

Sermon for TUMC August 4, 2024.

Tim Schmucker

“Unboxing non-conformity: A scriptural & personal journey”

One of my earliest memories at church—I was around 6—was in the fellowship hall at Toledo Mennonite playing under a large quilt. My mom and other women sitting around it, chatting while quilting. It was lots of fun—a tent of sorts. Until we got too loud or rambunctious, when they would shoo us out. My mom and the other women wore a head covering, also called a prayer covering.

Based on Paul’s admonition to women in I Corinthians 11 to cover their heads while praying lest they cause disgrace,<sup>1</sup> wearing “the covering” was a common practice of many North American Mennonite women when I was a young child. It pre-dated me and is still practiced within many traditional Mennonite and Amish groups.

Growing up in the church, I heard this morning’s scripture passage read in worship services, preached from the pulpit, and taught in Sunday school. As an adolescent, I memorised it. Especially, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Do not be conformed to this world—this is a large and full faith box for me. Journey with me now as I attempt to unbox it.

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<sup>1</sup> in Paul’s time, men considered women’s hair the most erotic part of their body and so by covering their hair women signaled that they were not sexually available.

# Unboxing Non-conformity:

A scriptural and personal journey

Romans 12: 1–2

Tim Schmucker



My mom’s prayer covering was a particularly visual embodiment of non-conformity to the world, because I grew up in the secular city, not in a Mennonite community where women wearing the covering out on streets would have been a common sight. So I intuited—I knew in my heart, to use Haven’s framework of knowing in her sermon last month—I intuited that we were different from the others in our neighbourhood, in our city. Being Mennonite meant that we were in some way “not conformed” to the world.... Although my dad had a Cadillac convertible when I was a toddler. Ummm. That would be a different sermon.

Were we to continue unboxing this prayer covering, we’d note that its European roots are more cultural than biblical. We’d also realise, as we’ve learned from Mennonite women over the past decades, that it was not only a symbol of submission to God but also—not surprisingly—one way that patriarchy enforced submission of women to men.

My mom soon stopped wearing it outside of church, and by the mid to late 1960s, she no longer wore it even there. Still, my mom’s covering informed my young intuitive understanding that as Mennonites we were not to be conformed to this world.... Now, another memory from growing up, as we continue unboxing non-conformity.

In Ohio where I grew up, school children participated in a program designed to build patriotism and to help fund the military. They’d buy war stamps and collect them in booklets. Schools would set particular goals—to fund an army tank, for example. A full booklet would be redeemed for a US Savings Bond.



Once a month, during grades 2, 3 and 4, on “war stamp day,” my classmates would bring their booklets to school. At the appointed time, they would line up at the classroom door, excitedly showing each other their collections. When our teacher gave the word, they would file out and go to the auditorium to buy more war stamps. I however remained in my seat until they had all filed out. Then my teacher would set a chair in the hallway and silently beckon me to sit there. She would then proceed with my classmates while I would sit in that chair until they returned.

So again, I intuitively, viscerally knew that although my family was well-known and -respected in the city, we were not fully part of it. We were different. As I learned at home and at church, we were followers of Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies, which meant we did not participate in war efforts. We did not conform to this world. Stories of faithfulness and persecution—such as my six-times great-grandfather being sentenced to death in a military court for refusing to support the US war of independence—also contributed to my understanding of non-conformity, that a life of faith had everything to do with how we lived.

Let’s take a look at today’s scripture from Paul’s letter to the Jesus followers in Rome.

*I appeal to you therefore, my siblings, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasoned service or worship.*

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the good and complete will of God.*

I appeal to you therefore, my siblings, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, **which is your reasoned service.**

**Do not be conformed to this world**, but be **transformed** by the **renewing of your minds**, so that you may **discern** what is the good and complete **will of God.**

Romans 12 has been essential for Mennonites over the centuries. Part of our canon within the canon—the core scriptures that are central to our understanding of faith and life. Last September on Gathering Sunday, Michele preached on the entire chapter. She said it was akin to a manifesto for being church, that it captured the ingredients that make church communities robust and resilient. The first ingredient she suggested was not conforming to the world. She went on to describe many of Paul's ethical exhortations as core non-conformity for us as a congregation. That sermon is worth listening to or reading again; it's on the TUMC website, as are all sermons.

Let's look a bit deeper at verse one. Paul instructs Jesus followers to *present your bodies as a living sacrifice*. Sacrifice was a familiar concept and a bloody practice in Paul's world. But Paul says the sacrifice is to be a living one, rather than one on a cultic altar. One's entire being is to be offered to God because becoming followers of Jesus means embarking on a complete re-socialisation—a transformation of relationships, of understandings of reality, and of oneself, who is now in Christ. As Paul had written earlier to the Corinthians "If anyone is in Christ, there is a whole new world, a new creation."

*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice*. And this living sacrifice *is your reasoned service*. **Reasoned service** is a more accurate translation than "spiritual worship", says John Toews in his Believers Church commentary on Romans. Service to God is performed by reasoned thought, by carefully thinking things through. Given Paul's ethical exhortations on how we are to treat each other in the following verses, apparently he envisioned that ethical living would emerge from rational deliberation.

