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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

IGNORING GRANDMA

By Ron Allen

A preacher advertised revival meetings in a city. The night for the opening meeting arrived. The weather was terrible. Rain washed over the sidewalks and made drains overflow. Wind lashed power lines and caused street lamps to bob dangerously, casting wild shadows on buildings.

It was time to start, but no one was there to listen to the message. The preacher decided that the Lord was not going to send anyone to hear God's word that night. He was about to close his book and lock the doors when he saw a man enter the door and take a seat in the back row. "How wrong I was," he thought. "God has sent me someone."

The preacher took to the stage and gave vent to his message which he had spent a long time preparing. After about an hour, he finished and made his way quickly to the front door in order to greet his audience. To his dismay however, he learned that the man—who happened to be homeless—was stone deaf!

In his book, 'Strange Gods,' John Cornwall gives an account of Father O'Rourke's (a Jesuit priest) attempt to evangelize a tribe of natives in the Peruvian jungle. Through an interpreter, the Jesuit begins by trying to teach the natives about the Mass. They sit on their haunches chewing coca and looking at the priest with amazement in their eyes.

The interpreter says to O'Rourke, "They think you are a white cannibal witch; they are frightened of you." One of O'Rourke's assistants—another priest—says to him: "We are going to have to learn their language and their ways first. They have no idea what you are talking about. Your words about the body and blood of Christ—they think we are man-eaters."

The tribesmen have no categories with which to comprehend the Lord's Supper. Never in their lives have they heard the language, the metaphors, and the poetic expressions of Christianity.

In a reference to the Pagan World, Paul, in Romans, asks: "How can they call on One they have not believed in; and how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14). Yes, the Mekroti hear O'Rourke speak, but they do *not* hear. They do not hear with their intellects. For all intents and purposes they are like the deaf man at the revival meeting: preached at, but oblivious nonetheless.

The book of Acts traces the gospel's progress from its beginnings in Jerusalem to Rome, the pagan world headquarters. Church pioneers in Jerusalem believed they were stewards of the Word of Life, and they took their responsibility seriously. Steeped as they were in Judaism, they understood and expressed Jesus' message using terms and concepts with which Israelite people were familiar.

There was nothing wrong with this. After all, Jesus was himself a Jew. His execution had taken place within sight of Judaism's beating heart—the temple, and those who first believed in him were Israelites.

But this state of affairs did not long continue. After the martyrdom of Stephen, the Jewish establishment began to persecute the disciples. Many fled Jerusalem. Some went to Samaria and others down to the coast. They told the story of Jesus, and in each place they sought out Jewish communities and witnessed to them. Acts 11:19 confirms that they "preached to Jews only." This policy meant that the gospel was largely confined to a Jewish sub-culture within larger societies.

But something new happened. Two disciples, one from Cyprus at the gospel's northern frontier, and another from Cyrene in Africa in the south, traveled to Antioch, the third largest city in Rome's broad empire. It was cosmopolitan, famous for its temples with their institutionalized

prostitution, and the loose morals of its citizens.

There was a Jewish community in Antioch but its populace was overwhelmingly non-Jewish. The two missionaries from Cyprus and Cyrene came to this city and decided to make a direct pitch to people whose habits of life and thought were totally foreign to Jews. "They began to speak to Greeks also, telling them about the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20). They did not tell about Jesus—CHRIST. That is, they did not set out to demonstrate that Jesus was MESSIAH as they would have done if they were witnessing to Jews.

Israel formed only a small fraction of the world's peoples. Most of those knew nothing of Abraham, Moses, Israel's prophetic history, its Messianic expectancy and the kingdom of

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EDITORIAL . . .

*"If God were your father you would love me."
(John 8:42).*

Upon the question of their personal response to himself, Jesus tested the claims of his own people to a genuine connection with God. He had sought to offer them a richer, more liberating experience of God than they had ever before known. This offer they had spurned. "We are Abraham's descendants," they said, "and have never been slaves of anyone" (John 8:33). "We don't need you. Our familiarity with God is our national heritage. God is already with us!"

Being able to document communion with God by means of glib reference to the facts of one's genealogy is rather convenient. It seems absurd, yet there is something typically human in wanting Christianity to be just like that: an uncomplicated assent to a few doctrinal statements; a routine observance of forms and ceremonies.

