

# Recognisably Christian?

*A sermon on Romans 12:9-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 3rd September 2017*

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## Message

Christians are to be known for what they celebrate and affirm and encourage rather than what they are against.

## Sermon

In all likelihood, in the middle of this week, the High Court will squash the postal vote on same-sex marriage, not because of anything to do with same-sex marriage, but because the method is an undemocratic attempt to spend government money for political purposes without the permission of the parliament. Unfortunately, campaigning has already well and truly begun, and it has already given ample evidence to show why holding any sort of plebiscite on the issue instead of simply holding a free vote in the parliament is a very bad idea.

The campaigning is toxic, polarising and socially divisive, shedding a lot more heat than light, and the blame for this falls on both sides, though perhaps not equally. Both sides have a tendency to demonise the other, and to dismiss one another's arguments as misleading and unfair. Sometimes they're right, but over-generalising actually creates a backlash that makes it harder for anyone to change their mind, so it is counter-productive.

The first television advertisement from the "no" campaign is actually very clever, in that it demonstrates a good understanding of shrewd marketing strategy. It is also very nasty, but part of its cleverness is that it conceals that nastiness under the sweet guise of ordinary mums who are concerned for the welfare of their own children. Its nastiness is that it deliberately implies that the LGBTIQ community is a sinister and conspiratorial organisation who are leveraging the push to legalise same-sex marriage as a trojan horse to gain access to our children in order to reprogram their minds and sexually corrupt them. It's nasty. It's not true. It's poisonous. And it's divisive.

The ad is also clever in not saying anything about religion. Although most of the opposition to any sort of social legitimising of homosexuality comes from religious people who believe that God's biggest agenda is to get people to conform to a particular code of behaviour, it is clear that they have listened to the marketing experts who can tell them that very few people in the Australian community are going to respond favourably to that line of argument.

The church's social influence was already on the wane, and recent abuse scandals have ensured that fewer people than ever will take moral guidance from churches. But it is not just that. The same-sex marriage issue itself, and the bigger issue of the acceptance and support or not of LGBTIQ people has seen the churches cast themselves in a very bad light. The further out of step with public opinion we are seen to be, the more we are seen as a bunch of yesterday's wowsers, frowning on anything to do with bodily pleasure.

The fact that the ad made no mention of religious morality is an indication that those behind the ad, or at least their marketing advisors, recognise this. It was apparent too when the Baptist Union of Victoria debated a motion supporting the prohibition of same-sex marriage two years ago. Many of our biggest churches, although not in favour of same-sex marriage, were actively trying to stop the debate and vote from taking place because they saw it as

damaging their “brand” in the communities they were trying to reach. They recognised the cost of being perceived as a bunch of nay-sayers who were always coming out against things. “Christians are against sex before marriage. They are against abortion. They are against drinking.” Go back a generation and it was “Christians are against dancing, going to movies or wearing make-up.” It is a widespread perception, and unfortunately, it has often been well earned.

In tonight’s second bible reading, we heard the Apostle Paul’s list of exhortations to the church at Rome. There’s actually about thirty statements in this list, and it reads a bit like Paul’s summary manifesto for Christian behaviour, Paul’s list of the things that Christians should be known for. There are a number of things that you will notice as you read it through a few times, and one that most grabbed my attention is the overwhelmingly positive thrust of it. There is little or no sense here that the followers of Jesus should be those whose behaviour is defined by what they don’t do, what they abstain from, what they take stands against. It might be a common perception of Christians nowadays, but Paul’s list is nothing like that.

What Paul is doing here is fleshing out what he said in the reading we heard last week. He encouraged us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God and he warned us not to conform ourselves to the standards of this world, but to let God transform us inwardly by a complete change of our minds. Now he is describing what we will look like if that happens.

Let love be genuine. Compete only in showing honour to one another. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who curse you. Overcome evil with good.

Another thing that you may notice as you read it through a few times is the amount it has in common with the words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount. Both speak of the importance of humility, of hungering for righteousness, of peacemaking, of persevering under persecution. And most notably they share an almost identical teaching on how to respond to those who hate you. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” says Jesus. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them,” says Paul. “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”

By my count this passage contains a total of 22 positive exhortations and only 8 negative ones. And of the 8 negative ones, in four of them the emphasis falls at least as heavily on the positive opposite that they are paired with – eg. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” The four remaining are “do not be haughty”, “do not claim to be wiser than you are”, “do not repay anyone evil for evil”, and “never avenge yourselves”. They are not exactly the sort of abstentions for which Christians have made a name for themselves.

