Romans 12-13: Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. **2**Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. [Skipping to verse 9]

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. **10**Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

**14**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. **15**Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. **16**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

**17**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18**If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19**Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. **20**On the contrary:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

**21**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Do Not Conformed to the Pattern of This World

Romans 12-13

Prayer: Lord, tell us what we need to know and show us what we ought to do to serve Jesus, your son, and our Lord. Amen.

When I entered my first pastorate, Richard Nixon was President of the US. I remember being shocked by the vulgar and even profane language of the Watergate tapes. The tapes also troubled Nixon’s friend, Billy Graham. I spoke out against the President’s language, and I do not remember anyone saying: “You must be a Democrat to attack our Republican President.”

I should add: Billy Graham learned from that experience to avoid partisan politics and became the spiritual advisor to most subsequent Presidents – both Democratic and Republican.

In my first decade on the faculty of Messiah College, President George H.W. Bush made the decision to invade Iraq. Our Biblical and Religious Studies Department unanimously signed a letter opposing that invasion on both biblical and just war principles. The entire department – both Republicans and Democrats – signed that letter.

About a decade later, President Bill Clinton’s affair with an intern became public knowledge. I spoke to friends and family about the immor-ality and abuse of power in President Clinton’s behavior. Nobody said you must be a Republican to speak out against our Democratic president.

Another decade later, I was distressed by President Barack Obama’s use of drones to cause death for both targets and civilians and for his policy of returning immigrants. When I shared my feelings, no one said: “You must be a Republican.”

Nevertheless, whenever I spoke about the alleged affairs of President Trump with prostitutes, the lie about President Obama’s birth certificate, or President Trump’s divisive language, the response was along partisan lines – Democrats approved; Republicans defended the President. So today, many hesitate to speak out about political issues for fear of being considered partisan. In the process, the prophetic message of Jesus has been muted. We are reluctant

Let me add, because this sermon is recorded before the election, we may have a new President Joe Biden. Some among us will be uncomfortable with Biden’s prioritizing the rights of a pregnant mother over the unborn life she carries. I trust that concern will not brand the person as a Republican, but both sides will search together for God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will, although neither side has complete understanding of what that is.

If Jesus were here today, I do not believe he would identify with either the Democratic or the Republican party. After all, he had among his disciples a man who supported the empire, Matthew the tax-collector, and Jesus’s disciples also included a political revolutionary, Simon the Zealot. Jesus attracted both patriots and revolutionaries.

Yet, Jesus was political in the sense that he taught that our spiritual worship has implications for how we live in the world of the “polis” or the political world. Many forms of that Greek word *polis* occur in the New Testament translated “city,” “state,” “rule,” “magistrate,” “citizen.” How we act as citizens is important to Jesus. Paul says it this way in Rom 12:1.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Paul says, when we come to worship, we offer to God our “bodies” and what we do with them in the *polis* or political world as our “living sacrifice.” When what we do in the political world is “holy and pleasing to God,” that is our “true and proper worship.” Spiritual worship and political action are not to be separated in that gnostic manner that Pastor David talks about.

Moreover, in this sermon series, Pastor David has repeatedly told us that we must be political, but not partisan. Followers of Jesus speak out on political issues that involve biblical principles, without getting on the Republican or Democratic bandwagon. How do we do that?

Jesus proclaimed many principles with political implications: “do not kill,” “love your enemies,” “do not resist the evil one,” “turn the other cheek,” “swear not at all,” “let your “yes” be yes and your “no,” “no.” And perhaps the hardest for me to follow in today’s political context: “Do not worry about anything.” Is it reasonable to follow these seemingly impossible sayings of Jesus? Is it practical to follow Jesus in our world?

Many Christians have given up following Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in everyday political life. Martin Luther said: the Sermon on the Mount applies only to the spiritual realm, not to the secular world, where we should instead rely on common sense. Missionary and theologian Albert Schweitzer argued that Jesus teachings in the Sermon on the Mount apply only to the disciples immediately after Jesus’s death. Dispensationalists like C.I. Schofield thought Jesus’s teachings apply only to the future kingdom of Heaven. Others thought Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount included general principles taught through specific illustrations, but only the principles, not the illustrations, were binding. Still others thought Jesus’s tough teachings were councils for perfection, not for salvation. Yet others believed Jesus’s teachings apply to our intentions rather than what we do. And others believe Jesus’s words are impossible precepts to show us our inadequacies or overstatements to remind us how demanding Jesus is.

Rather than explaining away the difficult teachings of Jesus that clearly have political implications, we should follow the most accepted interpreter of Jesus – the Apostle Paul. In our scripture lesson for today, Paul is answering the question: How can you follow Jesus in the world where live? His answer is: “Do not be conformed to this world.”

