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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

Things Ineffectual

By Ron Allen

England of the 18th Century was a place of prosperity, of elegant town squares and grand public buildings, magnificent country homes with beautiful gardens all peopled by gentlemen and ladies embodying the finest ideals of civility and human progress. At least that is the Georgian period of many history books. Lesser-known records of the period tell a different story. Most people in England at the time could neither read nor write. They worked for long hours for too little pay. They were frequently forced to beg, steal, or to deaden their bitter feelings with gin—the only grog cheap enough. “Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence,” was an advertisement, literally true.

The establishment looked on this teeming underclass with a mixture of fear and loathing. They gave them names. “Rabble,” was one; “Swinish multitude,” another. In 1787, an attempt was made to gauge the number of criminals in the London of George III. It was judged that 115,000 were living off the proceeds of crime in the city; one in eight. These included thieves, muggers, forgers, scavengers, bear-baiters, gypsies, and 50,000 prostitutes.

This finding helped fuel an impression among elites that a criminal mob was almost out of control. A heaving tsunami of crime was about to inundate the country. Legislators responded with draconian legislation to help retain the upper hand and preserve social order. Death by hanging was decided upon as the appropriate penalty for hundreds of offences. These included misdemeanors like poaching, appearing on a highway with a sooty face, cutting down an ornamental shrub, and posing as a gypsy. The hanging laws were drafted, not to protect human life, but to protect property. Needless to say, the laws were weighted against persons who owned no property. Nearly all of those who ended their days at the end of a rope came from among the ‘swinish multitude’, the desperate poor.

Georgian lawmakers were convinced that capital punishment would fill the recalcitrant lower classes with ‘moral awe.’ But steadfast faith that the immutability of the law and the certainty of its penalties, would produce contrition and uprightness among the reprehensibles, found no echoing sentiment within the target group. To the contrary, hundreds upon hundreds of inmates who made their final journey from Newgate Prison to Tyburn gallows were attended by thousands upon thousands of the working classes who physically and vocally supported them.

England’s poor gave their own meaning to the hangings.

They called hanging day, ‘Tyburn Fair.’ Public executions enabled them to display—not mortification, guilt, regret or grudging respect for the law. Not at all! Instead: insolence, contempt, obstinacy and rebellion multiplied. Tyburn Fair meant one thing to those whose trust was in the strong arm of the law, and something else to a body of human beings whose chief preoccupation in life was survival.

One group had enough means and time on their hands to read books, ponder and discuss moral questions; another group lived so close to the edge of starvation and illness or some other existential threat, that law and moral concerns were inscrutable and irrelevant mysteries. One class viewed themselves as moral guardians, protectors of the public good and confident in their view of things. The other class was absorbed with mundane issues of muscle and blood, how to scrape together a meal for the day, how to stay warm and keep the bailiff from coming to take their children to the workhouse. In the fourth chapter of his Roman letter, Paul the apostle is answering the question: How can a person be right with God? The only possible way is for the person to seek refuge in God’s grace and accept his gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus. He turns to Abraham to find support for his thesis knowing that fellow nationals look to Abraham as the prototypical righteous Jewish man. Paul is able to demonstrate that the patriarch did not become right with God in virtue of his being circumcised. Citing Genesis 15, he proves that Abraham was counted righteous by God *before* circumcision.

The argument is extended in Romans 4:13-15:

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless. Because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

If circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham’s being counted righteous, the law in its entirety has even less to do with his being right with God, since the law did not even come into existence until 430 years after Abraham.

David Irving, an Englishman, has achieved some notoriety for being a Holocaust Denier. He promotes the fiction that millions of European Jews who disappeared from the face of the earth under the Third Reich, died of natural causes.

Needless to say, Irving is regarded with disgust and anger by

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“So then king Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent” (Acts 26:19, 20).

Saul, Damascus bound, was clear as to the nature of his assignment. His job was to round up people of ‘The Way’ in that city, and bring them in chains to Jerusalem to face trial. He was a busy man with an important task. However, Jesus stopped him in the middle of it and gave him a different work to do. Not now, a zealous campaign against a dissident group within Judaism: Now, a mission taking in Israel and the whole world. Not now, an authorization from the Sanhedrin targeting a few: Instead, a divine appointment to the many.

Instead of fuming threats directed toward disciples of Jesus; instead of forcing them to blaspheme his name and return to the ‘official’ faith, Paul began his lifelong gospel enterprise: to urge both Jews and Gentiles to repent and believe in the God of Jesus, Christ. No more a grim, intimidating threat against a dissenting minority, warning them to conform or else. Rather, a message calling for soul-searching for everyone; pertinent equally to Israel as the Gentiles.

Indeed, the same message of grace for the chosen as for the unelected. As champion of Israel’s religion, Saul’s working policy with regard to those he persecuted was: forced re-education in the law of Moses. Not anymore! Jesus now formed the entire content of Paul’s preaching and teaching.

