

Born to Win

A Man of Understanding

by Ronald L. Dart

Years ago, I used to enjoy going up on internet forums and discussing religion there. America Online, I recall, had any number of forums like this, divided up by category. Some of them were Christian, some of them were not. The Christian forums were divided up according to, I think maybe, according to denominations or what have you. What was fascinating to me—something I really didn't understand at first—was the degree of *hostility* that was often expressed on *Christian* forums. I mean, people got really mad at each other. It seemed to me a good thing these people were separated by the anonymity of the forum. If they had been in the same room they might have come to blows—it was that bad. And I wondered: what's behind this? What generates so much hostility in some people who are *supposed* to be people of faith? Why is it that when faced with a different belief, people don't adopt one of two rational responses: indifference or curiosity?

Now, what I mean by “indifference” is...when I encounter someone with an off-the-wall religious idea, I can tell quickly enough whether there's likely to be any merit there or not. It's not that hard to see. If the answer is *not*, I toss it in the wastebasket, I click my mouse, and I go somewhere else. Of course, if I am face-to-face with an adverse person I have a stock reply. I say, “You may be right. I'll give that some thought.” And then I change the subject to, perhaps, the weather. Now, does that seem disingenuous? Well, it's not if you maintain an awareness that even *you* don't have all the answers. No offense, but I don't and I know you don't either. So why get angry or hostile about it? That goes *nowhere*.

The other response which is rational is *curiosity*. If I think there is any merit in the person's argument, I want to do *more* and so I pursue the matter. And here's a key: I may even pursue the matter when I *disagree*. If the person advancing the idea seems reasonable, well-informed, intelligent, well then reason demands that I give him a hearing and try to *understand* him even when I disagree with him. For what hope would I have persuading a person if I didn't first *understand* what it was that he was saying?

I discovered C.S. Lewis a little late in life, and I found that I sometimes disagree with that great apologist. This would not dismay Lewis in the least, but I never had any difficulty understanding *why* I disagreed because I was trying to *understand* what he was saying. When you think about it, what's the point in only reading people you agree with? Isn't that basically a waste of time? I'm already there. The value and the possibility of growth lies in reading people I *may not* agree with but who have something worthwhile to say.

I commonly get notes from people who listen to this program taking issue with this or that point that I have raised. If the note is hostile, well, you already know what I do with those. But if the correspondence is reasonable, I almost always respond with clarification, with discussion, with reasons. We don't always agree, but why should we? It's no fun speaking to a congregation of head-nodders. I don't know if you know what I mean by that but, as a speaker, you look out and you see people who are listening to you and they nod their heads. “Oh, I agree with you. I agree with you. I agree with you.” And that's all fine and dandy *up to a point* but the truth is, if people are thinking, instead of seeing their head nodding all the time, I should see a furrowed brow. Now, good speakers always *watch* their audience, and for me the furrowed brow is a signal that I haven't made something clear. And so it's very common for me, when I encounter that in person... (I can't do it on the radio because I cannot see the

condition of your brow.) But what I do is I back up and I go over it again and try to clarify what I have just said. There's a great pleasure, actually, in being able to see a furrowed brow smooth out and the light of understanding dawn in someone's eyes—even when they don't agree.

Now, mind you I'm not saying that there is no absolute truth—there is. Jesus said:

John 14

KJ2000

⁶ [...] I am the way, the truth, and the life[...]

What I am suggesting is that you and I don't have it all wrapped up in *our* neat little package. Some people like to do that—they like to sew it all up, hang a creed on it or whatever they like to do, wrap it up, put a ribbon on it, and put it on the shelf, and say, "That is settled." That, my friends, is an *end* to your spiritual growth. You've *got* to be willing to examine your beliefs. You've got to be willing to *understand why* it is that other people, who are just as smart as you are, don't see it the way you do.

Now, realizing that indifference and curiosity are reasonable responses, I wondered why some people found a third response: anger. I think, at long last, I am beginning to understand this. I'll tell you what I think it is and then I'll explain *why* I think that way. Anger that derives from religious argument arises from *fear*. The fear, in its turn, arises because a person feels *threatened*. We have a great deal of our selves—our heart, our mind—invested on faith, our beliefs, our church. We may have spent *years* in this church and all of a sudden see something that begins to threaten the integrity of our commitment to this church. Anything that threatens that investment creates fear, and the fear, well, it tends to create hostility, anger. Now, you may not follow that entirely but just remember that anger over religious arguments and differences is *not a rational response*. If you find yourself angry, at least stop and ask yourself *why you feel that way*. Try to come up with a *reason* for it—a rational approach to it.

