

# FAN, FANATIC, OR FOLLOWER

## *Romans 10*

We continue in the portion of Romans where Paul is wrestling with how his countrymen are, and are not, responding to the message of the Gospel.

In chapter 9 the emphasis was on God. Think back to the four questions outlined, they were all about God and God's purpose. The emphasis in chapter 10 is on us, humans. After beginning with another personal plea, "brothers and sisters," Paul sketches out the situation in verses 2-4. He then focuses on this human situation in three progressive steps:<sup>3</sup>

1. The need for humans to understand the Gospel (verses 5-13);
2. With that understanding the necessity to proclaim the Gospel (in verses 14-15); and
3. That this Gospel proclamation must be received by faith (in verses 16-21).

In many ways, as much as the previous chapter looked back, this chapter turns to the present. I want to communicate two things: first, some gems (that should be short), and then, by looking at what Paul is saying about his own people, to look at how we can fall into the same trap. First, to the gems.

- "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Verses 8-9.)

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Stott on pp.282-290 uses these three headings to unpack the text.

- For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. (Verse 10.)

Turning now to what Paul is saying about his own people. He opens the chapter again with a personal plea. In chapter 10 we read, “my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (verse 1). As these chapters roll forward, Paul’s pain is increased. J.B. Phillips in a paraphrase senses this as he translates the verse as “from the bottom of my heart I long and pray.” This is not just theology for Paul, it is personal.<sup>4</sup>

Paul has already in 9:4 pointed out the privileged position Israel enjoys. It pains him to see them combine their privilege with prejudice. Why do I say it is prejudice? Because they persecute those of The Way. In addition, he is equally concerned with their combination of ignorance and zeal (his words). He has no doubt of their sincerity, he can testify about it. In fact he was exactly in their shoes, he was extremely zealous as he persecuted and killed followers of Jesus. As he looks at them, he is looking back at himself, which allows him to conclude that their zeal (like his), indeed their obsession, is not based on knowledge.

Yet, “Sincerity is not enough, for we may be sincerely mistaken. The proper word for zeal without knowledge, commitment without reflection, or enthusiasm without understanding is...fanaticism. And fanaticism is a horrid and dangerous state to be in.”<sup>5</sup> Paul points out the specific problem in verse 3: “For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.279.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 280.

Paul is working on his own people, Jewish people who reject the Jewish Messiah. Said differently, Jesus came from inside the Jewish system of religion. Let me ask you to jump forward with me. My belief is that today, inside the religion of Christianity, we are doing the same thing to Jesus. We, the Church, are dismissing Jesus. Today it is the Church that has the promises of Christ and enjoy the privilege of being the established organization. It is often the Church that is extremely sincere about all sorts of things. It is often the Church that at times is extremely zealous for this cause or that cause. Now don't misunderstand, these causes are important. But here is where I see the connection. The causes — to the political right or left — can never be more important than the Person of Jesus Christ. When they become more important than Jesus, we see God's Word twisted and distorted to meet the needs of the zealous. Paul described it as "seeking to establish their own (righteousness)." The result is Christians look like fanatics, loudly yelling, often at each other, as they place themselves on both sides of an issue. Again, I say the issues are important, and maybe they are not always yelling, but the media loves conflict, and what happens is great attention is given to the conflict. It all gets loud, so loud that the Gospel cannot be heard and in the end the people do not hear about how much God loves them and that this love is found in the Son, Jesus Christ.

Our task is straightforward: Invite people to meet God through Jesus Christ, "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it

is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Verses 13-15.)

As I read chapter 10, I think not of the religious men of Paul’s day, but I find myself looking in the mirror. May we stay on task, the task of proclaiming the love of Jesus Christ to the world for God seeks neither fans nor fanatics, but rather followers.