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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## NOT... By Faith

By Ron Allen

New York Times best seller Sam Harris, in his book, *The End of Faith*, says this: “The idea that every human should be free to believe whatever he wants about God, is one of the principle forces driving us towards the abyss.” He goes further: “No society in history ever suffered by becoming too reasonable. Faith needs to be supplanted by reason.” Clearly, Mr. Harris has a low opinion of faith. At least, of faith as he understands it.

There can be no doubt that our era is marked by widespread loss of faith—in faith. Jesus foresaw it. “*When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*” (Luke 18:8).

Barna Research Group tells us that an increasing number of Americans believe in God, own a bible, pray, meet with friends to talk about God, try to grow spiritually—but don’t attend church. This corresponds with a growing demographic describing itself as atheist.

It seems that mainstream faith institutions are failing to be convincing that faith is good for society. Why? Could this simply be accounted for by straight-out increase of godlessness? Or are people who are ‘of the faith,’ giving a poor impression of what faith is?

Writing to the Roman Church, Paul speaks about the sad spectacle of Israel’s unbelief. A majority had rejected David’s promised Son. A majority concurred with their leader’s who had engineered Jesus’ death. As a result, they missed out on the supreme Messianic blessing—God’s own righteousness. The blessing of being right with God as God is right with himself.

This was a bizarre state of affairs. No race of people had put ‘rightness with God’ at the center of their national life as Israel had done. To strengthen the paradox, Gentiles, who had no such history of zeal, were now embracing the righteousness of God as they encountered it in the gospel.

Paul expressed the irony this way: “*What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it... But Israel who pursued a law of righteousness, has not obtained it*” (Romans 9:30). Then comes the obvious question, Why not? The answer: “*Because they pursued it NOT by faith.*”

That is a rather surprising thing for Paul to say. He is discussing people who probably thought of themselves as

people of faith. Indeed, they were of a kind that Sam Harris would regard as people of faith; religious people. The group that had vigorously sought God’s approval—without getting it—were the stereotypical religious types of the day: Those who were not busy to make sure their acceptance by God—and obtained it—were the irreligious, the ungodly.

Devout Israelites may have thought their consecrated routines constituted faith. They did not. In truth, what is broadly understood and promoted as faith in today’s world is not faith either. Paul gives us some ideas about genuine faith.

“*They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own*” (Romans 10:2, 3).



When it comes to religious zeal, the kind that isn’t faith is that which does not recognize the righteousness which is God’s grant, not his reward. Faith has little to do with an encyclopedic knowledge Scripture. Faith does not occur in a quest to discover and join the ‘right’ religious denomination; the ‘bible-believing’ institution adhering to correct doctrine. Faith is not the intellectual project by which the seeker assents to right teaching while wholeheartedly repudiating wrong teaching. It’s not faith when your enduring aim is to capture and retain an error free set of propositions about God.

It isn’t faith when you are comforted by the presence of academics and theologians and preachers in the church of your affiliation, who ‘have the truth’ (not like those Pentecostals

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1).*

Saul’s zeal was born out of an unquestioning confidence that he was acting from a position of rightness and truth. Much eagerness in religious endeavor, today, trades on the same thoroughgoing certainty. Its currency is ‘absolutes.’ Its coin: indoctrination, authority and conformity. It has its attractions because when you are utterly certain that you are in the right, it is easier to know who is in the wrong.

Who is wrong? The non-conformist. You have identified the enemy—God’s enemy. The very existence of the non-conformist confirms *your* identity and your life’s mission. Your task is to assert truth, proclaim the tradition, declare the unchanging standard and expose those who depart from it. What a thrill; knowing you are God’s instrument!

Being sure he was God’s agent, Saul had no qualms about using violence against dissidents. This remains a feature of some religious enthusiasms to this day. God’s name is used to bully people.


There are some, reading these lines, who might supply sad accountings of things that happened to them in their own worshipping community. Zealous individuals, possessed of overwhelming certitude, found their way to influential

positions and set about to purge the church of individuals deemed to have fallen away from the creed. So began a no-holds-barred cleansing: Secret meetings, night-time disciplinary hearings, kangaroo courts with no regard for due process, natural justice, transparency or compassion. Such values are not needed when dealing with heretics!

The word ‘infidel’ has come to prominence in recent times. Despite progress in humanitarian values (which can be attributed in large measure to Christ’s influence) there are yet those who think that persons should be killed for not acceding to dogma.

In 1994, Dr. John Britten was on his way to his work in an abortion clinic. He was shot and killed by the Reverend Paul Hill; a man who claimed he was following the Bible.

Saul was devout—and dangerous. When men and women profess a godliness chiefly expressed by devotion to an ideology, they easily dehumanize those who do not conform. They become hard in their treatment of others.