Now, over the years I have noticed a plain correlation between two things: one the degree of security one has in his faith, and the other thing the correlation is, the *calm* with which he can consider an adverse idea. Fact is, the thing that tears us up is that, at its core and at its heart, we have insecurities about our faith that we have been unable or unwilling (or perhaps just never really *had* to) deal with. I faced this question at a personal level many years ago. I know the *cold fear* that can arise from the possibility that I can be *wrong*—and not just a little wrong, wrong in major ways that can even affect the way I earn a living. But I couldn't, at that time, ignore the issue. I was working on an essential Master's thesis and I had to deal with it—there was no alternative. And then there came to me a great insight. It's obvious, but sometimes you don't think about it. I had nothing whatever to fear from the *truth*. After all, didn't Jesus say:

John 8

KJ2000

³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

And one of the things it sets you free from is *fear*. And there is a corollary: to whatever extent you don't know the truth, you're not free. Well, from that day forward it became a lot easier for me. I could look at any idea, no matter how intimidating or harebrained it was, and do so without fear. And since that time I've noticed another thing that comes with that fear: the temptation to manipulate the facts and the arguments to, kind of, shore up your weakness. And I can now spot it a mile off when an author has yielded to that temptation—when he is lying, when he is misrepresenting, when he is citing a source as saying something that is not exactly what that source was trying to say. I can see it; it's just clear. What happens is, you end up lying to yourself and then you get mad at anyone who threatens the structure of the lie, who threatens the lie, who's going to expose you and what you have done.

With hindsight, I can see what made the difference in my case. The first thing that made the difference was knowing what Jesus said, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Second, I had, several times in my prayer life, worked my way through the Book of Proverbs—just as I had through the Book of Psalms. Now, I gotta tell you, working your way through Proverbs as a part of your prayer life is a *tough study* because time after time after time the Book of Proverbs calls you a *fool*. And you can’t escape it, you can sidestep it, it’s right there staring you in the face. But there is a thread that runs through the Book of Proverbs that is a lot stronger than that.

There is a thread that runs through the Book of Proverbs—a very powerful thread—and it focuses on the word *understanding*: the characteristic of an understanding man, how you get to be that way, what the value of it is. One of the early places in the Book of Proverbs where it shows up is in the fourth chapter, verse one, where Solomon starts off by saying:

Proverbs 4

KJ2000

¹ Hear, you children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding.

What do you mean, “understanding”. Well, let’s go on and see what we can figure out. He says:

Proverbs 4

KJ2000

² For I give you good doctrine [*that means teaching*], forsake not my law.

³ For I was my father’s son, tender and the only one in the sight of my mother.

Try not to lose sight, when you read the Book of Proverbs, that his father was none other than King David and an *enormous* amount of what you read in the Book of Proverbs originated not with him, but with David. And, of course, his mother was Bathsheba.

Proverbs 4

KJ2000

⁴ He taught me also, and said unto me, Let your heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live.

⁵ Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither turn away from the words of my mouth.

⁶ Forsake her not, and she shall preserve you: love her, and she shall keep you.

It’s interesting how God presents this characteristic—wisdom—as a woman. In fact, in some ways, parts of the Book of Proverbs are like a tale of two women: one—the good woman, the wise woman—the other, the adulteress. And these patterns keep repeating in Proverbs.

Proverbs 4

KJ2000

⁷ Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all your getting get understanding.

⁸ Exalt her, and she shall promote you[...]

If you want a promotion, hey, understanding is one of the big keys.

Proverbs 4

KJ2000

⁸ [...] she shall bring you to honor [...]

Want to receive a medal? Want somebody to stand up and give you an award, a plaque to hang on your wall? Get understanding.

Proverbs 4

KJ2000

⁸ [...] she shall promote you: she shall bring you to honor, when you do embrace her.

⁹ She shall give to your head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to you.

The *value* of understanding is a powerful, recurring theme in this book. It occurs *54 times*, this word does, and it is closely linked to wisdom, which *also* occurs 54 times. And wisdom and understanding are *very closely* interrelated. Now, you see, when your objective is understanding, hostility and anger become *pointless*. You aren't even tempted in that direction because that's not going to get me what I want, because what I want is *understanding*.

Now, I hasten to add that doesn't mean you have to examine every lunatic idea you encounter. In fact, having understanding as your object enables you to dismiss foolish ideas in a *fraction* of the time that the angry man will manage it. Later in Proverbs 14, verse 7—this is one of the most important things I ever took away from this book—Proverbs 14, verse 7:

Proverbs 14

KJ2000

⁷ Go from the presence of a foolish man, when you perceive not in him the lips of knowledge.

⁸ The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way: but the folly of fools is deceit.

Now, this is a *wonderful* thing to understand. You are liberated; you are free. There is nothing in Christianity to require you to stand still and listen to an *idiot*. When you begin to understand that this man does not know what he's talking about, you are *freed* in Christ (because he freed with the truth). You are free to walk away. You have a right not to listen to fools.

Proverbs 14

KJ2000

⁸ The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way: but the folly of fools is deceit.

Now, this is really interesting because I've already referred to this. What the fool will do is, he will lie. He will actually deceive himself first about what it is he's trying to say, and he was shore up his lies with false arguments and various circumnavigations to keep you from having to deal with the truth that he is lying to himself. And, in turn, he is lying to you. They put up a wall—it's faulty. They daub it with mud, fill up the cracks. They whitewash it to make it look good. But it doesn't change the fact *it's a lie*. Now, for this matter of internet forums which I raised, these are liberally salted with fools. You might briefly entertain yourself by being able to spot them in those locations. They're are there; they are there everywhere. Proverbs 18:2 says one more thing which I think is *crucial*.

