

Fashioning Ourselves as Christians

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Continuing in 1 Peter 1, as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance, but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation, because it is written, be ye holy, for I am holy. Now we let the Holy Spirit tell us what to do here from verse 14. Not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance.

That is a truth negatively stated, but carrying with it a positive truth. We all know, and have studied it sometime in our lives, I suppose, how everything carries its opposite along with it in its concept.

If you say short, in the back of your mind there is its opposite, long, or else there would be no reason to call it short. If you say high, you have in the back of your mind the opposite, not so high, or there would be no reason for you to say high, short, large, small, cold, warm.

So here the apostolic injunction carries its own opposite. He does not say, do not fashion yourselves. That would be contrary to Scripture and contrary to human nature. He says, fashion not yourself after the old pattern, the pattern of your former lusts in your ignorance, but fashion yourselves nevertheless, but not according to the old pattern. That's the positive element. So, it is the positive element that I want to accent here. Fashion yourself, but do not fashion yourselves after the old pattern.

Now that's what the Holy Spirit says to us, and as Christians there is no argument here. You and I have no reason, no excuse in the wide world to sit in the Church service and find fault with what the Holy Spirit says. You might find fault with interpretations that the preacher did, that's another matter. But when once we know what the Holy Spirit has said, you and I as believers are committed to carry out that injunction without one word of demerit. We must obey.

So, the word fashion here means to conform to a pattern or to become like a pattern or to shape ourselves according to a pattern. That's actually what it means in the language Peter used when he wrote this. Fashion yourselves, that is, conform yourselves to a pattern, become like that pattern, and shape yourselves according to that pattern.

Now human nature, we therefore conclude, is not fixed. Human nature is fluid. Clay is the happiest illustration of it to be found, I think, in the entire Bible; the clay is not fixed, it is not fluid, or at least it is malleable, and in a figurative sense fluid, so that it can be shaped.

But after it has been shaped, and the potter says, now that's what I want, and then he bakes it, and then burns it, and then perhaps glazes it, that's fixed. Then it is no longer fluid, it is no longer subject to any changes. The only way it can be changed is by being

destroyed. It can be crushed and ruined, but it can never be changed into anything useful, because it has passed its fluid state and has become fixed.

Now the very fact that the Holy Spirit would say, fashion yourselves, or do not fashion yourselves after a wrong pattern, indicates that that burning and glazing has not yet happened to human nature. We are in a state of fluidity as regards normal, or as regards moral character.

Now, there are two things that may be said about any man, I don't care who that man is, whether it's little John Mark, just born a few days ago, or whether it is the man who sits waiting to die in the death cell in Missouri for the kidnapping and murder of a child.

There are two things that can be said about any human being, you can be changed. We talk about men being hardened, but always remember, friends, that we need modifiers if we're going to get at the truth. And when we say that that man is hard, he's beyond help, we are saying that as far as any powers that we know are concerned, the man is probably in a state where he can't be changed.

But actually, nobody is beyond changing as long as he is alive and conscious. Two things may be said about him, one is that he can be changed. And this is the dim hope that every man has, the dim hope of the drunkard, when once he allows himself to get sober just long enough to give it a moment's serious thought. He is saved from complete despair by the knowledge that he can change.

Or the dope addict, who must have so many shots a day, or he is in frightful misery and will sell his own soul to get dope. The only reason he doesn't commit suicide is that there is a dim hope burning there yet, that he can be changed. He knows that he is not yet fixed. He is still in a fluid state.

So, for the drunkard and the dope addict, there would not seem to be much hope, but that there can be hope, and there is, and that a man can be changed, even when he's an alcoholic, history has fully and completely confirmed.

Now that is not only the hope of every addict and drunkard, but it is the hope of every average sinner everywhere in the world, that he does not have to remain what he is, that he may be deeply in sin, so deep that he's ashamed of himself. But the very fact that he is ashamed indicates that there is a model, a pattern after which he could shape himself, and he hopes that there can be change come. And the hope of change is what keeps men alive in the earth.

And the second thing that can be said is that you're not finished yet. That wherever you may be, old or young or in between, you are not a finished product, you're only in process.

