



The Elegant Nonconformist¹

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Once upon a time the most important thing in the life of young people was pleasing their mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandmothers, pastors, teachers, principals, 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, most recently through a large study undertaken by researchers in the Institutes for Research in Learning at Michigan State University. Commissioned by Youth for Christ International, a survey research inquired into the way values in young people's lives are related to what other people value. Overwhelmingly, the other people who count are peers—other young people. Today the outlook of youth, from what constitutes right and wrong behavior to where to go to college, is conditioned by influence from the peer sub-culture. And we find no significant variation from this generalization, even among the church-affiliated young people. The peer orientation of the youth sub-culture is strongly in evidence. Especially among the 15-30 year olds, the peer sub-culture is the 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 regard an honors 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 little factor: We still preserve individualism—one dominant hangover of the historical American.

Yes, even in the emerging peer-oriented society, good old American individualism still holds. This is the individualism that has served the nation very well in matters of the frontier and in matters of technology. 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 busy asserting our 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 forces conformity; *individualism* allows nonconformity but 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 would swing toward a more fragmented, disaffiliated, self-centered individualism; or (2) by contrast, we could swing toward a more communal and more standardized society (standardized largely by majority consent to an enforced conformity).

¹ Ted Ward. The Elegant Nonconformist. Address to Honors Convocation, Wheaton College, December 2, 1970. Subsequently adapted for publication: See Ted Ward. The Elegant Nonconformists. *Common Ground Journal*. Vol.10 (1) Fall 2012, pp. 39-41

Hopefully there is a third possibility: A system could emerge in which the values of peer orientation are satisfied through a sense of community and the values of non-conformism are realized through a respect of excellence. I cannot see the contemporary American society as promising this third possibility. But I do see the possibility in the church of Jesus Christ.

The body of believers—the community of the redeemed (more properly, the *church*)—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 own community--whose talents, gifts, and energies are such that they 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 individualism could not even gather itself to provide a recognition—nor would it care to.

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 GPA's unless they indicate valid, honestly motivated, intellectual growth. But then I don't believe in honors for perfect attendance either, or for Miss Peanut Butter of 1970. What sorts of irrelevancies and anachronisms there may be even 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 of 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 put down 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 or to the little sub-culture we have created—but to our Lord himself. We can accept the encouragement of the saints: Starting with 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 sense 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 the work of Jesus Christ constitute the major validation of our ceremony today, honoring the elegant nonconformists.