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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

Canary in the Coal Mine

By Ron Allen

Aside from whatever musical talents may be his, R & B singer Chris Brown gained notoriety some time ago by marrying another singer, Rihanna. During the marriage, Brown attacked his wife. Her beautiful face was smashed and swollen beyond recognition. Brown was subjected to a restraining order and obliged to serve six months community service.

Despite this incident, and some more that are similar, Brown does not appear to retain any doubts about himself. In a recent interview he said that *“Most women will not have any complaints about being with me. They can’t complain. It’s all good.”*

We may smile grimly at Mr. Brown’s self assessment, but sadly, the psychology behind his behavior is widespread. This is one reason why the Bible—in particular, the gospel found in its pages—is so vital. Its insightful reading of human nature is pertinent indeed.

In our last article on the New Testament letter to the Romans, we saw that God’s righteousness involves his judgment against evil. **Ignorant pagans**, who brazenly indulge their ungodly passions, lie under God’s wrath. **Enlightened moralists** are also judgment bound. The same goes for religious **‘officionados’** because they, if not in deed, at least in spirit, do the same things. In fact, Paul thinks it is entirely conceivable that a person without education, religious and natural advantages, might be more inclined to do God’s will than a Greek or Roman man of letters (or even his religious counterpart in Judaism). In that sense, he could be more Jewish than a Jew.

Paul realizes that there are Jews who are the enlightened moralist and the religious practitioner rolled into one. He therefore introduces an imaginary individual of this kind to his discourse, to object to what has been said, so inviting an answer.

The objection is: *“What is the advantage of being a Jew, then?”* (Romans 3:1). Paul replies that Jews are advantaged because they *“have been entrusted with the very words of God”* (Romans 3:2). The people of Israel were immensely favored because they were the receivers of revelations from God

in the form of the law, the urgings and reproofs of the prophets, and the providential leading of God in their history. In this, they were privileged in excess of other nations. To be made wardens of this enhanced apprehension of deity was a rich blessing.

It must be noted that this blessing was composed of God’s actions. Its features were divine. So comprehensively was this the case that even the unfaithfulness of the Jewish nation could not cancel their advantage (Romans 3:3, 4). Indeed, the recidivism of the chosen people only served to make the faithfulness of God more pronounced.

Sensing the implication of Paul’s language, the imaginary interlocutor has a supplementary question: *“If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned?”* (Romans 3:7). The question issues from an assumption that Jewish advantage ought to attract exceptional treatment from God. Even though it was God who initiated and supplied the advantage, the Jew, by a curious mental process, has come to think that something about himself makes him ‘right with God.’ Like Mr. Chris Brown, he supposes that since God took up with him, God has done okay; he has nothing to complain of; God has gained something by associating with him.

The Jewish man reasons that if being who he is doesn’t secure him in God’s favor; then there can be no real point in being who he is (a Jew). **He fails to view his relationship to God in terms of who God is, what God has done, what God can do, God’s faithfulness, God’s truthfulness, God’s righteousness and God’s greatness.** If after so many years of being in covenant with God, the only thing to remark on is God’s faithfulness in contrast to his unfaithfulness, then—O wait a minute! Now I see it; I am assisting God by my unfaithfulness. *“Let us do evil that good may result”* (Romans 3:8).

You see where this religious man is going with this? He reasons that because of his superior knowledge of God and of duty, his biological link to Abraham and the

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“It is hard for you to kick against the goads”
(Acts 26:14).*

This was one of the first things the resurrected Jesus said to Saul; a homely proverb evoking mental images of a beast of burden, lashing out at its harness with flailing hoofs, only to hurt itself in the act. At the time, Saul was fully involved in a campaign to extinguish the Nazarene sect, the followers of Jesus, and it is the only insight we have into his state of mind when he was so engaged.

Aside from the observation Jesus made, there is no evidence that Saul’s militant mission was causing him any trauma. He did not seem to be troubled by second thoughts concerning the legitimacy of his work. Self doubt was not a problem for this defender of the religion of Israel. Like the Jewish men who now accused him before King Agrippa, Paul had once exercised the same unrelenting determination to crush Christ’s disciples. *“I was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth,”* (Acts 26:9), he said. As if to say: “There was a time when I counted it my religious duty to use all possible means, including violence, against those who questioned the authority of the law. I practiced a religious zeal just like the one that brings you here, to this place, to have me killed.”


There are many, looking in at people of faith from the secular world, who do not understand a religious perspective that encourages adherents to think it is right and good to vilify, oppress, harm, and even kill, people with differing world views.

Since the first half of the 20th century, “Fundamentalism” has become a label for this species of religious fanaticism. Its badges are ‘certainty’ and ‘authority.’ The fundamentalist knows, and he knows that he knows. He has the answers. Despite that mystery and complexity are everywhere to be found in creation, the fundamentalist is never in doubt. Within the fundamentalist community everything is obvious, clear as crystal. Outside fundamentalism, debate rages over issues in the sciences, the humanities, as well as in social questions on abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, genetic engineering and stem-cell harvesting. No need for argument among the fundamentalists, though.

