

Acts 16:1-15

Conforming For A Cause

Learning Objectives:

- Our goal as believers is to continually conform more to the image of Christ.
- Sometimes, we are also called to reduce barriers to people hearing the Gospel by conforming to certain aspects of society.

Pray for your time together as a group.

? In what ways have you tried to “blend in” before (e.g. school, work, on a team, etc.)? Do you think you were successful? Why or why not?

Read Out Loud:

Though we typically dive right into our main passage from the start of our study, in this one we’re going to do things a bit differently. Let’s take some time to think about conformity as a believer at its roots—being conformed to the image of Christ.

Leaders’ Note: If you have more introverts in your group, this would be a great time to divide into smaller pairs or trios to look at the following three passages and have initial discussion about the two questions that immediately follow. We recommend then having additional discussion of the same questions as a whole group. If your group is more extroverted, consider reading the passages out loud and discussing as a large-group from the start.

Passages to Read Out Loud (Or In Small Groups):

Romans 8:22-30 (NIV)

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image

of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

2 Cor. 3:12-18 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Philippians 3:17-21 (NIV)

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Leaders' Note: We're providing these passages in context to help with discussion, but please steer people away from bunny trails regarding issues like predestination, etc. While those are beneficial topics to discuss, encourage them to do so outside of your small group time. We are focusing on conformity in this study.



What does conformity mean in these contexts?

Possible Answers: Our ultimate "conformity" should be into the image of Christ! Pursuing that our lives are a greater reflection of His.

Definition of Conformity from Merriam-Webster: 1: correspondence in form, manner, or character: agreement <behaved in conformity with her beliefs> 2: an act or instance of conforming 3: action in accordance with some specified standard or authority <conformity to social custom>



What does it look like for us to be "conformed" or "transformed" into the image of Christ?

Possible Answers: Reflecting His character, goals, and attributes. Demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit as He works in our lives (love, joy, peace, patience, etc.). Glorifying God in all that we do.

Leaders' Note: Depending your group, you may already touch on this in the question above.

? In what ways is this different or similar to how you've viewed conformity in the past?

Possible Answers: All conformity is not bad. Sometimes we use it as a negative word—want to pursue individualism or uniqueness instead.

? How can conforming have positive consequences (either specifically from these passages or in life in general)? Negative?

Possible Answers: Positive: It ultimately exalts/glorifies Christ! It helps us connect better with people.

Negative: It can cause us to compromise on those moral areas where we should hold firmly--areas where we need to uphold the truth of the Gospel, even if it isn't widely approved.

Read Out Loud: With this perspective as our foundation, let's now look at our passage from Acts and see another example of conformity.

"As we are conformed to the image of Christ, he is made more and more the center of all things."
~John Piper

Read Out Loud: Acts 16:1-15 (NIV)

¹Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. ²The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

⁶Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹²From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Leaders' Note: Verses 6 and 7 could raise some interesting questions regarding the disciples being prevented from sharing the Gospel in certain regions. Ajith Fernando provides us with a bit of guidance in The NIV Application Commentary: Acts, "God's strange providence in the way he prohibited Paul from going to places where he wanted to go (16:6-8) shows us that, while it is right for humans to plan and have visions, those plans must be submitted to the will of God and be open to his veto. [See Prov. 16:9] Paul submitted to God's will and was also receptive to his voice. ... Just as Paul was guided by God after a period of uncertainty, we too can trust God to guide us if we earnestly seek his will." (pg. 436)

? In chapter 15, we read a lengthy dispute about how believers did *not* need to be circumcised. Can anyone give a summary of what happened in that chapter? Why do you think that Paul would now circumcise Timothy (16:2)?

Summary: Paul and Barnabas faced a disagreement they were having with the teachers of the church in Antioch. The teachers had been adding circumcision as a requirement for Gentile conversion to Christianity. Paul and Barnabas brought this issue to the other apostles, and they agreed that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, though certain other cultural practices (like abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols) might be honored as a way to prevent fellow believers from struggling in their faith.

Possible Answer: His circumcision was not necessary for his faith, but would allow him to be a more effective witness to those he was ministering to. This would also prevent the distraction of side-debates about Timothy when they shared the Gospel. See the sidebar for more information.

? Besides conforming physically (Timothy's circumcision), we also see Paul's travel plans disrupted several times due to redirection by the Holy Spirit. In what other ways have we seen Paul guided by the Holy Spirit? How have you personally been led by the Holy Spirit?

Possible Answers: Paul has often had visions, received guidance through other trusted voices (like the elders from Acts 15), looked to the Old Testament (Scripture), learned from past experiences.

"It was Timothy's mixed parentage that made Paul decide to circumcise him before taking him along as his junior colleague. By Jewish law Timothy was a Jew, because he was the son of a Jewish mother, but because he was uncircumcised he was technically an apostate [violator of the covenant] Jew. If Paul wished to maintain his links with the synagogue, he could not be seen to countenance [admit as acceptable] apostasy. He set his face implacably against any move to circumcise Gentile believers like Titus (Gal. 2:3-5), but Timothy was in a different situation." New International Commentary On The New Testament: Acts, pg. 304

? We can approach different aspects of our faith as either “open” or “close-handed” issues when viewing them through the lens of conformity. What might be some examples of open issues? Closed? How do we know the difference?

Possible Answers: Open--How we should partake in Communion. What type of music should be played during services.

Closed--The core of the Gospel--that Jesus is the Son of God who died to atone for our sins and make us justified with our holy God. That salvation comes through Him alone. Aspects of God’s character, e.g. that He is both gracious and just.

We can know the difference by studying Scripture, prayer, seeking wise counsel/church leadership, and like the disciples demonstrated, listening to the promptings and leadings of the Holy Spirit.

? What’s at stake when we compromise on open vs. close-handed issues?

Possible Answers: For Open issues, we can help people get over barriers they’ve encountered before to hearing the Gospel message (past bad experiences, hurtful situations, etc.). For Closed--We are at risk of losing the truth of the Gospel and diluting its message.

? How do we strike the balance between conforming for the sake of the Gospel vs. becoming “of” the world (John 17:14-15)?

Possible Answer: We need to check our hearts! Are we conforming for the sake of our personal comfort, preference, or prerogative? Or, are we meeting people where they’re at? We also can look to the Holy Spirit for guidance.

? Optional: At Hope, we have certain aspects of our culture adjusted to intentionally reach our unique demographic (even within specific ministries!). In what ways have you seen conformity “for” the Gospel done well (at Hope and elsewhere)? Where have you seen this done poorly?

Leaders’ Note: Be careful that this doesn’t become a church-bashing question!

? What are ways that we can (or should) acclimate to those we want to minister to?

Possible Answers: Those “open-handed” issues. Things that may make us culturally uncomfortable at times (e.g. wearing a skirt if you’re a woman ministering in Africa). Being open-minded about other styles of worship (that are still beneficial and God-honoring).

? In what ways can conforming actually hinder our ministry (personally and corporately)?

Possible Answers: If we seem too wishy-washy about what we actually believe. If we say and do two different things. If we’re causing other people (or ourselves!) to stumble into areas of temptation/sin.

For Discussion And Accountability

? In what ways are you being conformed to the image of Christ? Are there areas where He is calling you to greater conformity?

? Are there areas in your life, whether generally or in ministry specifically, where you are conforming in a way that hinders the Gospel? What steps can you take to course-correct this week?