Wouldn’t it be great if when people heard that you were a Christian, instead of saying, “So you’re against same-sex marriage”, they said, “So you’re not stuck up or vengeful”? And wouldn’t it be even better if the first things that came to their minds were things like love, peace, patience, perseverance, compassion and hospitality? Wouldn’t it be great if we were known more for what we stand for than what we stand against? The culture of God will be a lot closer to being fulfilled when the church is known for the joyous and life-giving things it does and the divisive and destructive things it abstains from, instead of for getting it the other way around.

Now that of course is all very easy to say. The real question is, “How do we go about growing into that vision?” Paul has started off by saying, “Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind.” But complete changes of the mind don’t come easily, do they? The standards of the world around us have been imprinted into us ever since we were babies. In our day, unlike Paul’s, those values are now constantly reinforced using the most sophisticated and seductive media and marketing strategies. And as we’ve seen with the ‘no’ ad this past week, those same strategies can be employed to reinforce a nasty negative approach to religious morality too. However much you might hunger for a completely renewed mind, unless you become a hermit, the ways of your old mind are still going to be in your face pretty much every hour of every day.

We may well be a group of people who are committed to that complete change of mind and to supporting one another in living out the fruits of that renewed mind, the sort of fruits Paul lists here, but we generally only see each other for a couple of hours a week and the marketers are at us all the time. In Paul’s day, not only did people not have to cope with the sophisticated marketing of competing values, but the church met together daily to pray and learn and break bread together. We have probably a greater need for gathering to nurture our growth in faith and renewed values, and less opportunity to do it.

So where is the good news? If these values that Paul lists are just a matter of trying a bit harder than non-Christians to be a bit nicer, then I for one don’t hear any good news in that. That just sounds like a lot of effort for very little reward. And it doesn’t sound like a complete renewal of our minds – it just sounds a mixture of repression and play acting. I think that Paul is talking about something a lot more radical than that.

The complete renewing of your mind is made possible by surrendering yourself to the grace and mercy of God made known and available in Jesus the Christ. It is a possibility that you are baptised into. But although there may be some real changes that happen right there at that beginning point, the complete inner transformation comes about over a period of time and requires our active cooperation and participation. In the gospel reading we heard (Matthew 16:21-28) Jesus spoke of how we only find true life when we let go of the life we have. Cling onto the life you have and it’s all you’ll ever have. The greatest obstacle to our freedom is our tendency to cling onto our chains.

If we can let go and follow Jesus in the pathways of transformation, we will be renewed within, and we will see these sorts of fruits that Paul speaks of growing within us. That doesn’t mean that there is no place for disciplined work on our part. We will be a lot more successful in surrendering to the Holy Spirit’s transformative work in us if we are honestly facing up to who we are now and how far we have to go.

Try taking this passage and reciting it in the first person so that you can listen to it as a personal manifesto for your life and see how it fits.

I am a person who rejoices in hope.

I am patient in suffering, and I persevere in prayer.

I contribute to the needs of others, and I extend hospitality to strangers.

I bless those who persecute me; I bless and do not curse them.

I am not haughty, but I associate with the lowly.

I do not claim to be wiser than I am.

I do not repay anyone evil for evil.

As you do that, you will probably have no trouble identifying where the clashes are, the bits that are still pipe-dreams at the moment. Don't beat yourself up over those things. That's not the point. These are all non-conformist qualities and the world has been shaping you in opposite directions all your life. So don't beat yourself up, but don't cover them up either. Take them to prayer. Offer them to God and hunger and thirst for transformation. Talk about them honestly with friends who can be trusted to be honest with you and support you in your desire to follow Jesus.

If enough of us are doing that together, we can together create a sub-culture that truly supports one another in the renewal of our minds, the transformation of our hearts, and the growth of true love, mercy, peace, compassion and hospitality. Such a sub-culture is called a church, a little colony of the culture of God. And if we truly begin to become such a church, and to reflect the values and characteristics described in Paul's list, we will actually look less and less like the fearful, repressive, conspiracy-theorists of last week's 'no' ad, and more and more like the Jesus whose joyous acceptance and positive affirmation of all that is of life and love drew crowds of people flocking to him, saying "Yes, yes, yes!"