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Author's Note

Innovation often leads to change. Change is often resisted. Innovators are not often welcome. Though innovation is the doorway to discovery, it is sometimes difficult to get the door open! Change always seems alien. It is easily rejected. Innovators are often lonely. Resisters easily draw a crowd. It is no wonder that the status quo is so popular! But innovation is a community service. The innovator moves forward by seeking out and sharing with colleagues. Conformists are the peer-oriented resisters who hide behind tradition. The elegant innovators are those who rise above quantitative assessment of bias to open up new territory—with their colleagues—to demonstrate the values of change. These are the elegant nonconformists.

Abstract

Nonconformity in the context of an academic award ceremony is discussed. Being a functional member of the community of Christ is to be prized over self-serving individualism; peer influence is to be evaluated as contributing to unhelpful conformity. Elegance is expressed through a sense of community, where values of nonconformism are realized through shared respect for excellence. *An unpublished manuscript written by Ted Ward for an address at an award's ceremony in 1970.*

Once upon a time, the most important thing in a young person's life was pleasing mother and father, aunt and uncle, grandmother, pastor, pastor's wife, teacher, principal, and even the kindly old policeman on the corner. Decisions in life were made to please and honor the elders and the formal representatives of the society.

Today it's a whole new ballgame. Today American young people make their decisions on a different basis. Today, what counts most is what others of their own age say. This shift has been observed by many scholars and through many studies, for example, a survey commissioned by Youth for Christ International and carried out by the Institute for Research in Human Learning at Michigan State University, inquired into the way values in young people's lives are related to what other people value. Overwhelmingly the people who "count" the most are peers—other young people. The outlook of youth, from the decisions about "right" and "wrong" behavior to the decisions about what college to attend, is conditioned and often determined by influences from the peer sub-culture. And we find no significant variation from this generalization, even among the church-affiliated young people. Especially among 15-30 year olds, the peer sub-culture is the predominant source of values, standards, and bases for decision-making. In a peer-oriented society, the pressures for conformity become irresistible.

"Excellence" is just one more variation from the norm that must be discouraged. A completely peer-oriented culture would likely regard and honor convocation as an archaeological relic.

On many campuses academic honors and even athletic honors are being de-emphasized. Honoring those who excel would be even more rare if it were not for one small factor: we still cling to *individualism*, one dominant carry-over from the historical American.

Yes, even in the emerging peer-oriented society, good old-fashioned individualism still holds. This is the individualism that has served the nation very well in matters of problem-solving on the frontier. It also relates well to entrepreneurial technology. Thus we still guard individualism as if it were the Holy Grail. Even Christians have a hard time becoming the community of Christ because we are so committed to lone-wolf individualism.

These two dominant characteristics, *peer orientation* and *individualism*, each have good and bad features. Consider: *peer orientation* tends toward a sense of community, but tends toward conformity; *individualism* allows nonconformity but traditionally discourages community. The dominant characteristics of the emerging American society are clearly in conflict. In other words, the contemporary society, especially the youth sub-culture, is unstable. The tenuous balance cannot long remain. The two dominant counter-forces (peer orientation and individualism) cannot balance each other very long. There are three possible resolutions: (1) we might swing toward a more fragmented, disaffiliated, self-centered individualism; or (2) by contrast, we could move toward a more communal and more standardized society (standardized largely by majority consent to an enforced conformity).

Hopefully, there is a third possibility: (3) a social system could emerge in which the values of peer orientation are fulfilled through a sense of community in which the values of nonconformity are actualized in an increased respect for excellence. I cannot imagine the contemporary American society encouraging this third possibility. But I do see the possibility of appropriate leadership emerging from among the people of the church.

The body of believers—the community of the redeemed (more properly, the church of Jesus Christ) embodies and reconciles the two conflicting trends in contemporary society: peer orientation and individualism. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have a grip on one significant way to resolve the contemporary conflict. We celebrate it through exercises such as this one today. We have gathered here to recognize some of the nonconformists in our community whose talents, gifts, and energies are such that they open new doors and set the pace.

A society of extreme peer-orientation would seek to reshape or even to punish those we honor today. On the other hand, a society of extreme individualists could not even gather itself to provide a recognition—nor would it care to do so.

One word of caution: we must be concerned about what sorts of excellence we honor. What we honor must be consistent with the mission and the goals of Christ. To honor irrelevant achievements and obsolete skills is unworthy of the cause of Christ. For example, I don't see why we should honor high GPAs unless they indicate valid, honestly motivated, intellectual development. But then, I don't believe in honors for perfect attendance either, nor for Miss Peanut butter of 1970. What sorts of irrelevancies and anachronisms there may be in today's exercises must be a constant matter of study and concern for the committee sponsoring this occasion. It is not enough to decide who gets the honors; a more basic question is the matter of what honors make sense in terms of the mission and goals of the church Jesus Christ—the community of the redeemed.

Those we honor today are members of our community (no matter how shaky it may be); these we honor are our brothers and sisters. We honor them because they have excelled. In their excellence they are true nonconformists—*elegant* nonconformists. Their achievements do not demean the rest of us, because we are all part of the same body. Through their excellence they bring honor to our whole community. We do not intend to hold them back.

We can recognize, accept, and enjoy the true basis of our conformity—not to each other, nor to the little sub-culture we have created—but to our Lord, himself. We can accept the encouragement of the saints: starting with the Apostle Paul and continuing down through the ages right up to your roommate, the saintly role of exhorting toward excellence is a fundamental factor in the Christian community. Work toward a sense of community through the fellowship of believers! Don't let your American culture of individualism isolate you from the identity, the sharing, and the gathering together of the body of Christ.

Christ's work in your life and in the church constitutes the lifestyle that emphasizes the best of the values of community and the best of the values of individualism.

Thus the person and work of Jesus Christ constitute the major validation of our ceremony today, ***honoring the elegant nonconformists.***