Our Anabaptist forefathers did not try to conform Jesus’s teachings to the world they lived in. Instead, they followed Jesus advice: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world.” We belong to a new age inaugurated by Jesus; we are renewed by God and freed from the control of Satan. This world is the realm of Satan’s power. We conform to the pattern of the kingdom of God rather than the empires of this world.

In verse 2 of chapter 12, which is the thesis for this entire section of his letter to the Romans, Paul says:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

How can we be political but not partisan? We follow the politics of Jesus rather than conforming to the politics of this world.

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. We have a new way of thinking – a new world view, that enables us to “test and approve what God’s will is.” This way of thinking is totally subversive to the way things usually work in our political world. In the words of Pastor David, we give up “power over” others to support the weak and oppressed with “power under” that strengthens and supports them. We give up personal rights, privileges, and power for the common good. This is so radical that former dean at Messiah College Don Kraybill calls it an “upside, down kingdom.”

Paul urges Christians and church leaders to “renew their minds” to this radically new way of thinking and to agree on strategies taught by Jesus that do not exercise power over others but give up power to be of one mind, supporting persons who cannot support themselves – persons of all races, classes, genders, and income levels. This unity is only achieved when people act like Jesus. This new worldview and value system is based on love for the other, honoring rather than shaming people who are different. Paul is calling for a revolution in the church that spills over into the political world.

Operating in Jesus’s kingdom requires the power of discernment to know what is God’s “good, pleasing and perfect will.” That discernment causes us to reject the world’s value system.

The word translated “world” in our passage here is not the Greek word *kosmos,* but *aeon* our word “eon” or “age.” Jesus introduced a new age. We do not conform to conventional patterns of this old age. Instead, we allow Jesus to transform us. The Greek verb Paul uses is our word “metamorphosis”– indicating a complete change or transformation.

In our flower garden this summer, I found milkweed covered with scores of disgusting, squirmy, worm-like larva. I was going to destroy them, but my biologist daughter told me they would soon become beautiful Monarch butterflies. We also have several large butterfly bushes only a few yards away from the milkweed. Later in the summer, I liked to think the butterflies I saw on the bush were once the larva on that milkweed.

Like those caterpillers, if we allow Jesus to renew our minds, repenting of old ways of thinking, conforming our minds to Jesus’ new age, something beautiful like those Monarch butterflies is born.

This new way of thinking affects relationships between people. The old thinking created conflict and destroyed relationships; Jesus’s new way of thinking controls self-ambition and power for the common good and the welfare of the community. We seek the mind of Jesus and test each political issue to separate the important from the trivial, the genuine from the bogus, to find the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

Paul lists specific ways we can conform to the will of God. First, and perhaps most important, for not conforming to the pattern of this age, is to love God and others. Among Jesus’s principles for conforming to the will of God, love heads the list. In verses 9-10, Paul says:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Central to the teaching of Jesus is: Love God and others. This love is not a abstract concept or feeling, but an active *agape* love embodied in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Paul says love must be sincere, literally without hypocrisy – without being “two-faced,” – without acting one way around Republicans and another way around Democrats. Love sincerely “abhors what is evil and persistently clings to the good.” Love hates the evils of injustice and bigotry, but clings to the good, like taking care of the weak and oppressed.

Julia Johnson models that for us in her care for the poor, the addict, the homeless. The pattern of the old age shames the poor, jails the addict, and bars the immigrant. Following Jesus supports policies that bring health to the afflicted. Jesus calls us not be conformed to the patterns of this age.

This is something that followers of Jesus can be excited about. Paul says it like this in verses 11-13:

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Paul says that we should be zealous with spiritual fervor serving the Lord. But Paul also says that our spiritual fervor has implications for our conduct in the *polis* or the political world. We give joyful hope to those in despair, we are patient with the afflicted, we share with the needy, we invite strangers into your home, and we faithfully pray with those who have physical and emotional afflictions. This is quite the opposite to the pattern of this world that says in tough times: Take care of yourself.

Let’s summarize some of the other things that Paul says it means to not be conformed to this world in verses 14-16. Pastor David peached insightfully and helpfully on these verses several weeks ago, so I’ll just read them. [Note: I have added a few words of my own.]

**14**Bless those who persecute you [because you hold to the principles of the kingdom of this God, rather than the kingdoms of this world]… **15**Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn [over their physical and emotional hardship]. **16**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position [the poor, the immigrant, the addict]. Do not be conceited.

**17**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18**…live at peace with everyone. **19**Do not take revenge, my dear friends…

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
     if he is thirsty, give him something to drink….”

**21**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Jesus’s teachings do not conform to the pattern of this world. Yet, they certainly have political implications: “Live in harmony with one another;” “do not be conceited;” “live at peace with everyone;” “do not take revenge;” “feed your enemy;” and **“**do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” These principles apply to the administration of the *polis* in cities like Minneapolis or Annapolis or Indianapolis. Followers of Jesus practice the political principles he lays down.

