

## Be Not Conformed

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.  
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So tell me: how do you feel about adding a drive-thru latté stand here at the church? I'll tell you this, we wouldn't be the first church to have one. Now more churches have latte bars than drive-thrus, but we would hardly be the first. I know a mega church outside Phoenix has one. They also distribute Xboxes gaming systems at church to keep the kids busy. And the ministers there preach on such topics as how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money and how to reduce your debts. Really?

When I was at Willow Creek Church, one of the two most famous mega churches, their book store was as large as B&N here at Friendly Center and I ate Italian for dinner in their food court. After all, bigger is better. But you see that's a lie. I love Eugene Peterson's translation of Paul today: *Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.* As but one example, we in the church, including the clergy, have completely bought in to the idea that bigger is better. So how big is your church? But bigger is something that the culture values, not scripture. From bigger is better to the way we do politics, there's a lot that our culture values that scripture does not.

Our gospel lesson today takes us to Caesarea Philippi near the Lebanese, Syrian, Israeli border. It's mountainous and wooded. Clear water cascades down from the Lebanese mountains and more spring water gurgles up from the ground. The Romans, busy occupying a rugged desert country, knew it was a perfect place for a spa. Now at this day spa, Caesar erected a temple to the Greek god Pan, or Faunus as the Romans knew him. The god of mountains, rustic music and forested glens he came to be associated with the spring fertility rites. Now folks, do I need to spell out what is meant by fertility rites, or can I just say it had to do with sex and leave it at that? In other words, Pan enjoyed himself and people... enjoyed themselves in Pan's honor. When my pilgrimage group went to Philippi, instead of saying "cheese" when a picture was taken we said, "Say debauchery." And then 20 pastors all said, "Debauchery."

So now we've got a place where there's a grand day spa and a place where people enjoyed indulged themselves. One more factoid: Caesarea Philippi is where King Herod built a temple dedicated to the God emperor Caesar.

It is in that space - a spa, a place dedicated to indulgences, and a place honoring the man-god Caesar - that Jesus approaches his disciples. Look folks, we know what others are saying about Caesar or at least what they had better say about him. We certainly know what people think about Pan. So tell me, what do people say about me? Better yet, what do you say about me? Peter responds "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Yay! Gold star for Peter, right?

Years ago my youngest son would come up front for the children's message. Can anybody tell me who loves you more than any other person? And Zak would squeal: Jesus! What has a big bushy tail and eats nuts? And Zak would squeal: Jesus! Zak I'm pretty sure the answer is a squirrel. Oh, I thought the answer was always Jesus. So just because Zak got the answer right didn't mean he got Jesus. Just because Peter got the answer right doesn't mean he got Jesus. And Peter doesn't get Jesus. In fact, I'm quite positive that in today's lesson Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anybody he's the messiah because they don't yet understand what kind of messiah he is. Apparently we still don't know what kind of messiah he is.

So let's take a trip from Caesarea Phillipi to Houston Texas, home of the smiling pastor Joel Osteen whose church inhabits the 16,000 seat arena that used to be home to the Houston Rockets basketball team. But don't worry. Osteen isn't going to hog all the success for himself. He wants to share it with "you" because he's always asking "What can God do for You?" Oh yeah. That's biblical. Here are some of his book titles: Your Best Life, Become a Better You; It's Your Time. Are

you noticing a pattern here? And by the way, you don't have to be a progressive theologian and preacher to see how off-center Osteen is. The imonk, a conservative, evangelical blogger is one of his harshest critics. And Publisher's Weekly, a secular publication, called Osteen's books "a treatise on how to get God to serve the demands of self-centered individuals."

So if Osteen has been debunked by conservatives, progressives and the secular press, why do so many flock his way? He tells us what we want to hear. Look at it this way. 3 out of 4 Americans believes that "God helps those who help themselves." Too bad it's not a biblical idea. Too bad the quote is from Benjamin Franklin. Too bad that belief runs counter to everything Jesus lived and breathed. But we see Jesus through the eyes of our culture and then take him and conform him to us, the very thing Paul told us not to do.