Saul changed from being a ruthless, cold-hearted defender of the law, when he was conquered by Christ. Instead of hunting men and women to oppress them, he became a helper. Like Jesus, he went looking to seek and to save that which was lost. 

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who promote so many errors, or those liberal churches that don’t even know the Bible is against homosexuality, or that other group that doesn’t even believe the rapture). That’s not faith!

That fact that you or your group understands the gospel isn’t faith either. Having a true intellectual appreciation of grace, thinking the right thoughts about it and avoiding misunderstandings of it, is not faith. It’s just you keeping vigil over your own wits. It’s zeal that fails to take account of the righteousness which comes from God; the righteousness, which is his gift to anyone who will receive it, even those who are uninformed and unschooled; even the intellectually docile and incompetent.

Picture that man in the gospel of John (John 9); blind from birth and bereft of so many advantages and opportunities accessible to those with sight. To live he must beg. One called Jesus of Nazareth comes by and rubs mud in his eyes. Suddenly his blindness is gone. He can see.

The men from the faith establishment come round to seek an explanation. He tells them: “A man called Jesus did it.” The teachers cannot accept that. “This man is not from God. He is a sinner. He could not have healed you. He doesn’t agree with our teachings—the true teachings.”

The man born blind replies: “I don’t know whether he is a sinner or not; one thing I know: I was blind but now I see.” Now they are mad with him. “We **know** God spoke to Moses, but we don’t know where this man comes from.” →

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Editor

Pastor Ron Allen

Graphic Designer

Debbie O’Brien

Proofreader

Philip Rhodes

Molly Clayton

AFFILIATE ADDRESSES:

Canadian office:  
222 Olive Avenue  
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6  
Canada

# Who Do We Say He Is?

By Daniel Robinson

*“Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:27-30)*


This reference in scripture takes place in Caesarea Philippi, an area with a long history of the worship of false gods. Interestingly, the worship of Baal had existed for hundreds of years when King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, instituted the worship of this false god in Israel. They had temples erected and prophets killed. So, it is notable that some thought of Jesus as Elijah, the miracle working prophet who had publicly confronted Ahab about the false god he worshipped, and then proved them false (1Kings 17:1).

Imagine Jesus sitting with his disciples in a wooded area near the rocky hills of Caesarea Philippi. First, he asked his disciples, “Who do the people say that the Son of Man (Jesus) is?” Some answered “John the Baptist” while others said “Jeremiah or another prophet.” Still others said “Elijah.”

Soon Jesus would be revealing His need to go to Jerusalem; but on that day, He next asked, “But who do you say I am?” That question to His disciples two thousand years ago is the question that each of us must answer today. Who do we say He is?

Peter said “You are the Christ, the son of the living God (Matt 16:16).” Jesus the Christ is the anointed one—the chosen savior of mankind. This was the first time that a follower of Jesus had spoken this truth. “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona,”

Jesus answered, “Because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” At that point, Jesus gives Simon the name, Peter—translated as the “rock”—and says that “upon this rock I will build my church.”

These scriptures show us that God changes us from being a part of this world to being a part of the heaven bound. Our God is an awesome God. He loved us so much that He gave us His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life. He came into the world at a perfect time in history to reconcile all of us to God. We can trust in him to give us peace in a world that is lost without him. 



*“That is remarkable. He has healed me, and you God-experts don’t know where he comes from!”*

The men who were the religious professionals; who knew a lot of theology and doctrine, were unable to recognize the work of God when it was right under their noses. That, which the man born blind had not been laboring to appropriate by getting all the correct ideas into his head, he obtained. It is not faith when we seek the friendship of God by means of our discernment, our comprehension of him. Faith takes refuge in his apprehension of us.

Israel missed out on their much-sought-after rightness with God because “they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of trusting in him” (Romans 9:32 *LIVING BIBLE*). Their religion had become for them an apparatus for self-congratulation. Instead of viewing their

privileges as tokens of God’s kindness, they became badges of pride. They interpreted their chosen status in terms of blood and soil. Faith would not have been like this. It would have been expressed in an abiding mood of astonishment that God had chosen them and not another people. It would have been amazement at God’s generosity to them; wonder that they were the objects of his care. Faith would have been realized in a healthy consciousness that they did not deserve anything from God. But since faith was absent, they thought to face God on their own terms.

Through scrupulous regard for the details of their tradition, they thought to win and maintain the favor of God. They had to supervise themselves closely. Sadly, it was not faith. It was a fervent immersion in their individual and corporate ego.

Religion is not faith when it is all about being sufficiently alert to identify and avoid fatal errors. Finding out all things that are wrong which God would not like, which would annoy him if they were committed—is not faith. It is God experienced as a threat; as a fault-finder, a far from genial watcher.