Such certainty in a patently uncertain and confusing world has its appeal. There is an attraction to being sure. It saves a lot of worry and effort. It ought not to be forgotten, however, that the grand ideas brought to the world and promoted in it by Christianity, were not so obvious in their inception. They came slowly by means of enormous intellectual and spiritual expenditure, many an advance, many a retreat, dead-end and incalculable human cost. Many fundamentalists trade on these beliefs today as if the possibility of a mistake concerning them never existed. Human beings do not like uncertainty. They yearn for intellectual security as surely as they do for the material kind. A voice of authority always gets a hearing.

Perhaps Saul was no different. Perhaps he preferred the assurance that goes with knowing you are absolutely right. Yet, somewhere, hidden deep in his subconscious self, there may have persisted a worrying thought that such purity of discernment is just not available to humans; that his campaign might not be just after all. We cannot know for certain, but Christ knew, and he put his finger on a weak spot in Saul’s world view when he said to him: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

The other feature of fundamentalism is authority, the ready use of enforcement. Saul was not content merely to be conscientious in stamping out dissent. He went at it with a fury (Acts 26:11; Acts 9:1). In bypassing the ‘weightier matters of the law’ such as justice and mercy, fundamentalism makes up for the deficit by increase of ardour in upholding selected religious laws; as if hard-heartedness could be made into something else by practicing it with multiplied zeal. Did Saul’s dedicated enthusiasm mask and uneasy feeling that there was something about what he was doing that displeased God? It is always hard to kick against the goads.

Are you brimming with zeal? What about? What for? Is your religious activism born out of peace with God? Is it the product of a God-given disquiet? Whatever your answer, be sure of this: the Living Lord will meet you whatever road you travel; he intends to give you what you never would have obtained anywhere else. May his light shine on you. 

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covenant sign in his flesh, he has built up credit with God. When Paul robs him of that pleasing thought, he refuses to relinquish it by insisting God still owes him. He should still be in God's good books by virtue of his unfaithfulness. He should nonetheless be right with God because, by his falsehood, he has been magnifying God's truth. If God's judgment were to be against him that would be unjust; God would be in the wrong!

To Paul, the very idea is unthinkable. "*Let God be true and every man a liar*" (Romans 3:4), he says. His Jewish opponent reverses this maxim, making into something like this: *Let every man be true and God a liar*. The only religion worth anything, the only saving, redemptive, restorative religion, is that in which the pearl of great price is the faithfulness of God, the truth of God, the righteousness of God. It is *that* religion in which God is remarkable; God is wonderful, beautiful, infinitely gracious and good.

Other religions distinguish themselves from this legitimate human-divine outlook, by making far too much of those with whom God has to do. The worshiper is promoted against worship's proper object. He/she becomes the center of value which God is called upon to recognize, treasure and reward.

I once heard a minister of religion telling a colleague how he was often pulled over for speeding by the police. "*I usually say something like this,*" he said. "*Officer, I am embarrassed to have been caught speeding. As a matter of fact, my work is to teach people to be lawful. I am a Christian minister, you see.*" The minister of religion went on to report that he never once paid speeding fines. The officer always dismissed him saying, "*I'm sorry reverend.*"

A newspaper story described how a member of the state legislature was having dinner at a high-end restaurant. As the evening progressed she became intoxicated and loud. Staff approached her table and asked her to 'tone it down.' She refused and was later asked to leave. She swore and asked: "Do you know who I am?" As it happened, the staff didn't know. But how would they have known?

Think of a postman who demands to be treated with more deference than other people—because he delivers the mail. Think of a newsreader who insists on recognition beyond that accorded to others—because he reads the news. What about a wealthy man who thinks he deserves priority treatment because he is wealthy, and what of a lawyer who assumes his expertise at law means he should have privileges before the law in excess of his clients?

These examples are the contemporary equivalent of Paul's enlightened moralist and his Jewish objector. They all think they are exceptional; that they are in a position to pass judgment on others; that there is an 'a priori' in-the-rightness



applicable to them. They are the culture shapers and thought leaders of society. They enjoy genuine advantages. Yet, the greater part of their advantage is attributable to factors which required no input from them. Genetic good fortune, favorable family circumstance, superior health, opportune historical conditions, and a host of other events outside of their control which conspire to positive effect.

We sense the inappropriateness of a lawyer who presumes that justice should work differently in his case. We are annoyed by the politician who insists on being highly esteemed though she behaves dishonorably. We are bewildered by the minister of religion who believes it is his privilege to break the law and not be called to account for it.