You know, you and I tend to fix terminal points. I heard Dr. Alan Redpath on Thanksgiving Day, and I noticed that he spoke about terminals. He called them termini. I take it that's a British expression, but I'll not use the Latin plural, but the English, and say that we tend to fix terminal points, terminals. And beyond that, you don't go.

For instance, birth. Looked at one way, the obstetrician, when the baby is born and examined and found healthy, the obstetrician says, this is fixed. Now, as far as I'm concerned, my part's over, and a child is born into the world, and so he goes somewhere else about his business. That, as far as he's concerned, is done. And he fixes a terminal point there. Through the long months preceding, he'd been very anxious.

Now, the terminal point. A healthy, normal child has been born into the world. The mother knows that's not terminal. He's not fixed yet. Basically, if she's had any before, she knows that trouble has just started, and the fun. And she knows that education must now take place. She knows it from the time she teaches him to play patty-cake, until he walks out of the college hall with his degree, that there's a process of education. He's not fixed. He wasn't fixed and finished.

When the doctor was through with him, he had to have all the influences of education. And then when he gets his degree, we call basic degree, we say, ah, we're glad we got our boy through college. And we tend to fix a terminal point there and put a period and say, now he's done. He wasn't done before, but now he's done. No, he isn't done yet. He's still on cooking, and he's still being changed, and he's still being shaped and being fashioned.

And then we come to another terminal point, and that's marriage. Many a mother has breathed a sigh of relief when her son suddenly became serious, settled down, got married, got home. And she says, now my worries about him is over. He's settled down, we call that. But not everything that's settled down is finished. Keep that in mind.

Then when success comes, and he becomes first vice president of his company at 15,000 a year, and gets his big car and his lovely home, we say, now he's fixed now. Now he has arrived, he is an American businessman. No, he's still moving along.

And then when we come to middle age, when, as the poet said, gray hairs appear here and there upon him. I always thought that was a nice expression. Gray hairs appear here and there upon him. And the first couple or three, he says, they make him look distinguished. And after that, he pulls them out, then finally gives up. And we say, well, he has arrived now. He is certainly somewhere.

He's now a portly, well-proportioned businessman. And he hunts in the fall and fishes in the spring and goes to baseball in the summer. And does the things that professional middle-aged businessmen do. No worry about him, he's fixed. No, he's not fixed yet. And he'll never be fixed until the soul leaves the body.

Even the old man in his old age is still changing somewhat. Certainly, the proportion, the speed and rapidity and scope of change is not so great. That slopes down from maybe our 30th year. But there is change, nevertheless. So, remember, you're not finished. And remember again, you can be changed.

Now somebody else would say, yes, but I do know a terminal point, Mr. Tozer. You've been talking in terms of humanity, unregenerate humanity, and I have. Now I know a fixed point, a terminal, and that is when we are converted. Then we are fixed. That we can say, now rest my long-divided heart, fixed on this blissful center, rest.

Surely that means that the fluidity in our nature is over with and we're fixed now. And the answer is no, my friend, you are still fluid. You are still subject to being fashioned, to being changed, to being shaped. You can grow and develop and change and be fashioned still as a Christian.

And so Peter writes and says, don't fashion yourselves after the old pattern, but fashion yourselves after a new holy pattern; you recognize that we're still in process. Christians don't seem to realize that.

Nowadays if we just get them converted, we put a period and say, now it's all over, rest my long divided heart. And there is a sense in which that song is brilliantly, beautifully true and I love it and sing it often, so don't think I'm reflecting on it. I'm only pointing out that he did not mean that you are now no longer fluid, no longer malleable, can no longer be shaped. It means as far as your being fixed in Christ is concerned, that's settled. Thank God for that. That's what he meant and that's what we mean.

But when it comes to the shaping and development and growth and enlargement and exploitation and artistic shaping and fashioning of our characters, that doesn't stop when we're converted. It just takes a new direction is all.

Now I'll talk about for a minute how men fashion themselves. Some people would say we Christians don't fashion ourselves Mr. Tozer, God fashions us. We are clay and God is the potter and God does the fashioning.

Now that's the way it should be ideally. And if we were to be completely surrendered from the moment we're saved to the time we die, to the influences of God and to the powers that work in us from heaven, that would be true. But there are powers that shape men even in the kingdom of God that are not divine powers.