However our text insists that the acid test for a bona fide relationship with God is whether or not a person loves Jesus. Needless to say, such a love would scarcely be genuine if it did not involve a practical devotion to everything that Jesus said and did. A love that cared not enough to imitate and contend for Jesus' values in our common life would be a poor kind of love.



Pastor Ron Allen


A fine young man approached Jesus. He was rich, religious and unhappy. He had heard of Jesus and wondered if he might supply him with what was missing in his life. "Teacher," he asked, "what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Keep the commandments," Jesus replied.

"Which ones?" queried Jesus, with a partial recital of the Ten Commandments.

"I've done all that," said the young man.

"Go and sell all you have and give to the poor, then come and follow me," Jesus said.

The young man turned away, sadly. Christ had tested his desire for life eternal by daring him to jettison the values which had previously dominated his life, in exchange for those of the Son of God. The man failed the test. Rather than truly enter the life of God by emulating Jesus' way—a lifestyle of radical service and concern—he returned to what was less demanding—and far less satisfying. If he really did know God; if he truly wanted to know God, he would have loved everything about Jesus, and chosen to go with him. 

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God. All of that would have been gobbledegook to them. So instead of preaching that Jesus is the Christ, they told about Jesus as LORD.

The name *Jesus* is the Anglicized rendering for the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which means Yahweh is salvation. It would mean little to Gentiles, but the Greek word *Kurion*—Lord—was widely used as a title for the cult gods. Kings and rulers everywhere were likely to be addressed as Lord. Caesar, who claimed to be divine, was no exception. Lord, as a title, had religious significance in paganism. For the nations outside of Israel the words 'God' and 'Lord' conveyed similar meanings.

When the missionaries came to Antioch and spoke about Jesus as Lord, people could hear and understand according to their cultural idioms. But what did the missionaries tell Greeks and Romans about Jesus that might persuade them to believe in his Lordship? There is no record of the life of Jesus in the book of Acts, but we know it was written by Luke, the author of the Gospel that bears that name. We can surmise therefore that some, or much, of the record of Christ in that Gospel would have formed the content of the message the Gentiles were given.

Over and again, the remarkable events surrounding Christ's birth would have been recounted. The story of his life as a man; his wise sayings, his brilliant parables—so richly appreciative and in sympathy with the human condition—must have been rehearsed. An impression was created of a person who knew somehow, with profound insight, what it is to be a human being.

Antioch, like any of the big cities, was an amalgam of the rich, powerful and prestigious, inelegantly blended with the poor and disgraceful. There were those who were approved and applauded, and then the pariahs.

Persons who offended the established order received short shrift. Slaves—who amounted to a large portion of the populace—had few human rights. Soldiers who failed to meet expectations were often summarily executed (see Acts 12). Women generally occupied a lower position in society. They had no choice. Neither did they exercise freedom in the bearing of children. They were expected to do so and could be divorced if infertile. When a woman gave birth, the primary right of the father was exercised as the baby was laid at his feet. He would recognize the child as his own in the act of picking it up. If something in the child displeased him and he did not pick it up, it was left to suffer death through exposure. →

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When people heard about Jesus' attitude... long suppressed yearnings came awake in many hearts.

The woman was not permitted to overrule her husband's decision. Most children treated thus were either girls or weak-looking males.

Stories about Jesus' treatment of society's unwanted and rejected were told and retold in Antioch by the Christian witnesses. When people heard about Jesus' attitude to adulterers, harlots and religious minorities like the Samaritans, frauds like Zacheus, lepers, the guilt-ridden and hated, long suppressed yearnings came awake in many hearts.

When people with no choice but to accept the usages imposed on them heard how Jesus honored them, women's hearts beat with joy and hope. Here was One who valued them for their intrinsic worth as human persons; not as brood mares in a male-run stable.

How the same women must have felt as mothers when they were told how Jesus looked on their children: not as disposable chattels, but exceedingly precious beings to whom the gates of heaven were open wide. Jesus' valuing of their offspring resonated deeply with their maternal instincts.