Let me give you but a few examples as to how we are conformed to our culture and not to Christ. We do not bless those who persecute us. We do not associate with the lowly. We still think repaying evil with evil is the only real option in this world. We think blessed are the peacemakers is a "bless your heart" kind of idea that is dangerously naive in this dangerous world. We still court power, not a servant mentality. We still think poverty is to be pitied and not riches. We still think vengeance is ours or at least it should be. Yes, our country goes to church on Sunday and says, "You are the Messiah the Son of the living God! But we don't believe what he believed. We don't value what he valued. We don't live how he lived.

Let's go back to Caesarea Philippi for a second. Today the Pax Romana is gone, but the Pax Americana is very much present. And Caesar, he's still here. The Caesars of the left and right are still here and still speak of dominion and power and glory. But there is no cross. They still spread their gospel by conquering and at any cost. Their message is forced, imposed on others. So our Caesars hold prayer rallies and they say Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God. But at the end of the day, they will still rough up those who get in their way. The ends will still justify the means, mercy and grace will be trampled underfoot and the cross will be forgotten. But truth be told, Caesar isn't in charge; not even close. If any god reigns it's Pan.

Today the shrine to Pan at Caesarea Philippi stands empty, but he roams freely amidst a culture that is completely devoted to self-fulfillment, self-desire, and self-pleasure. I mean, that's what matters: YOU. Pan is the god that asks, What can I do for YOU today? After all, it's your time and no one else's. You. Your desires, your will, your preferences, your individual rights. No one else matters. Just you and what you want. On Sunday we confess Jesus to be the messiah the son of the living God and Pan just smiles. Our confessions don't bother him in the least, so long as we keep spending and indulging ourselves the rest of the week. In Pan's world, self-denial is the only real enemy.

Three years ago in Caesarea Philippi I sat down and talked with a Mennonite pastor. He's a great guy, good looking, and like most Mennonites he is gentle and mild mannered. He also has a rap sheet. He had been in Washington D.C. and he dropped down on his knees and prayed during a protest against the American War in Iraq and he was arrested. He doesn't regret what happened or what he did in the least. I asked him why he did it.

Jim, this country spends \$720,000,000 a day or \$500,000 a minute to stay in Iraq. And by the way Jim, that doesn't include costs for the physical and psychological care of our vets, nor does it count the accrued interest on the debt for financing this war, nor does it count the costs to replace used and destroyed military equipment. Do you know what we could do with \$500,000 a minute? We could provide healthcare for almost 424,000 kids. We could be feeding countless more. Jim, it's a sin. It's a sin to make God's children in this land suffer while we go and kill God's children in another land. And we're not doing it because God wants us to; we're doing it because Caesar desires this. Jesus never once took a road of violence and I'm a follower of Jesus. So I went and I prayed and I was arrested.

Let me be clear folks. I'm not asking you today to agree with his geo-political understandings. You don't have to agree with his understandings of when or if the military should be used. I am not asking you today to follow suit. I am saying this: no one left or right will ever think this individual has been conformed to the culture. No one. You may think he's a freak, but it's clear... he's Jesus' freak.

Folks, it's easy to be a nominal Christian in this country. Being a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist, or even an atheist, that's difficult. And any fool can say Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God, and a lot of fools do. But what is so difficult is allowing that messiah to mold you until you think different thoughts, value different values, and live different lives.

In recent years we became absolutely histrionic at the thought of removing the words "under god" from the pledge of allegiance. But what god do we pledge our allegiance to? Who is our Lord? Caesar? American patriotism? Pan? The gods of 5th avenue? Me, myself and I? My individual rights? My individual desires? As Christians we say Jesus is the messiah, the Son of the Living God. But he tells Peter and he tells his disciples to tell no one and to follow him. That's what he wants. But the problem is that when Jesus shares these words, he's already halfway to Jerusalem where he will win by losing. And in Jerusalem there will be no latte stands, no Xboxes, no food courts. There will be no sermons on disciplining your children or how to invest your money. There will be no bookstores and you'll have to walk. There will be no shuttle buses. And in Jerusalem you'll learn, no, it's really not all about you. It's really no wonder Peter wanted to stay in Caesarea Philippi. It's no wonder we do as well. Amen.