

True Nonconformity.

IT is regrettable that the word "nonconformity" possesses so limited a significance to many who pride themselves on their "nonconformity." For there are many in our churches who still cherish the notion that the word primarily refers to a refusal to adopt the creeds and practices of the Anglican Church. They cannot see that a Free Church service may be remarkably like an Anglican service, and yet this may be only one expression of the essential nonconformity of that particular church.

To a certain extent, the answer to the question "What is nonconformity?" is to be found in the mind of Christ as it was represented in the words, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." These words suggest that the basis of nonconformity, in relation to the State, is a positive freedom to refuse, if necessary, one's obedience to the State's authority.

This does not mean that the nonconformist is an anarchist, or that he does not regard the institution of the State as an essentially good thing. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." An organised and ordered social State is a necessary condition of the full and disciplined Christian life, and the Christian will therefore give his full loyalty and support, wherever possible, to the authority of the government under which he lives. There is, however, a limit to obedience to the State, and the limit is reached when obedience to the State clashes with loyalty to something greater. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, *but* unto God the things that are God's." There is a place for conformity, and there is a place for nonconformity, but there is a sharp dividing-line between the two.

One of the best illustrations of nonconformity in relation to the State is to be found in the utterance of one of the ministers ejected under the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Delivering his farewell sermon from the pulpit of Exeter Cathedral, Robert Atkins said, "Let him never be accounted a sound Christian who does not fear God and honour the king. I beg you will not interpret our nonconformity to be an act of unpeaceableness and disloyalty. We will do everything for His Majesty . . . but sin. We will hazard everything for him . . .

but our souls. We hope we could die for him, if the need arose, but we dare not and we will not be damned for him."

The State has a right to my obedience so far, but no further. So far, for if the State provides me, as it provides my fellows, with the advantages of an ordered society, then it is a simple matter of justice that I should pay for them. I am under obligation to render unto the British government the things that belong to the British government. As a Christian, I cannot possibly contract out of this obligation. This, however, does not mean that I concede to the British government the right to regulate my moral behaviour or the method of my approach to God. That is not in the contract. These are the things that belong unto God. If the State tells me that I must interpret or misinterpret the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a particular way, and that, unless I do this, I must be branded or punished as a bad citizen or a disloyal subject, then the State is overstepping its functions, and is interfering in a matter which concerns only God and myself. If, in these circumstances, I were to acknowledge the authority of the State, it could only be at the cost of denying the Lordship of Christ. If the State tells me that there is only one legal way of worshipping God, and that, unless I adopt that way, I am to be regarded as a law-breaker, I can only reply by asking the State to mind its own business, and not to presume to usurp the authority of God.

So much for nonconformity in relation to the State. The basis of the essential Christian nonconformity, however, cannot be discovered along those lines. When the Apostle Paul sought to indicate the Christian's attitude to his environment, he did not say, "Be not conformed to the regulations of the State from which you obtain the advantages of an ordered society." He said, "Be not conformed to *the world*." That is the true nonconformity which is binding upon all who profess to live under the obedience of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to avoid relating this Pauline injunction to the brave words of the Master—"My kingdom is not of this world." Looking out upon the population of the earth, Jesus saw it sharply and hopelessly divided into two sections. . . . His Kingdom, and the world. He saw that these two had nothing at all in common with each other, and that they were on two entirely different planes. His Kingdom was not of the world, and the world was not of His Kingdom.

His Kingdom is the society of men and women who, by an act of conscious and deliberate choice, have entrusted to God the complete ownership and control of their lives. They have no wills of their own; the one will that directs their lives is God's will. They do not act as they please: they only do what

God tells them to do, and what God lets them do. God is their King, their Master, their Judge, their Guide . . . in fact, their one reason for living at all.

"The world," on the other hand, means society minus the Kingdom of God. It denotes society organised on a basis of selfishness. It refers to the aggregate of individuals who, in some way or other, are out for themselves. They fight, they compete, they hoard, they spend, they indulge in sensual and sensational pleasure, they hanker after position and applause and social approval. Either they are brazen in their conceit, or they try to cover it with the cloak of a respectable religion of Church-going and charitable services. "Be not conformed to the world." There can be no conformity. The Kingdom of Christ can no more mix with the world than oil can mix with water or than light can have traffic with darkness. A true Christian is, *ipso facto*, a nonconformist. How can it be otherwise? Belief in the whole of the Gospel of Jesus Christ necessitates the recognition that it is a divisive Gospel. He said that He had not come to send peace, but a sword. He said that He would divide men from one another, even within the same family. He said that a man's foes would be they of his own household.

For Jesus Himself it was a divisive Gospel. Because He would preach that Gospel, He soon found that the world was ranged up against Him. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not." "He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not." "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." He was rejected by His own family, by His own Church, by His own nation. He was despised and rejected of men.

It was a divisive Gospel for His first followers. He told them that it would be so—that they would be like sheep in the midst of wolves, and that they would be haled before governors and kings for His sake. And they were. Tradition has it that, of the twelve disciples, only one died in his bed! "The early Christians dared to draw the issue with the world. They would not fight in the Roman legions. They would not sacrifice at the Roman altars. They kept deliberately aloof and separate. Christ had given them a level of life, and on that level they would walk, though all the world called them fools and burned them for doing it."

How strange does this situation seem in the eyes of the average Christian of to-day! I happen to live in an enlightened and respectable town, so different from such barbarous centres of population as Rome or Corinth! It is a well-educated town, almost unique in the country for its higher educational advan-

tages, and containing numerous little societies which can only appeal to the intelligentsia. It is often described as a "Church-going town," and it is notable for raising great sums for charitable purposes. Moreover, it is a decent, clean town, with no real slum problem, and where even the public-houses have exteriors which are pleasing to behold. Is it unreasonable to imagine that the enlightenment of local society has made the town so devoid of paganism, and that what the New Testament calls "the world," is so poorly represented, that he who would follow Christ has little occasion for nonconformity? It is. The world is still with us. Paganism is still with us. It is still true that he who would follow Christ cannot conform to the world.

I find myself in hearty agreement with the words of Samuel Shoemaker, of New York (*Confident Faith*, p. 127). "It is a little disconcerting to me to find the Christians and the pagans getting along so comfortably with one another in these days. We like to think that Christianity has infiltrated paganism till they have come up to walk with us on our level: but it hasn't; we have stepped down of late to walk with them on theirs. A Christianity which can live so amicably with paganism is not Christianity at all, but some pale, diluted broth made from the dead bones of Christianity. We have had about enough of tolerance: I want to hear a little more preaching about, Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord. We need not think that we shall challenge the present-day pagans out of the indulgence and the pathos, which is the heart of paganism, by our easy acquiescence in their ways. A Gospel which dares to be distinctive, or divisive—it comes to much the same thing—will draw the line, sharpen the contrast, and weed out the religious dead-wood. It will also draw in some of the pagans who are tired of being miserable in a world where God made happiness possible. And again, we shall get a Church that has a quality of its own. And those who have lost their lives for Christ shall find them in the rewards which He gives."

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SIR EGERTON LEIGH in 1769 published at Charles-Town in South Carolina, a book of 154, 44, (6), (1), pages octavo, "The man unmasked: or, the world undeceived, in the author of a late pamphlet, intitled 'Extracts from the proceedings of the high court of admiralty in Charlestown, South Carolina, &c.' With suitable remarks on that masterly performance." As the baronet became pastor of the Baptist church at Rugby, this may be registered in the Baptist Bibliography as 43-769.