O yes! People of negligible value in Antioch must have listened eagerly to reports of a Man who always took the part of outsiders, who left no one out, who spoke redemption and hope to those who could not make the grade, who messed up; the overlooked, the refused, and the abandoned.

No one needed to have been born and raised a Jew in order to be touched by the parables of Jesus. These spoke eloquently to universal human aspirations. Greeks and Romans could easily recognize themselves and their own life situation in Jesus' stories. No interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son was needed. Many a headstrong young man saw himself mirrored, while many a father, bowed down with worry and longing for his son to come home understood that the author of this story knew a great deal about things that make hearts break.

When the parable was told of the man whose impossibly big debt was cancelled by the merciful landlord, many a debt-ridden resident of Antioch pricked his ears. Others easily identified with the desperations of Christ's persistent widow, who risked the judge's ire by beating at his door late at night.

Not only Christ's parables, but recollected stories of his encounters with common folk going about their daily business: these left a mental picture of a person with an insider's appreciation of how men and women must make do; how they must live their lives.

A man with a demon-possessed son meets Jesus who challenges him to believe. *"I do believe,"* says the father.

"Help my unbelief." What father, What parent who has ever anguished over a sick child would not identify with that father's plea? Does not his entreaty echo the fragility and pathos of our position in the world? Are we not often in a state of weakness? In our trouble do we not fear that we ourselves may hinder our own redemption?

The beauty and the appeal of Jesus lives on in the written and oral records of his ministry. Thus it is now; so it was in Antioch. As the disciples spoke of the Savior, the tradition bore the imprimatur of One intimately acquainted with suffering. This aspect of Jesus' personality is sufficient on its own to attract attention to Jesus. It was doubtless so in Antioch.

When British ships disgorged their pathetic human cargo at the penal settlement on Sydney Harbor, native women, peering from the wooded shoreline, wept as they saw white men being flayed to within an inch of their lives with the cat-'o-nine-tails by other white men. Suffering is a language universally understood. It is like the microwave background noise that permeates the universe: ubiquitous. It is composed of billions of sobs and moans. Hearing the story of Jesus, people of Antioch detected something familiar. Life for everyone is punctuated with piercings and throbbing.

Jesus draws men and women to him because they recognize a brother in sorrow. He does not look for suffering; he has no pathological attachment to it, but he accepts it as part of life and shrinks not from it when it stands between him and the will of God.

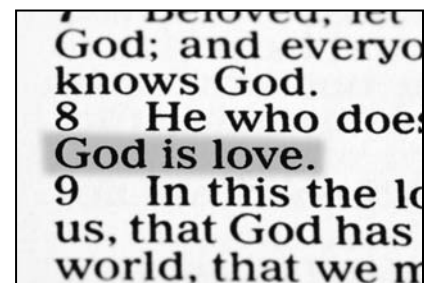
Antioch heard the good news of the LORD Jesus. Here was a Lord unlike all Lords known; not proud, aggressive, capricious or ambitious. A Lord looking to serve, not to be served. He demonstrated that *self-service* is neither at peace with itself or other people. He showed that only the *self* devoted to other *selves* discovers true contentment. With crucifixion looming he could say: *Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."*

Populations living within the Roman Empire were largely polytheistic. The gods were known as Lords and Emperors and Rulers. They liked to be called Lords. The word 'lord' had religious connotations.

But people were dissatisfied with the gods and the Lords. Many were disgusted. When gospel witnesses spoke of Jesus as Lord they addressed a public that was, to an extent, disenchanted with its received religious tradition; a public open to a new and better reality. Though compliance to religious forms was maintained, souls were nevertheless thirsty; hearts were hungry. The Lords of heathenism did not speak to human aspiration as did Jesus.

This really happened: disciples of Jesus came to Antioch and told the good news of the lordship of Jesus. *"The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21)*. Later, Barnabus came from Jerusalem. When he saw the evidence of God's grace in Gentile lives, he *"encouraged them to remain true to the Lord" (Acts 11:23)*. As a result of his pastoral work in Antioch, *"a great number of people were brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24)*. So runs Luke's unadorned summary of the first gospel missionary campaign

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among principally non-Jewish populations. With unaffected simplicity, Luke repeatedly uses the word *Lord* when he refers to Jesus. From his brief account it is possible to discern the following:

Jesus as Lord is the subject and content of Christian witness.

