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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

SAUL BECOMES PAUL

By Ron Allen

The Schoolmaster's name was Mr. Malison, and never was there a schoolmaster with a more rigorous sense of duty. He kept a horsehide strap on his desk; its tip cut into small fingers, soaked in brine and hardened over a fire. The slightest error in reading, writing or spelling he accounted for with a stroke of this whip around the legs of his pupils. He believed in law, did Mr. Malison. He saw the need for discipline and justice. To his way of thinking, the best way to advance these values was with the horsehide. Each stroke was an administration of righteousness. Every error was deserving of God's wrath. In laying on the whip, Mr. Malison saw himself as God's co-worker. As for his students, every day was for them a cycle of terror, strife, suffering and deliverance at the closing bell.

Mr. Truffey brought his twin grandsons to the school. The two boys were examples of what poverty will do to human beings. They were emaciated, half-clothed and pitiful. "Give them their whips," Truffey told the Master. "It's no use sparin'the rod and spoilin'the child." Mr. Malison looked pleased with this authorization. It meant he could more wholeheartedly prosecute his life's mission.

The first thing Malison did was appoint one of the older boys to watch over the twins. This was a mistake. At a time when Malison was not looking, some other boys began to tease the Truffey twins. A scuffle broke out and Malison looked up just in time to see Andrew Truffey hit an older boy in the face. Without bothering to discover the sequence of events that led up to this misdemeanour, the Master laid hold of Andrew Truffey. Taking his head between his knees, he proceeded to thrash him with the horsehide strap.

In his indignation and agony, the little fellow managed to twist his head around far enough to one side to sink his teeth into his persecutor's leg. Malison yelped and stood up, throwing Andrew Truffey to the floor, where he lay without moving. Everyone could see something bad had happened to the boy. His bony little leg appeared all wrong. The knee-cap was out of place. Now, Mr. Malison looked scared.

For weeks afterward, Andrew Truffey lay in his bed at his grandfather's house. Every day, Mr. Malison called in and visited. Slowly, the patient recovered, but it was clear that he would always be a cripple.

When the school year was almost over, Andrew Truffey came back to school. He was on crutches, and skinnier than

ever. Mr. Malison rose from his seat and advanced to meet him. The boy put out his hand to greet his schoolmaster, but the movement made him lose his balance and he began to fall. Malison was quick, and he grabbed Truffey, carried him to his seat, and then returned to his desk at the front of the room where he buried his head in his hands. At the back of the room a whisper was heard: "Look at the Master, he's cryin'."



...he became his patron and practiced the healing art of kindness.

From that day onward, Mr. Malison seemed different. He was less harsh in discipline, and less frequent. Though he remained Truffey's schoolmaster, he became his sponsor and benefactor. He learned to love the former victim of his justice. Instead of correcting the boy with blows, he became his patron and practiced the healing art of kindness.

The renovation of Murdoch Malison did not go unnoticed in the community. By and large it was seen as an improvement; he

was better for it. It was not as if the former Malison was *bad*. He wasn't. But having the chance to observe the change, folk regarded the newer version of the schoolmaster as preferable to the old one.

As a general rule, change is viewed as a good thing when it occurs in individuals and groups that upset the civil order: change in criminals, subversives, or traitors. But people find change less commendable for themselves, especially when they know themselves to be decent and God-fearing. Even so, some of the finest things about life as we now know it have come about—not because of adjustments obtained among ne'er-do-wells—but because of changes that happened in the lives of persons who were already seen as upright, already respectable.

Perhaps the best known conversion in history is that of Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ. His transformation was not from atheism to theism; from rank paganism to the worship of Yahweh. He was already a monotheist. He worshipped the God of creation and redemption;

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen


‘God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

In my home state, a man has been released from jail after serving fifteen years for the slaughter of teen-aged girl. It was for good reason that he has been set free. Good people, believing the evidence against him was flawed, worked for years to expose poor police work. A judge has ‘set aside’ the man’s conviction, but this does not mean the person is exonerated. Yes, he is out of jail, but he is not yet deemed innocent. That will require probably more years of judicial process with the ‘quashing’ of the original verdict only a possibility. Then, if he hopes to be compensated for wrongful conviction and imprisonment, he faces many more legal battles.

Compare God’s response to the world’s wrongful verdict against Jesus. Bear in mind, the world marshalled its most potent, most lethal weapons against Jesus. He was falsely arrested, a victim of official corruption. He was robbed of justice and shamed before his own people. Levels of false dealing not normally tolerated in the

‘system’ were encouraged against him.

But God? What was God’s retort? He did not ‘set aside’ Jesus’ conviction. He made it utterly null and void; he negated world opinion that was against Jesus. He dismantled the disgrace by raising his Son from death. He overturned the humiliation by installing him into the place of highest honor. A more comprehensive undoing of a great wrong is impossible to imagine. The resurrection of Jesus was the cancellation and reversal of the processes that cooperated in his death. By raising Jesus from the grave God invalidated the verdict that nailed Jesus to the cross; he quashed the human consensus and replaced it with the values Jesus lived and died for.