And then there are times when God uses powers to shape us, providential powers, secondary powers to shape us and to bring us. Let's put it like this. I think I can illustrate it. Usually, when you can't explain, you can illustrate. Take such a thing as getting a suntan. This is not exactly an appropriate or happy time of year to talk about it after the snow we had last night.

But suppose that a young fellow decides he wants to get a suntan. Personally, I was always glad that I was light as I was. Never cared much for suntans. But suppose that a fellow says, I'm going to get a suntan. So he strips to his trunks, goes out and sits in his backyard, or goes to the beach, and exposes himself to the sun.

Now, who's tanning his hide anyhow? Where is it coming from? Is he doing it? There's a sense in which he is doing it, for if he'd kept his shirt on, it wouldn't have happened. But there is a sense in which the sun is doing it. The sun is tanning him, but he had to go and expose himself to the sun, cooperate with the sun, in order that the sun might do its work upon him.

Now, that's exactly what we mean when we say that we fashion ourselves. Just as a man tans himself by exposing himself to the powers of the sun, so a Christian fashions

himself by exposing himself to the divine powers that shape him. Just as a man can keep his jacket on and not get a suntan, even though the sun is there trying to tan him, so a Christian can keep himself wrapped in the cloak of his own stubbornness and never receive any of the beneficial graces that leap down from the throne of God where Jesus sits as mediator.

So Christians can go through life without very much change having taken place. They're converted, yes. They believe in Christ, yes. They have this root of the matter in them, yes. The seed of God's in them, yes. But they're embryonic, at least infantile, and the growth and development and beautifying and enlarging and shaping has not taken place because they would not expose themselves to the powers that shape them.

Then there is another way in which even a Christian may shape himself, and that is to expose himself to the wrong kind of influences. And I believe that this is done to an extent that grieves God.

Now, there are powers that fashion us, and we know what the old powers were. We know those old powers were the powers of the former lusts in our ignorance. It tells us in the second chapter of Ephesians about those powers, wherein in time past he walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience, among whom also we all had our intercourse, our conversation or conduct or fellowship. In time past, in the lusts of our eyes, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as others.

Now those are the forces that were shaping us once. But we came to Jesus as we were, weary and worn and sad. We found in Him a resting place, and He has made us glad. Now we are supposed to put away those old forces, not expose ourselves to them anymore.

But you say, how can I keep and hold myself from being shaped when I am thrown now among men? I work in an office where men are wicked and vulgar and obscene. You can keep yourself from being shaped by them, just as a man out on the beach can keep himself by being tanned with the sun, keep a robe around him. You can draw your heart up tight and say, stay out, you devilish influences, and let my soul alone. It belongs to God.

If you are in school where there is dirty talk and irreverence, you can keep it from shaping you or having any influence in your life at all by shutting it out of your heart. You can even make it a blessing to you. When you hear an obscene mouth, you can say to God, O God, I hate that so bad, make my mouth ten times cleaner than it was before. When you see a wicked and injurious habit, you can use it to account. You can turn and say, O God, help me that I may keep clean from this thing.

You know how when you walk down the street and you see a man walking along, bent over, I don't mean a crippled man who can't help himself, I mean just some lazy fellow who's allowed himself to turn over like a perpetual question mark. For the next block, you straighten up and walk better, don't you? About the only time I remember to do it is

when I see some poor old fellow all bent over, I straighten my shoulders back and say, I don't look like that. You can turn that man to account by straightening up yourself.

And so, in the world where we are, the licentiousness and obscenity and vileness, we can use those very things and react from them with a violence and do what they call in psychology, overcompensate.

There once lived a man, I think I wrote this up in a publication. There lived a young fellow one time, maybe he was 14 years old, 13 or 14, and he got into a fire, I don't remember, his house burned or somehow, he was thrown into a fire. He was burned from his heels, I think way up his legs and up his back. Particularly his legs were terribly, tragically burned.

And that young man, after it got healed up so he could walk around again, they said, you'll never be able to run again, Glenn. You'll never be able to get around very well, but thank God everything will be all right, you'll be able to walk and you can get around. He said, I'm not only going to walk, I'm going to run.

This young man set out deliberately to overcompensate, to use those very burned legs, and the very burns on those legs to spur him on. And he went out without anybody knowing it, and he learned to run. And he ran and ran, tall and lean and thin he grew to be.