Yet, although Jesus’s teachings have political implications, they are not partisan. As Pastor David says: we do not follow the Democratic donkey or the Republican elephant, but we follow Jesus the Lamb. We advocate and proclaim Jesus’s message, which is neither Republican nor Democratic.

My wife and her brother are polar opposites in their political leanings, and although, I must say, they are able most of the time to avoid arguments. But one time after Amy had expressed a political opinion, her brother said: “Well, you have been drinking the Kool Aid.” Yes. Most of us drink the Kool Aid of one party or the other. Some of us drink the red Republican Kool Aid and others of us drink the blue Democratic Kool Aid.

Do you remember the origin of that Kool Aid imagery? It originates from Guyana, where on Nov. 18, 1978, 900 members of the Peoples Temple died when their leader, [Jim Jones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Jones), convinced them to commit "revolutionary suicide" by drinking a powdered drink laced with [cyanide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyanide).

Rather than being deceived into drinking the destructive Kool Aid of the donkey Democrats or elephant Republicans, we followers of Jesus are instead nourished by the living water from the Lamb Jesus Christ.

But some of you have looked ahead to the next chapter. Politicians love to quote the beginning of Rom. 13 out of the context of chapter 12. Rom. 13 has been used to support both Republican and Democratic policies. The message from both sides of the political aisle is: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities” [when the governing authorities are us]. “Let everyone be subject to governing authorities’ was used by our Attorney General to justify separating children from parents at the border.

By contrast Dwight Eisenhower, supreme commander of Allied Troops in Europe during World War 2, President of the United States from 1953-1961, and product of the Brethren in Christ Sunday School in Abilene, Kansas, Eisenhower understood the importance of Romans 12. When he was President of Columbia University, he was asked to “Witness for Christ” in the prestigious Riverside Church in New York City. Eisenhower did not turn to Rom. 13, but Rom. 12. Eisenhower read the following words:

…every man that is among you, [is] not to think more highly [of himself] than [he] ought to think… Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor what is evil; cleave what is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another… If it be possible, as much as lies within you, live peacefully with all men.

Interesting words for a former General and President of United States. Eisenhower understood that only if these words of Jesus are given their proper place, only then should we “be subject to governmental authorities.”

Romans 13 must be read together with chapter 12, which contains the thesis for the two chapters in verse 2: “Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world.” As followers of Jesus, we follow his teachings. We do follow Rom. 13 with subjection to our government when it tells us to obey just laws, pay taxes without complaint, and honor our government.

When Jesus was asked by the authorities, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?, he noted Caesar’s head on a coin and responded: “Give Caesar what it Caesar’s.” Sometimes we stop there, but Jesus’s point is in the words that follow. Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s…**but** give to God what is God’s.” That is Jesus’s point. As citizens – both Republicans and Democrats – we give to our leaders the respect and obedience they deserve. But at the same time, our primary allegiance is to God, so we follow the politics of Jesus and reject being conformed to the pattern of this world.

Pastor David has set a “third way” before us. That means we avoid the polarities in our political world. We primarily are neither Democrats nor Republicans; we follow Jesus. We primarily are neither conservatives nor progressives; we follow Jesus. We are not prolife in the narrow way limited to life before birth – abortion. We are also prolife when it relates to gun use, we are also pro-life when it relates to capital punishment, we are also pro-life when it relates to the environment, we are also pro-life when it relates to programs for the poor, and we are also pro-life when it relates to educational policy. That does not mean we agree on all of these issues, but it does mean our prolife stance is not limited to abortion as important as that is.

But we also are not prochoice, when that means our concern relates only to the rights of the mother and does not consider the life of the unborn. Again that does not mean all followers of Jesus will agree on issues like abortion or gun use, but it does mean that we will not define “life” or “choice” as narrowly as partisan politicians. On all such issues, we do not conform to Democratic or Republican policy. To the best of our limited abilities, we follow the politics of Jesus.

Does that mean we should end our alignment or involvement with a particular party? My brother Hank Johnson, the pastor of the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church, gave me an idea of how to think of this. He appealed to BIC historian and theologian Luke Keefer, who in a classic article said that the BIC have never conformed completely to any movement. First, the BIC were Anabaptists with a difference and Pietists with a difference. Later, we were Wesleyans with a difference. More recently, we have become Evangelicals with a difference.

Pastor Hank applies Keefer’s thinking to politics. If you are a Republican, be a Republican with a difference–a Republican whose primary allegiance is to follow Jesus. If you are a Democrat, be a Democrat with a difference–a Democrat whose primary allegiance is to follow Jesus. Our primary identity is with Jesus rather than being conformed to the partisan politics of the present age. Jesus said: Be not conformed to this world!

Benediction: Go out into the world in peace. Have courage.

Hold on to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak,

help the suffering, honor everyone.

Rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

May the grace of Lord Jesus Christ be with you and give you peace. Amen