

Conforming your character

Rules were made to be

Kudos if the first word that popped into your mind was “followed,” “obeyed,” or “enforced,” especially if you were born after the baby boom. But you’ve probably heard the mantra enough to know that the correct answer is broken.

Our culture is so fiercely devoted to individualism and personal freedom that any attempt to have any community standards or rules is viewed as not just intrusive but downright immoral and un-American. Any talk of conformity conjures up images from Orwell or of the Gulag.

“Be yourself,” “Make up your own rules,” “Do your own thing” and similar statements are part of our cultural vernacular. Just watch a few commercials on television and you’ll see individuality glorified repeatedly. Ironically, these themes are also part of many character development programs today, with the focus on teaching students to express themselves, be true to themselves, and have a high self-esteem.

However, this emphasis is actually counter-productive to develop-

By Ralph Clark

Ralph Clark is pastor and teacher at Oakdale Christian Academy in Jackson where he spends his free time playing games with his four boys that usually involve a ball. Oakdale is a boarding school serving 7-12 grade students from all over the world. More information is available at www.oakdalechristian.org

ing character. At the core of true character development is the necessity of conforming yourself, along with many of your passions and desires, to standards that have little or nothing to do with who you are. It isn’t about figuring out what character is or how you want to fit it into your lifestyle. Rather, developing character requires molding yourself into the kind of person (honest, respectful, diligent, courageous) that has been honored and revered for millennia. These are not subjective, “figure-out-what-they-mean-to-you” virtues. They are standards by which we measure ourselves, not which we evaluate and decide if they suit our tastes, personality, or life experiences.

Unfortunately, this confusion is found in the church also. It’s not uncommon to hear someone preaching or giving a devotional, and after reading a portion of scripture, asking, “Now what does this mean to you?” Instead, the question that should be asked is, “What does this mean for you?” The issue

is not what we think about something, but how it affects us and makes us a better person. Thus it is with character; you change yourself to align with what is good - not the opposite.

This is why even though we talk so much about a renewal of character in our country today, we still see so little. As much as we want the benefits that character brings (civility, community, trust, decency), we cherish the value of individuality and personal choice above all else. Though we would like the benefits that objective standards bring, we are unwilling to conform ourselves to anything that didn’t originate within us.

If our desire is a civil society, in which individual rights are protected by more than just the law, we will have to think less of conforming the world around us to our whims and fancies. Instead, we must conform ourselves, regardless of the consequences to our person, to a good which is higher than any of us as individuals but which bene-

fits us all.

I work at a small boarding school and have the privilege of living in a close community of staff families and students from around the world. While we strive to celebrate every individual and the unique ways God has gifted each one, the larger focus is on community standards and the development of specific character traits that are essential to any Christian’s growth and maturity. We recognize that we are all called to become more like Christ and that he never changes. But we often do as we are conformed into his likeness.

“We say we want a renewal of character in our day but we don’t really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a credal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels. This price is too high for us to pay. We want character but without unyielding conviction. We want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame. We want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend. We want good without having to name evil. We want decency without the authority to insist upon it. We want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms we want it.”

— from “The Death by Character” by James Davison Hunter

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