Now, we know what is supremely worthwhile. Now, we are aware of ideals worthy of our utmost effort; truths and scruples more valuable than life itself; principles that death cannot outlast or overcome. They are embodied in the One who God has exalted. Let us therefore recognize him as *our* Lord and Christ. 

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the God who revealed himself to Abraham and his descendants.

Saul was highly schooled in the religion of his people. He was taught by one of Israel’s leading theologians. He was a promising young Jew, one of Israel’s best and brightest. Saul knew with utmost conviction that his people were God’s people. Familiar with their history as he was, he knew that God was Israel’s patron. If the nations were to come under the rulership of God, they could do so by learning and adopting the tenets of Israel’s religion. When he heard of the new sect known as the WAY, whose adherents professed loyalty—not to the traditions of the elders but to Jesus of Nazareth—he was filled with righteous indignation. This bunch of dissenters needed to be stopped!

One member of the WAY, a man named Stephen, earned the Sanhedrin’s condemnation and was stoned accordingly. Saul was there, and he agreed with Stephen’s fate. Perhaps the event helped Saul discover his life’s purpose—to champion the religion of his fathers and defend it from heretics like Stephen. He later offered his services to that end. The Sanhedrin never

sought *him* out; he volunteered. He was thus permitted to make arrests and to bring dissenters to Jerusalem for trial. His zeal was notable. Words used to describe the spirit he brought to his task are of a kind to describe the ravaging behavior of a wild beast.

So began Saul’s action against the disciples of Jesus. It was an aggressive campaign, which doubtless caused fear and apprehension among the believers. There is no evidence that Saul had any doubt as to the rightness of his course and his methods. His was a sacred task. It was born of unquestioned confidence that he was acting from a position of truth.

Religious certainty of this kind exists today. It trades in absolutes; its currency is authority, conformity and indoctrination. It has its attractions. Subscribers, knowing they are absolutely right, find it easy to identify who is wrong. The non-conformist is wrong. He is the enemy of truth; the enemy of God. The very existence of the non-conformist outlines the task for devotees, which is to announce the truth, proclaim the historic understandings, declare the code, expose and condemn those who depart from it.

Being convinced that he was God’s agent, Saul did not →

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hesitate to use inhumane methods. Contemporary proponents of the same religious fervor also distinguish themselves by intimidation and bullying. Sadly, there are Christians able to recount their own trauma when their community was overrun by zealots who set about purging it of persons deemed to have fallen into 'error' or who were 'not clear' on the fundamentals. Secret meetings, kangaroo courts without regard to due process, transparency, compassion, tolerance or respect ensued. These virtues being surplus to requirements when dealing with the devil and his kin.

Some think they do God's will when they preach hatred, when they demonstrate with placards and slogans consigning homosexuals and and free-choice advocates to hell. William Temple said: "Not all religion is good. If our conception of God is wrong, the more religious we get the more dangerous we are to ourselves and to one another." Saul was devout—and dangerous. Where there is a 'godliness' consisting mainly in adherence to an ideology, there soon follows the dehumanization and demonizing of those who fail to conform, justification of a militant response to heresy, then persecution.

Having obtained authorization to pursue heresy in Damascus, Saul made his way there. As he neared the city, he was struck down by a blinding light and a voice asked: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). It was *the* critical event in Saul's life.

Within a short space of time, several things became clear to him.

- (1) Jesus of Nazareth was alive.
- (2) This Jesus was the Christ, friend of those whom he (Saul) had been pursuing.
- (3) His persecution of Christ's disciples was a terrible wrong; his religious ardour had not been *for* God but *against* him.

By means of his question, *Why do you persecute me?* Christ lanced the zealot's soul open. In his very being, Saul's values, benchmarks and priorities were interrogated. The error and futility of his crusade was exposed. He realized that people he had despised and tried hard to destroy were in mysterious fellowship with God's Son.

If ever one who believed in God was set to benefit from radical alteration, it was this man Saul. If ever the world was set to gain from change in perspective of a religious man, it was at the moment of Saul's enlightenment.

Consider the contrast between Saul's method of bringing about change in people, and Christ's method. Saul used tools of influence which make sense to those who think of God in terms of law, regulation, judgment, command, boundaries, limits, penalties and punishments. But Christ's intervention in Saul's life, though dramatic, was not compulsive. It was gracious. He was respected, not violated. He was spoken to as a person. Christ appealed to his humanity; he called on him to examine his work in terms of its impact on his fellow men and women. Was he really doing them good? He was moved to evaluate himself by love's measure, and thereby the way was

left open for him to respond in love. If my religion consists chiefly in my response to embargos, threats and enforcements, I cannot love God; I can only fear him.