Then in verse 2, the root word for non-conformity refers to a society's underlying value system—its core beliefs and behaviour expectations. In other words, its ethics. Paul says that non-conformity happens when one is transformed through the renewal of our intellect. And with this metamorphosis, Jesus followers can test what God's

complete will is; reasoned thought can determine what is valid and genuine; it can distinguish the authentic from the bogus.

*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the good and complete will of God.*

Here's another personal story as we continue our journey unboxing non-conformity.

In the late 70s and into the 80s I was part of that generation of young adult Mennonites who considered themselves quite enlightened. With eyes open to the unjust and violent realities of the world, our non-conformity became “eating and living



more with less,” and resulted in justice and peace activism and advocacy in our secular context. We spent some time in jail due to acts of faith-informed civil disobedience. We even put our bodies in front of the guns of marauding counter-revolutionaries in rural Nicaragua who, financed by the US government, were attacking peasant villages. Our Jesus ethics were formed by reasoned thought that included a commitment to significant personal sacrifice.

Jesus ethics. For decades, I've listened to young people and not-so-young people say, “I'm not sure I believe in God, but Jesus? Jesus, I can relate to. I consider myself a follower of Jesus. My faith is following his life and teachings.” I get it; I've been one of them for over forty years. I left the piety and heart-felt faith of my childhood and youth, and embraced ethics discerned with reason within the faith community. Paul would have approved, I think. Ethics became my faith.

However, there is a significant aspect about Paul's rational ethical non-conformity that I wonder about. Let's remember Paul – a Pharisee who vigorously

persecuted followers of Jesus and AND who had a dramatic life-changing mystical spiritual experience with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. A transcendent non-rational encounter that radically transformed his life and faith. In Greek, a *Metanoia*. A complete turn-around-and-run-the-other-way. Not only did he as a Pharisaic Jew embrace Jesus as the Messiah, but he became convinced that Jesus's gospel was also for the Gentiles.

That mystical spiritual experience was the foundation for the rest of his life. It undergirded his missionary efforts throughout Asia Minor and his letters to the emerging congregations of Jesus followers. It wasn't reasoned or rational. It'd be something like a hard-core Trump supporter who has a vision of Jesus and immediately starts campaigning for Kamala Harris. Or a hard-core Pierre Poilievre supporter who encounters Jesus and immediately begins campaigning for ... ummm, I don't know who. Sorry, my analogy breaks down here. In any case, we can barely imagine the scope of Paul's transformation.

And that mystical transcendental non-cognitive encounter doesn't seem to be here in chapter 12. But that's okay. I understand Paul. For decades I defined and experienced faith as rationally living an ethical life, and yet on Sunday mornings, I would experience transcendence and mystery in our congregational singing—in ways that were beyond reason and cognition.

Still, it's a bit baffling that Paul would emphasise reason and rational thought without weaving in his foundational spiritual transformation on the Damascus Road. Now, we can only speculate on what it was among the groups of Jesus followers in Rome that had Paul focusing on rational thought and discernment in their service and ethics. Perhaps their worship gatherings were also chaotic like those in Corinth a few years prior, taken up with ecstatic unrestrained exuberance.

Whatever the reason, Paul's ancient middle eastern world is not our world today. Our age is one of rampant rationality, where faith, transcendence, and mystery seem "out of step, almost embarrassing" — to quote Will Braun in June's Canadian Mennonite magazine.

So I would like to suggest this morning that not being conformed to this age, to our world, requires an openness to, and even an embrace of what we don't rationally understand, that is the mystery of

transcendence, of spiritual faith experience that isn't explained by reasoned thinking. I am not talking about minimising reasoned ethics in a life of faith as followers of Jesus, but rather that we affirm also the experience of mystery and



transcendence. Whether that's in nature—I am always in awe of sunrises and sunsets— or in meditation and prayer, or in deep conversation with others—however you touch transcendence.

So I have been adding transcendence to my box of non-conformity. In my ongoing journey toward non-conformity to the primacy of rationality, Jacqui, my spouse, has been a great guide. So has Bruce Cockburn, the Canadian troubadour and singer-songwriter, who has for fifty-five years shared profound poetic lyrics along with intricate guitar work blending folk, rock and jazz. His lyrics are also a blend – of Christian spirituality and mysticism, social and economic justice, the joys, pain and humour in relationships, and an environmental conscience. Like Gordon Lightfoot, his childhood and teen experiences with music in an Ontario United Church were formative.

In one song, Cockburn gently responds to those who say that the world and the universe are explained by reason alone. Using “mystery” as another way to refer to The Transcendent or to God, he sings “You can't tell me there is no mystery. It's everywhere I turn.” With poetic pictures he paints that “Infinity always gives me vertigo ... and fills me up with grace” and that “mystery overflows my cup.”

He ends the song with a challenge to all people of faith, calling us “stumblers who believe love rules.” I sense that Cockburn is naming all of us who suffer “the ravages of rationality,” but who still believe God is Love. So he invites us: “Come all you stumblers who believe love rules. Stand up and let it shine. Stand up and let it shine.”

Video conclusion:

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