except for the intervention of the eldest. In compromise, Joseph was sold to slave traders en route to Egypt, and Jacob was told his favorite son had been killed by wild beasts.

In Egypt God was with Joseph, and he rose to a high office in Pharaoh's government. Through his God-given gifts he guided Egypt to store up the bounty of seven good years of harvest, in preparation for seven lean years of drought.

During the drought Egypt's bounty attracted the poor and the starving from nearby lands—including, it turns out, Joseph's brothers. Joseph recognized them, and after playing with their heads for a time, welcomed them to Egypt. Not only did he provide food, he invited them to relocate in the fertile Nile delta, which they did. It turned out to be a good life, so they stayed.

But we've read the rest of the story. Eventually they ended up in bondage and suffered greatly in that land. The move to Egypt originated in an effort to meet the *legitimate* needs of Jacob's people. The end result was painful, dehumanizing bondage.

I think I can build a case that almost always what brings God's people down *begins* in a *legitimate* concern for "meeting our needs." We do, indeed, have legitimate needs. And the effort to meet our needs is valid. But history confirms that when the church focuses on *its* needs, it virtually never shifts the focus back outward, even *after its needs are met and exceeded*. At some point in the not too distant past, the change became apparent: the religious public decided to stop being servants of Christ, and to become customers of the church.

Jesus taught, "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness; and all this other "stuff" will find its proper place and perspective." ~ Matthew 6:25-34). That's the church's "Prime Directive"; but it's a hard sell in a culture raised on the mantra, "The customer is always right."

Over a period of generations the Children of Israel basked in the shade of

palm trees and lived off the fat of the land. It was not what they had been called to do. And then one day they awakened to a different world. The book of Exodus begins, "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph" (EXODUS 1:8 KJV).

Zig Ziglar says, "First you get the habit; then the habit gets you." Before the Children of Israel knew what had happened, they found themselves in bondage.

After three or four generations of conforming to the values and procedures of this culture of materialistic consumerism, the Church finds itself in a self-imposed exile to those same values.

And, that's how we got here.

I don't know. Maybe my love for this congregation clouds my perception; and, maybe it's a relative thing. I just don't see this congregation fitting the general trend that characterizes the 21st century North American Church. But, we live in the same culture, with the same forces at work; so, I don't assume we are immune. Hopefully, our history demonstrates a kind of vaccination against the materialism and the "I'm-the-center-of-the-universe" kind of world view. But, even with vaccinations; sometimes a periodic "booster shot" is needed. We just can't afford to become complacent, what with the marketing industry becoming one of the most powerful influences in human history.

We can't afford to forget our Prime Directive: "Seek first the kingdom..."

PRAYER SLIDE