While the scars weren't pretty on his legs, he learned to use them. And the very scars themselves drove him forward. His hard, bright mind said, I'm not going to be licked by scarred legs. And the day came when that young fellow could go out on the track anywhere and win the mile run, Glenn Cunningham.

Glenn Cunningham has been replaced by Gil Dodds and some of the other boys that have come up later. Glenn now must be in his late thirties. But when he was a lad, he overcompensated. He went so far in one direction to get away from the thing that pulled him in the other direction.

So, in the kingdom of God, I don't have to give up to the devil. And I don't have to yield my weak soul to the influences that pull and drag me. When I see something wrong, I can react from it with violence and say, if God will help me, I'll be different from that, and make the very sight of evil to drive me further into the kingdom of God.

Now, let's just notice some of the things that shape us. Whether we're Christians or whether we're sinners, we're shaped by these things, and we fashion ourselves by them. I'd like to give you eight things that will fashion you. Any of you young people want to take these down? Get out a pencil, put these down. I'd like to give them to you.

I want to tell you eight things that will fashion and shape you. I won't be long at it, but put it down. Older people too, but in a reduced proportion, but particularly for young Christians, take this down. These are the things that will fashion you whether you know it or not, and whether you believe it or not, or whether you like it or not. These things will fashion you.

The literature you read, put that down, one. The literature you read is going to fashion you. It's going to slowly condition your mind, little by little, even though you'll fight it. If you read it and like it, it's going to shape you. Slowly you're going to take on the shape of the mind of the man who wrote that book. You're going to put your emphasis where he put his. You're going to put your values where he put his. You're going by liking what he liked and thinking as he thought, you're going to be shaped into what he was.

And then, two, the songs you sing and the music you enjoy, that is going to shape you. I can take you to parts of this country, if they still do as they did when I was a lad, and I can let you hear songs so obscene and vile, for I've heard them, farmers and woodmen and drivers, singing vicious, vile, gutter songs and enjoying them.

Maybe you've never heard them, I trust not. But there are other songs just as dangerous and as damaging to the human spirit, other music just as harmful to the soul. And that song you sing and that music you enjoy will determine what you're like inside.

But you say it doesn't amount to very much, it's nothing really. Don't you fool yourself, it's nothing really. It is something indeed, for it stirs your emotion, it moves you out. It's like the fingers of a potter to shape that clay and push it into the crevices and get a form there.

And if you're a Christian that comes and sings Isaac Watts' hymns of a Sunday morning, and then through the week listen to Boogie and all the rest and enjoy it, then you wouldn't listen if you didn't, unless you're forced to listen, as I sometimes am in restaurants. Ray and I have a place we go to eat in a hurry to keep from spending time. Bless my heart, some stuff you hear coming over that loudspeaker there, you'd think the devil had collaborated with Judas Iscariot in writing it.

But there it is, and that doesn't affect you because you'll react against it. It drives you the other way. And you love to sing a good hymn after hearing that dirt better than you did before because you say, thank God with something better. If you like music that's low, that touches the baser emotions, it'll shape you whether you like it or not.

And somebody here says, oh, listen to that old man. What business is it of yours what I listen to? None. You can drink strychnine if you want to, brother, but I'm still friend enough of yours to warn you if you do, they'll carry you out in a box. I can't stop you, but I can just warn you.

So, I haven't the authority to tell you what you can listen to, but I have the divine commission to tell you that if you love and listen to the wrong kind of music, that music will do something to your inner life.

Three, the pleasures we indulge in, whatever kind they may be, they shape us. Say, what's wrong with this and what's wrong with that? And there's no answer, maybe, but the answer is, give him ten years in that kind of pleasure and then look at his spiritual life. That's the answer now. What's wrong with that, we say?

A kid who insists on fourteen, smoking and drinking and living poorly, what's wrong with that? You can't argue with him but give him ten years. Give him fifteen years.

Before he's thirty years old, look him over and you'll know what's wrong with that. What argument won't do, plain evidence will do finally. It'll convince you that wasn't the way to live. And all the pleasures we indulge in are shaping us just as sure as we live, for whatever gives us pleasure changes.

And then the ambitions we entertain. Think of the ambitions people entertain. Whatever's eating at you there, whatever you'd like to be, whatever you dream over, that's shaping you.