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the few survivors of the death camps and their families. In some European countries today, it is against the law to deny the Holocaust.

If Jewish outrage over Holocaust denial can be imagined, it may help us appreciate the outrage of many Jews when Paul, himself a Jew, made bold to say that the LAW, so central to the life of Israel, was powerless to justify anyone in the sight of God. Indeed, the chief expositors and exponents of the law in New Testament times taught the opposite. Scribes and Rabbis tried hard to instill in people’s minds, that the way to be right with God was to pay strict attention to every stipulation of the law. Thorough vigilance in this regard would enable the devotee to enter the life of God; he would attain righteousness. Paul argues that this much-recommended, watchful

Not all the other apostles shared Paul’s emphasis (see Acts 15). Some felt strongly that Gentile converts to Christ should be instructed in the Law. Not Paul. For him it was Jesus first and last.

Paul’s faithfulness to the charge he received personally from Jesus—to make him known not only to Jews but to the Gentiles—nettled some Jewish friends within and without the church. But having met Jesus, Paul realized that the religion of his father’s was not an end in itself. He saw that Christ was the supreme meaning of the law; the great purpose for which it had been given and to which it proceeded. He came to believe that Messiah did not come to heap kudos on the law’s custodians and bearers of the Messianic hope, but to shine light into a darkness inhabited by Israel that hoped, and nations that hoped not.

We who live millenniums after the gospel origins, who carry on its tradition, do well to remember that Jesus is the bread of life for us as well as for the world we inhabit. We stand in the same need of a Savior as do our neighbors who yet do not believe. The children of the household and the dogs who sniff for crumbs beneath the table, must alike perish without the grace of our Lord Jesus.

God’s provision in the gospel is so ample, his mercy and forgiveness so abundant and vast, that imagined differences between respectable folk and disreputable ones, between churchgoers and tavern dwellers, are negligible. They don’t amount to anything, really.



self-regulation is futile. It doesn’t work! In its most exalted role, the law is useless. As regarding the supreme purpose attributed to the law—it is ineffectual.

Bear in mind that in Romans, law means what it meant to Jews in Paul’s day: it meant their religion. For us, law is not the Jewish religion, but something that calls for our obedience. For many churchgoers, law is the teaching upon which their church is founded. Included are theological propositions and a package of ethical norms deduced from them. In politics, law is the espoused ideology of the party, to which party members must subscribe, else not be permitted membership. In culture, law consists in society’s conventions and customs, whether written or simply understood. It forms the backbone of ‘political correctness.’ If flouted, desecrated or ignored, the offender is likely to be denounced, shunned or somehow blackballed. →

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Jesus proclaimed unmistakable that God's law is so perfect and absolute that no one can achieve righteousness. Yet God's grace is so great that we do not have to. By striving to prove how much they deserve God's love, legalists miss the whole point of the gospel, that it is a gift from God to people who don't deserve it. The solution to sin is not to impose an ever-stricter code of behavior. It is to know God.

-Philip Yancey: WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE? p. 210.



Law requires acquiescence. Where law is concerned, you must fall into line, you must not mess up, you need to be vigilant. An existence built on law is necessarily preoccupied with compliance; nothing could be more vital, more crucial. Nothing measures up to the importance of satisfying the law's biddings and prohibitions. Therefore, to imbue potential dissidents with 'moral awe,' is ever a solemn duty to be carried out by society's leaders and teachers!

Advocates of law believe with all their hearts that if law is shown to be inviolate, if people are convinced they will suffer extraordinary loss by failing to obey it, then, being filled with moral awe, they will do all that they are required to do, and they will *not* do things which are forbidden—and a righteous society will ensue.

Paul does not buy this law-and-order argument. If God's promise to mankind was to be achieved by law—through meticulous compliance—then *"faith has no value and the promise is worthless"* (Romans 4:14). He goes on to say that *"the law brings wrath"* (4:15). That is to say: instead of law (with its affiliated fixation on strict adherence) establishing a claim on God's favor, it rather serves to point out areas of non-compliance which would have remained obscure if the law had not been proclaimed. Therefore, the law's effect is opposite to what its advocates expect. Rather than reveal its subjects to be in the right, it more vehemently pronounces them in the wrong. Law never works unto justification; it brings condemnation. The law brings wrath.

Law rubs salt into guilty wounds, breeding bitterness and despair. The illiterate poor of Georgian England were constantly falling afoul of the law, and were subjected to its terrors as a result. Did this energetic application of the law produce repentance? Was respect for the law encouraged? Did it cause an outbreak of civil obedience? The policy achieved none of these things. The opposite happened. The law was mocked. People made fun of its exponents, and a fixed hatred of authority was embedded among the lawless.

