

“The Five-Question Quiz”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – March 13, 2022

Philippians 3:17-4:1

It’s just five questions. It will take you less than two minutes. And faster than you can say, “Cheesy Internet quiz with no scientific value whatsoever,” you’ll know which dead president shares your pessimism or which old-school comic-book superhero happens to have everything in common with you.

“Congratulations, you have anger issues like The Hulk.” “You’re prone to patriotic acts of heroism like Captain America.” This is clearly information that you can’t live without. Plus, through the power of social networking, you can share the results with everyone on the planet!

The popularity of these five-question quizzes on the Web has even drawn in the Christian crowd. It’s common to see a quiz that allows you to discover which Bible character you most closely resemble. Although if you’re well-versed in these things, you may have noticed that the answers are always positive. “You have a heart for worship like David!” No one, it seems, ever gets aligned with the likes of Saul or Judas, even though we’ve all known plenty of people who fit that mold.

Shouldn’t we find it a bit ironic that such things are so popular in a culture that upholds — even idolizes — the idea of individuality? In 21st-century America, originality is the ideal. Write some book for business leaders about “breaking the mold” or being an “outlier,” and you’re bound to make millions. But conformity isn’t cool. Originality is everything, right? So why the popularity of such foolish fun on Facebook?

This may be a stretch, but perhaps our interest in such things reveals something inherent to our humanity; perhaps it gives us a clue as to how we’re wired to live. Individuality may be the cultural ideal, but if you take a tour through Scripture, you’ll see that it’s far from what God created us for. Yes, we Americans love to think of ourselves as unique individuals; we’re all precious snowflakes. However, Ecclesiastes tells us, “WHAT HAS BEEN, WILL BE AGAIN; WHAT HAS BEEN DONE, WILL BE DONE AGAIN; THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN” (1:9, NIV).

According to God’s word, being truly unique isn’t even a possibility. Individuality is a myth. Rather, you and I are creatures of conformity; we are inherently imitators of the world around us. Imitation is how we learn to be human at every level. We learn to speak by imitating our parents. We learn to walk by watching our older siblings. Later in life we create our own “unique” identity by imitating our teenage friends in high school and following our particular clique in college. Finally, we set certain people in our profession on a pedestal and mimic their movements. And, of course, whether we’ll admit to it or not, we imitate our spouse. Why do you think so many older, married couples look like twins?

Many of the things we conform to are innocent, such as a Southern drawl or the way one holds a fork. But others have lasting ramifications. Our work ethic, our attitude toward spouse and kids, and even our church attendance are things we pick up from others. Even really nasty things such as some sinful habit or a heart of discontent and cruelty can be the byproduct of bad conformity to someone around us.

We are what we imitate. Each of us is a mosaic of influences resembling many people in our past and present. We conform to the image of others, and others, right now, are conforming to us.

We are called to imitate, not innovate.

This understanding brings great weight to the words of Paul in the book of Philippians, chapter 3. Here the apostle gives a loving but firm command. It’s one we’ve heard him offer time and again in his letters to the church. Paul writes, “BROTHERS, JOIN IN IMITATING ME, AND KEEP YOUR EYES ON THOSE WHO WALK ACCORDING TO THE EXAMPLE YOU HAVE IN US” (*Philippians 3:17, ESV*).

Paul doesn’t ask us to be innovators but imitators. Innovation in Christian confession and Christian life so easily leads to foolish and meaningless excesses and misdirection. We can see this in the Prosperity Gospel, Nationalism theology, and the rise of the KKK. We hear it in the words of “The South Will Rise Again!” Paul instead commends imitation as the way to go. Paul acknowledges that we are creatures of conformity. What Paul is telling the Philippians — what he’s telling us — is simply this: “You’re going to copy. You’re going to mimic someone’s steps and mirror someone’s movements when it comes to learning this Christian life. That’s how we roll as human beings. So, if

you're going to imitate somebody, go ahead and imitate me. Follow me as I follow Jesus." Imitation is key to the Christian life.

All of this begs a few questions. First, who are you imitating? From whom are you learning what it means to live as a follower of Jesus in this messed-up world? Is it your spouse, who always seems to be five steps ahead of you spiritually? Do you have a Christian friend whose faith feels more mature? Are you soaking up the wisdom of fellow Bible Study members? Are you following the pattern of a faith-filled parent? Or are you simply asking yourself at every turn, "What would Pastor do?"

Here's the second question. Who is imitating you? If you have children, this one is easy to answer. But your sphere of influence extends beyond the home. Who in your life knows that you're a Christian and, thereby, whose understanding of Christianity is influenced by your words, your actions and your attitude? Who is learning from you? That's a scary one to wrestle with, isn't it?

The bottom line is that if there is no one for you to follow, then there is a void of influence in your life that must be filled. Likewise, if there's something going on that leaves you feeling completely unworthy of having any kind of following, that's an issue that needs to be addressed with some wise, Christian counsel.

Why is this so important?

The Scriptures tell us that as we imitate the likes of Paul, as we learn from the faith and life of our brothers and sisters around us, the end result isn't a bunch of little Christian clones but a community of people who resemble Christ. In his incarnation and earthly ministry, Jesus not only assumed the role of our Savior by taking our sin as his own on the cross and defeating the power of death in his resurrection, but **in his living and breathing, in his walking and talking, in his healing and loving and perfect commandment-keeping, he also became our example.** Jesus demonstrated for the world, what it means to be fully human: to be right with God the Father, filled with the Holy Spirit and completely in step with the rhythms and patterns of life in our world.

Romans tells us that all those who are baptized into his name are not only forgiven of sins, right with the Father and filled with the Spirit but also have embarked on a lifelong journey of being "CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE" of Jesus (Romans 8:29). That is, we will slowly but surely start acting like him, loving like him and resembling him.

By imitating one another in the faith, we begin to resemble and reflect the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. For those who like big, theological words, another way to put it is that imitation is key to our sanctification.

Here's what this looks like.

Let's say you're a mom who aims for obedience to God's word in everything you do at home or at work. Your daughter imitates you as she starts a family of her own. Together, you resemble — not duplicate — Jesus.

Or perhaps your best friend has all the talent in the world but at every turn gives the glory to God. You imitate him. Together, you resemble the humility of Christ.

Human beings are creatures of conformity; we are inherent imitators. The question is not if your life will resemble someone else's but whose life yours will resemble. Knowing this, let's embrace the instruction found in 3 *John*: "DEAR FRIEND, DO NOT IMITATE WHAT IS EVIL BUT WHAT IS GOOD" (v. 11, NIV).

As of now, there's no quick, five-minute quiz that can tell us how well we're doing in becoming like Christ. In the meantime, perhaps one way to gauge your godliness is to simply take a quick glance at what's in front of you and a short look at things behind you. Whose footsteps are you following in today? What's coming from those who are walking in yours? Chances are, from time to time you'll be convicted by what you see — or by what you don't see.

But take heart. If you don't like what's in front of you or the things behind that resemble you, simply look to the cross at our Savior and example, Jesus Christ. He has graciously forgiven you already. Now go and do the same. Amen.