And fifth, the places we go. Again, somebody says, you can't tell me where to go. No, sir, I don't want to. I hope you end in heaven at last. But on your way there, be careful where you visit along the road, because that'll shape you and me.

And then the words we speak. The American people, I think of all people, are careless with language. The typical American joke is an exaggeration. Mark Twain and his exaggeration and our tall tale clubs and all exaggerations, you've got to watch them. Watch the language you use.

And seventh, the friends we cherish. This has always seemed to me the hardest thing I've ever had to do, because I value friendships and I know how people love each other. Even in this wicked old world, friendships are very beautiful things. And I've always felt something like a churlish heel in standing before audiences and say you'd better break with certain friendships if you're going to serve God. It seems like such a rude, churlish, uncivilized thing to say.

But my Savior said it more plainly than I could ever say it, more bluntly than I could ever say it, when He told us that we must take up our cross and follow Him, and we must turn our backs on everybody that was necessary to turn them on, even if it came to our own relatives and friends, yes, our own husband or wife.

Because Jesus Christ was first in the saving of our soul of prime importance. It's better to have no friends and be an Elijah alone than to be like Lot in Sodom, surrounded by friends that all but damned him. If it hadn't been for Abraham on the side hills of Mamre praying, Lot would have been damned by his friendships. And he very nearly was, and his family was ruined by his friendships.

So, your friends, he sitteth not in the seat of the scornful. Watch that, or goeth in the way of sinners. Walketh not in the counsels of the ungodly. Watch the ungodly counsel. Watch the scorner. Watch out for the opposer. You make a friend of him, you have given the enemy the key to your heart. You have opened the gate, the city will be stormed and taken.

And last, the thoughts we brood over. There never was a murder committed yet that somebody hadn't brooded over that murder. There never was a robbery committed, but somebody brooded over it, maybe half the night long. There never was an evil deed, unless we might for the moment make an exception of those sudden deeds of passion, anger, temper, or jealousy that sudden blinding rage brings a man, leads a man to do something. But even at that, I'm inclined to think that if he had disciplined his emotions by right thoughts and right living, he could control himself in the crisis.

So there never was a crime committed that wasn't preceded by a conditioning as a result of brooding thoughts. Whatever thoughts you brood over in the night season will make you. Whatever thoughts you entertain as you ride or walk along will shape you. Whatever thoughts you give place to will change you from what you are into something else, and it won't be for the better unless your thoughts are good thoughts.

So if your friends are sweet friends, Christian friends, godly friends, then they will bless you, and you'll keep them forever.

If the literature you read is good literature and it doesn't all have to be Christian literature. There's lots of good literature that isn't Christian. So I don't say you're confined yourself to Grace Livingston Hill and Paul Hutchins and A. W. Tozer.

I say read what you please, but let it be the kind that won't hurt you and will help you. The classics, for instance, are good literature. I've had to shake people off my neck who didn't like it that I read the classics. I've read them all my life, and I've never been hurt by one yet.

And when I see they hurt me, I throw them aside. I picked up one once, a book years ago, a very famous classic. I tore it into shreds and threw it away. I'm not a book burner, but that particular book, I liked it too well, and it was harming me, so I threw the thing away and have never owned a copy since.

Somebody says, you mean to say there's a classic you don't own? You're not educated. Well, but I'm a lot better off, and if I'd have wallowed through that guy, I'm thinking of Samuel Pepys since his education, the old scoundrel. So, Samuel Pepys can keep his diary. I'd rather read Paul.

Now, be not conformed, but be transformed and I'm finished. You have a soul, and you have opportunities. God gives to the potter the clay and says, now shape it. God gives to the builder the material and says, now build it into a worthy temple.

And then He says at last, now, how did you shape it? How did you fashion it? What have you got to bring Me out of the material I gave you, the forces that I turned loose like lathes and saws and hammers and buffers to shape and change you? I gave you those things. What have you done? To what have you exposed yourself?

I trust in that last great day we won't have to take our rich material before the blazing eyes of God and there before the judgment seat of Christ, and shamefacedly admit that we allowed ignoble or unworthy things to have a place in shaping our lives. Let us rather be transformed by the renewing of our mind that we may know what is that good and perfect and acceptable will of God. Amen.