What we really expect, what we think is appropriate, is that ministers of religion and educated professionals, should respond to their privilege by being *more*, not *less* accountable; more, not less responsible. We feel that people such as those described are not exceptional at all. They only prove that they know how to be evil in more subtle ways than the ignorant.

When Paul was writing to the Romans, the world was peopled by ignorant masses, all of whom resisted the will of God in their lives. A minority of educated sophisticates had a better grasp of reality. They understood the moral foundations for human well-being. These were what might be called secular moralists. Then, at the top of privilege's mound were Jews in possession of the most progressive theology of the day. They sat at the apex of advantage.

Paul contends that far from making them better or closer to God than the rest of mankind, these privileged folk are simply more responsible. Though they know more, their superior knowledge is not simply stock for them to trade with. Far from being a barometer of their virtue, Jewish advantage magnifies their lack of it. As stewards of the oracles of God, Jews have made the mistake of believing that their religion (their law) is a badge of *their* honor instead of God's. An aristocratic mentality has taken hold. They "*brag about the law*" (Romans 2:23).

But the law offers them no protection from God's righteous judgment. Rather, it makes them more answerable. It brings into the open the unpleasant fact that they are more opposed to God than they think they are. In their hands, the law has become an instrument for the law's circumvention; a tool to prevent the law applying to them as to other men. Far from proving them 'in the right,' the law demonstrates how luxuriant and virulent their determination to subvert it is.

The law has served to demonstrate that defiance of God among those with more opportunity than others to know and do right, is even more sinister. The law functions to search out and expose—ice-berg like—the massive bulk of inventive resistance to the way of God that lies beneath the surface.

In Romans 3:10-18, Paul submits a collection of quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah. They are lifted from what is broadly accepted as 'the law.' They include such phrases as: *no*

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The Law of Nature

By C. S. Lewis

I know that some people say that the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behavior known to all men is unsound because different civilizations and different ages have had quite different moralities. This is not true. There have been differences between their moralities, but these have never amounted to anything like a total difference. If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own.

Think of a country where people were running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regard what people you ought to be unselfish to—whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. They have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked.

But the most remarkable thing is this. Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in real right and wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his

promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining. A nation may say that treaties do not matter; but then, next minute, they spoil their case by saying that the particular treaty they want to break was an unfair one. If treaties do not matter, and if there is no such thing as Right and Wrong, what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one? Have they not let the cat out of the bag and shown that, whatever they say, they really know the Law of Nature just like anyone else?

It seems then we are forced to believe in a real right and wrong. Now if we are agreed about that, I go on to my next point which is this. None of us are really keeping the Law of Nature. This year, or this month, or more likely, this very day, we have failed to practice ourselves the kind of behavior we expect from other people. There may be all sorts of excuses for us.

The question at the moment is not whether they are good excuses. The point is they are one more proof of how deeply, whether we like it or not, we believe in the Law of Nature. If we do not believe in decent behavior, why should we be anxious to make excuses for not behaving decently? The truth is, we believe in decency so much—we feel the Rule or Law pressing on us so—we cannot bear to face the fact that we are breaking it.

-C. S. Lewis. MERE CHRISTIANITY, pp. 17-19. 



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one is righteous, not even one; no one does good, not even one; all have turned away. Lest a Jewish reader suppose these sentiments are applicable only to Gentiles, Paul takes care to say: “*Now we know whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law*” (Romans 3:19). In other words, the chain of quotes from the law has prior and immediate relevance to Jews and confirms what Paul has been saying. Namely, that the law has functioned in Israel’s history—not to show how outstanding and exceptional they are, but to highlight the truth that they are the same as everybody else.

If the law proves that those who most vigorously and conceitedly identify with it are not in the right, then those unabashedly ignorant or careless of God’s will are also not in the right. If Jewish people who center their individual and national life upon the law do not thereby gain access to God’s favor, they serve as a sign and a forewarning to the rest of humanity, that “*No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin*” (Romans 3:20). The Jewish people are ‘canaries in the coal mine.’ Their experience sends a message to the whole human race telling that it is impossible to be right with God through recourse to systems of worthiness. Effort of that kind never improves a person’s standing before God; it only makes it worse.



But oh, we do like our law, we like our religion. We sometimes seem addicted to our moral frameworks. “Why can’t we just be members of First Church? Isn’t it enough that we are not your average garden variety Christians; we are ‘Bible-believing’ Christians, ‘Born again,’ Christians, ‘Spirit-filled!’ Surely these things count for something?” No. They don’t. They are part of a profound disorder, and they have no remedy.

All of this is very humiliating, of course. But it necessarily prepares us for the gospel. The wound must first be cauterized before the cure can take effect. It hurts. Ideas of worth and merit are so wired into us that we distrust anything that asks us to believe that we are less than remarkable. Grace never comes easy. But grace—because it is grace—comes, and our hope lies there. 