As a result of his experience on the road to Damascus, Saul learned to love the God revealed to him in Jesus. What a change it made. Grasped by the realization that God had set his seal of approval on Jesus by raising him from death, Saul recognized God's glory in Christ's suffering and service. A new idea took hold. He saw that God does not make himself known through those who Lord it over their fellows; those who hunt and harass them to procure their allegiance through intimidation. God is not in the one that brandishes edicts and rulings, who menaces mankind with denunciations and excommunications. Rather God is to be known in the one who gives himself to humankind in its every shape, cast and condition—in the diseased and disowned, the despised and abandoned. He who values the degenerate, the weak, the foolish and the irreligious more than religion itself—he is God's man. The love of God is in him.

So Saul—champion of Judaism—became Paul, servant of Jesus Christ. No longer did he believe that God's truth for all time was laid down in the sacred texts and traditions of Israel. No longer did he consider godliness as assent to a set of doctrinal propositions. Instead, he lived and taught godliness as the reception of and participation in the life of God's Son Jesus. What a turnaround! Now, rather than badger and threaten his fellow man with force and fright, he placed himself at their disposal. Instead of being a man to avoid, a person to fear and hide from, Paul became a friend. Before the end of Acts nine, he is called 'brother.' Instead of ministering hurt and harm, he ministered life.

How does this apply to me? To you? Am I utterly committed to a set of ideas which I believe constitute the essential ingredients for a godly life? Do I consider it my high duty to persuade others to think as I do and warn them of consequences dire if they refuse to conform? Am I someone who makes others want to avoid me, or seek refuge from me? Or am I a follower of Jesus? Am I religious in a way that helps me to be every man's brother?

When Christians have earned a reputation for prejudice, anger and intolerance, it has not been because they were following Jesus. They were following an ideology. Murdoch Malison was all law and righteous wrath. He scared his pupils and scarred some of them for life.

Obedience to rules and doctrines is never enough. The law is too impersonal. "The meanest man I ever saw, always kept inside the law." Only devotion to God in the person of his Son enables loving service

"This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us, and we too ought to give our lives for others" (1 John 3:16).



How does this apply to me?


SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS SAUL

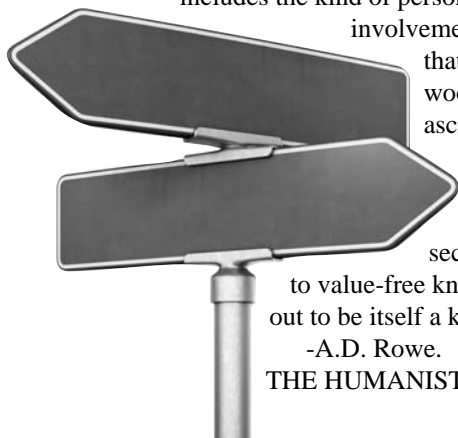
Current discussions about religion and culture are polarized by two extremes of secularist and religious fundamentalists. Secularist fundamentalism deems religion to be irrational and even inherently violent. Ostensibly arguing for a value-neutral, non-religious public square, secularists exclude religion from the public realm.

Religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, tends towards the opposite extreme by seeking utter clarity in the simplicity of religious truth and by imposing religious commitments and practices on those who either do not believe, or believe differently. Both views are short-sighted and largely ignorant of the hermeneutic nature of truth. We can get out of this fundamentalist battleground by first recognizing that our way of seeing things depends on many essential assumptions that we cannot 'prove' through experimentation. Therefore we cannot have an objective opinion. Nor does it mean at all that knowledge is merely subjective, but it does mean that objective knowledge

includes the kind of personal integration, involvement, and passion that dyed-in-the-wool secularists ascribe to the realm of the irrational. Hence the secularist pretence to value-free knowledge turns out to be itself a kind of faith.

-A.D. Rowe.

THE HUMANIST LENS. 



THE KINGDOM OR THE SYSTEM

Kingdom people are history makers. People who are still living in the false self, in the false world of illusion, are history stoppers. They just keep repeating. They're conformists, fearful people, and the nice, respectable proper thinkers of every age who think collectively and have no power to break through.

"Woe to you when the world speaks well of you," Jesus says (Luke 6:26). Kingdom reality is seeing life in a new way: things are not what they seem. It's not what you think. Only one thing is absolute. All else is relative and passing. **The system is the way people think when they don't think!** Kingdom thinking will never be commonly accepted. The system is very seductive and blinding.

-Richard Rohr. RADICAL GRACE. 



Our faith is not in words. Our faith is in a person. Our faith is in God who is revealing the divine self to us in the body of Christ. The word calls us into a personal dialogue, not a slavish idealization of words, not a rigid love affair with ideas. That is fundamentalism.

-Richard Rohr: RADICAL GRACE.