Jesus as Lord is the sponsor of Christian witness who works with the witnesses.

Jesus as Lord becomes the center and object of Gentile faith, allegiance and devotion. He is the Lord to whom they *turn*.

As Lord Jesus is the head of the church; believers are *added to the Lord*.

There are things here for today's believers to heed. Acts shows that every time the message of Christ took root in new territory outside of Judea, the leaders in Jerusalem displayed a remarkable degree of caution—not to say, unease. They were concerned that the church should grow in a homogenous way. What if newcomers did not conform to established Jewish patterns of devotion?

The Pastor sent from Jerusalem to check out the expansion of the church in Antioch—Barnabus—was the best possible choice. He saw in the Gentile converts, evidence of the grace of God (Acts 11:23). News of the Galilean Jew who lived and taught grace, mercy, sacrifice, forgiveness—even for enemies—was to people of Antioch good news about God. They came to trust in the God of love. They made him their Lord.

It was not necessary for the Gentiles to learn *everything* about the Hebrew patriarchs, the Kings and prophets of Israel. They perceived in Jesus the fulfillment of what the best heathen minds had been groping for. They heard in the reminiscences and reports of those who were first to believe, the voice of One who appealed to them at the very core of their humanity, and laid hold of them there. They listened, as millions have done since, with rapt attention to the invitation: *“Come to me all you who are burdened and weary, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:27, 28). *Come* they did, and found *rest for their souls*.

In Antioch a new gospel beach-head was laid down. A community of disciple came into existence with an ethos that was not so much a reflection of Moses and the cult of Judaism, but of the values of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the days of my childhood, I remember that Grandma would come to visit. Sometimes she would stay very long. That was alright, I suppose. There were six of us kids, and Mother seemed to appreciate Grandma's help around the house.

Grandma had grown up in Victorian times. Those were the days when children were meant to be *seen* but not *heard*; when they were expected to behave as if they were in the military.

Grandma would only be with us for a few days before she would begin trying to impose her world view on the family. “Dinner was two hours ago; you boys are late; Hmmph! You don't deserve to eat.” Or, “Did you wash your face before coming to the table? Your hair is not done; You should take your boots off before coming into the house; Who brought this dirt into the kitchen; look at the linoleum; Which one put a dirty spoon in the jam? Don't eat food off your knife, and, you boys never made your beds this morning.”

Grandma was something of a mystery to us. She seemed consumed with the idea of forcing us into behaviors that had little to do with the real business of life. She appeared to come from another world.

After a few weeks of Grandma, we asked Mother, “When is Grandma going home?” Lest the reader conclude that the author sprang from a bunch of crude ruffians with no manners whatsoever, permit him to say that ours was a farming household. Most days we would roll out of bed before sun-up, leaving them unmade and it would be long after dark before our boots were heard on the wooden veranda as we made our way eagerly to the family board for dinner.



Dad taught us to work hard. We enjoyed it, and Mother, knowing we always pulled our weight outside the house, never required much of us inside; she didn't mind too much if we came to dinner with our boots on and dust on our faces.

Grandma was disgusted. She retreated to the far end of the table to mutter dire warnings and cast reproachful glances; both at the children and their parents.

The people who were first to embrace the gospel thought the world could only hear it clearly by first entering into their culture and customs. They believed wholeheartedly that non-Jews should become familiar with Moses, the law and the traditions of the elders; that they should retrace the steps taken before them by Israel's saints, which had led them to expect the Messiah.

They made the mistake of thinking they could ‘manage’ the gospel. They strongly felt that it should remain Jewish in appearance. But the Holy Spirit did not share their concern. God brought people into fellowship with himself as they were drawn directly to his Son, Jesus. Just as my parents who made it clear to us that in some things Grandma could safely be ignored, so God let people into his kingdom who were not schooled in Israel's ways.

How so? In the end, it is not where you come from, not who your forbears were—whether they were high or low-born, religious aristocracy or uncouth and ignorant—but whether, having met Jesus, you realize that in his humanity, God is represented—and you make him your Lord. If you arrive at that place, God has nothing more to give you. You are at the feast. Come in with your boots on!



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