On Sesame Street, one of the characters is the ‘Count.’ he counts everything; never stops counting. He counts how many times the telephone rings. He counts the floors as he rides the elevator. He’s angry if there’s nothing to count.

There are some who think of God as a counter; ready at any time to pronounce in the manner of an exasperated parent: “That’s the last time I’ll tell you.” It’s not faith when God is experienced as a counter. It’s just a reverential species of

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## Faith is Faith is Faith

By Richard Rohr

To live in faith—which is to live with God—one has to risk looking and feeling like nothing—nothing that can be possessed, bargained for, developed, controlled, sold, bought, measured, merited, applauded, or even rightly communicated. Faith, finally, is beyond the world of power, function and purpose.

I must say it or I would deny the entire history of faith from Abraham to Jesus to Francis of Assisi to our own Donny Flowers and Erwin Wolke: Faith is beyond any reasonable process that even good people can devise. There is no community program or structure, no matter how perfect or how much we own it or invest in it that will ever make biblical faith unnecessary. Faith is faith is faith. And God can only be known by faith. I wonder why religious people so easily forget that.

Faith is finally to stand in nothingness, with nothing to prove and nothing to protect, knowing itself in an ever-alive charity that urges us to surrender, to let go, to give away, to hand over, to forgive, to walk across, to take no offense, to trust another, to lose oneself—while being quite sure that we are going to find ourselves afterward.

A consumer-oriented, functional and materialistic age finds

faith almost impossible. We want religion but we surely do not want faith. Because, if faith is nothing, the faithful person is a nobody. In our shallow culture, faith is called naïveté.

Forgiveness always looks like being soft and conceding to the enemy—even speaking the truth will not win you any votes or look patriotic on the evening news. Faith is nothing in this age and culture. Faith always has been nothing.

-Richard Rohr: RADICAL GRACE, pp. 70, 71. 



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dealing with God as an ever-lurking hazard. This is not faith it's anxiety. Faith, in contrast, is blithe. Faith is merry. It contemplates a God who is nothing at all like the Count. He is kind, pitying, beneficent, and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast faithfulness.

Trying to keep God on side by imitating the failed Jewish method (law-keeping) may seem to be God-centered, but it is not. It is self-regarding, and it has a tragic consequence. Where so-called 'faith communities' function on that basis, friendship and brotherhood is weakened. Men and women, consumed with self-monitoring, become strangers to one another.

In pursuit of righteousness (not by faith) Israel saw itself as 'a cut above' the blighted and foolish Gentiles. They believed they knew God; that they were wise. But when Christ came, their religious zeal was exposed as having little interest in God at all. As for the Gentiles: they put their trust in Messiah. But the Gentiles have no reason to be proud. 'Don't be conceited,' counsels Paul (11:15). 'Don't vaunt yourselves over against Jews' (11:18). 'You are not better than them any more than they were better than you. You only stand by faith' (11:20).

When being right with God is seen as a reward for being better than other people; for going to church, for being a good citizen, a morally upstanding person—it is always accompanied by pride and meanness.

An article published in *Current Biology*, takes note of a study of school children in North America, the Middle East, South Africa and China. Among the children were Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus. The study showed that the *more* religious the parents, the *less* altruistic their children were likely to be. Furthermore, children of deeply religious

parents were more likely to advocate harsher punishments than children of non-religious family backgrounds.

The study took note of a phenomenon called 'moral licensing,' in which religious practitioners commit to doing good by attending to religious routines, and in so doing, feel themselves exempt from other worthy habits like charity, humanity and compassion.

This brings us back to Paul's thesis: Contrary to what they had thought, seriously religious Israel had not sought God's approval by faith. They sought to procure it by attending to their own pious routines and obedience.

Today, what is widely assumed to be faith is often not faith at all: It is spiritual narcissism, self-regarding sanctity, moral licensing which uses punctilious regard for hallowed practices to cloak sectarian hubris and hard-heartedness.

As a community that is 'righteous'—by faith and not by a 'law of righteousness' (*Romans 9:32*), the church accepts that it is not exceptional. It does not boast. It does not set itself over against other human groupings because it trusts only in that which God provides.

The faith community will show that it is a people of faith by admitting to, and laying claim to, the same humanity as its neighbors. Of course this will include its Muslim neighbors, its agnostic, atheist, hedonist neighbors. In faith, God's people will not give an impression that they always know what's best for everyone else. They will give faith a reputation for modesty and humility. In them, righteousness will echo the 'meekness and gentleness of Christ.' As in the parable, they will not reprise the Pharisee, who in worship, told God all about himself. Rather they will model the Publican who could only pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and who went home from church, justified; right with God by faith. 