In my home state, lawmakers have been trying very hard to

break criminal biker gang activity. To this end, a raft of new laws have come into effect. One of these requires that any gang member sentenced to jail for criminal activity is required to wear a 'pink' prison uniform. The object adduced for this measure is humiliation; they must be taught that they are not greater than the law; they need to experience the power of the law. And so on. Needless to say, this example of law enforcement has not engendered a love for the law among offending bikers.

Wherever there is a community or a movement in which the presiding article of faith is: conformity to the received wisdom, agreeing to the fundamentals, confessing the creed, believing what you are expected to believe, and doing what you are expected to do; wherever there is a nation or a society wherein law is the supreme good, law the pearl of great price, law enforcement a most sacred endeavor—there is a community, a society in which inequity, division, and hopelessness are rife.

In the Gospels, the champions of law are the Scribes and Pharisees. Those subject to their critiques and judgments are the publicans and sinners. In Romans chapter 2 & 3, one group relies on the law and brags about the law, seeing itself as a guide and teacher of the ignorant. Another group knows not the law and needs to be taught how to live lawfully.

In Romans 4, the law group reappears in the form of the circumcised ones; they think their circumcision proves they are Abraham's children and therefore heirs to the promise of God. On the other side are the uncircumcised; Gentiles. People unschooled in the Jewish religion. On the one hand, those of the law. On the other hand, those not of the law. People who for whatever reason, do not conform. They do not do what is expected. One group is blessed with superior circumstances, better material opportunity, a history of religious thought and moral discourse. Another group is without these advantages. If access to the Promised Land of divine certification and belonging is by way of the law, a large portion of the human race is bound to be excluded. If the doorway to favor lies along

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A GOD—UNLIKE US! How to be Christian—but not dangerous.

Topics: Firm Ground for your Feet
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Things worth caring about

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the path of compliance, only an elite—those who comply with group norms—will make entrance. The rest will be disbarred from joy. The law brings wrath. The law brings rejection, judgment, division, alienation, shame and disrepute.

A person, reading this, will instinctively know him/herself to be not 'of the law.' You know because you have been told in more ways than you can count, that you are too young, too old, too fat or too thin. You keep getting the message that you are too rough around the edges, you come from the wrong side of the tracks. You dress wrongly, you need to pay more attention to your appearance in order to 'fit in.' You don't measure up; you don't cut the mustard. You are not interesting enough; you make people uncomfortable—and so on.

If ever men and women are to be right with God; if ever men and women are to realize life as they want it to be, as they feel it should be, it will need to be via a route that has nothing to do with law, nothing to do with compliance, measuring up, meeting expectations or fitting the bill. To be right-wised, humans need a law-free zone so that both the 'of the law' group, and the lawless rabble can enter together.

The promise God made to Abraham, which unfolds exquisitely in Jesus, did not have an elite, of-the-law group in its sights. It had the whole world. That is why Paul draws our attention to it:

*Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to **all** Abraham's offspring—not only those who are of the law, but also those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us **all** (Romans 4:16).*

Recently, I was privileged to read a statement of welcome that formed part of a vision of what a 'law free' space might look like. It came from a church in Ohio.

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy-rich, dirt poor, can't speak English. We extend a welcome to those who are crying newborns, skinny as a rail, or who could afford to lose a few pounds. We welcome you if you sing like Andrea Bocelli, or can't carry a note in a bucket. You are welcome here if you are just browsing, just woke up, or just got out of jail. We don't care if you are more Catholic than the Pope or haven't been in church since

Joey's baptism. We welcome disabled worshipers who have brought their service dogs with them. We welcome Muslims, Jews, or politicians and sinners like us. We especially welcome those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and teen-agers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those in recovery and those still addicted. We welcome you if you are having problems, or you're down in the dumps, or you don't like organized religion—we've been there too.

If you blew all your offering money at the casino, you are welcome. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, who work hard, who don't work, can't spell, or to those here because Grandma is in town and wanted to go to church today. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both. We welcome you if you could use a prayer right now; if you've had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or if you got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourist seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts—and you!

Few could hear what is inferred in a welcome like that and not feel the kindling of hope within themselves. Could it be? Is it possible in this world, that there exists a value surpassing that of law? Could it be in this universe, that there is something more vital, more elemental, more decisive than custom, convention or prerequisite? Dare we imagine a space, a home for the human spirit, where no one need be anything else but what they are, to get in? Is it safe to dream of such things?

The Christian answer is, yes! The good news is that the promise comes by faith in order to be by grace. God has cleared the field of conditions, terms, riders and provisional clauses, so that absolutely no one has precedence. Those of the law have no prior claim on God's favor. The gates of heaven are wide open and whosoever will may come. God is not the preserve of a few. The most ineligible person or group, the weariest and most disillusioned can, in confidence shout out their relief, amazement and gratitude. "Free from the law's crushing burden at last! Free at last. Thank God almighty, free at last." 