Proverbs 18

NIV

² Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.

We have a word for people like that: we call them "opinionated". And we're dealing with people who are loaded with opinions and have opinions on all kinds of stuff which they *treat* as though it's gospel. If you disagree with their opinion, well, you must be crazy or you must be a liar or you must be dishonest. I'll never forget some fellow who wrote to me once (he actually was a friend of mine at the time) who wrote to me and said, "You know, I can't understand it. You were so much smarter than all the rest of

us.” (I’ll add that that’s a doubtful thing.) “And I can’t understand why you didn’t see this.” And it never occurred to him that he’s already telling me that I’m smarter than he is and that I should see things *his* way instead of the way I see them. I still have not figured that one out.

Proverbs 18

NIV

² Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.

Now, if you happen to be a person who goes on internet forums (It’s not necessarily just there. It can be in a conversation after church, a conversation over coffee at work, or anywhere else.) if you find that a person is just *not interested* in what you are saying (even if you would never mess with an internet forum this is good to know) anytime you are talking with a person who has no interest in *understanding your* point of view, but only in *expressing his*, walk away or change the subject. You are *wasting your time*.

There’s another incidental idea that I have to consider at this point. Someone once said that if the devil can’t get at you any other way, he will waste your time. I had a friend who referred to these types as “time-wasting demons”. Now, I don’t think he meant that quite literally, but when you understand that the name “Satan” means “adversary” then it makes sense that some people might be time-wasting adversaries. And I think there is some truth in that statement that if the devil can’t get you any other way, he will *waste your time*. Sometimes, you just need to get up and *walk away*. But a man of understanding doesn’t have to *fear* anything. Earlier in the Book of Proverbs, in chapter two, verse one:

Proverbs 2

KJ2000

¹ My son, if you will receive my words, and lay up my commandments with you;

² So that you incline your ear unto wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding;

I want to stop there just for a moment. Because, the fact of the matter is, understanding is not found in any human gene. We aren’t born with a gene that somehow, as we grow up, makes us an understanding person. And while there may be a spiritual gift that falls on individuals that gives them particular insight and understanding, that’s not what he’s talking about here. He’s talking about the kind of understanding that comes to people who start out down the road crying after knowledge and lifting up their voice for understanding—actually trying their best to understand, applying their heart. And this is really very simple. When you’re engaged in a discussion with somebody, instead of being in such a hurry to express your own opinion, try to understand the person you’re talking with. It is a simple reorientation of the way you look at people, at life, at arguments, is that you are a person who wants to understand more than you do today. Man, I tell you, if you could encounter more people who did that it would be a different world. But you can *be* a person like that. You’ll find yourself, frankly, with more friends than you might have thought.

Proverbs 2

KJ2000

³ Yea, if you cry after knowledge, and lift up your voice for understanding;

Go looking for it. Pick up rocks. Look wherever you have to look.

Proverbs 2

KJ2000

⁴ If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hid treasures;

⁵ Then shall you understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.

⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom: out of his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.

Oh, so it isn't just experience; I can learn from the Bible, the Word of God. I can read through that and gain understanding. And I have to tell you the truth, for me it has been, absolutely, the greatest source of understanding any time in my life. Somehow or other I got started reading the Bible as a kid and I've kept it up down through the years. When I started reading the Bible, the King James Version was the only game in town, so that's what I learned. And I can't tell you how valuable it has been to me, even in the things that have to do with just living an ordinary life in the world. Not to mention knowing God and his Son.

Proverbs 2

KJ2000

⁷ He lays up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a shield to them that walk uprightly.

⁸ He keeps the paths of justice, and preserves the way of his saints.

⁹ Then shall you understand [*and there's that word again*] righteousness, and justice, and equity; yea, every good path.

Ah, one of the things that is so disappointing to me and some Christian people is that whenever they witness the judgement of God, they ask themselves, "Well, how in the world could a righteous and a good God do such a thing as that." And they just aren't willing to deal with the fact that God is not only good, he is also a *judge* And without justice—if it doesn't exist—mercy becomes *meaningless*.

Proverbs 2

KJ2000

¹⁰ When wisdom enters into your heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto your soul;

¹¹ Discretion shall preserve you, understanding shall keep you:

What a truth! Learning these things *from the Bible* and applying your heart to these things *in life* preserve you and keep you—keep you well, keep you safe, keep you without harm. What is that worth?

Proverbs 3

KJ2000

¹ My son, forget not my law; but let your heart keep my commandments:

² For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to you.

This is in chapter three of Proverbs. Then he says this:

Proverbs 3

KJ2000

³ Let not mercy and truth forsake you: bind them about your neck; write them upon the table of your heart:

Now, I kind of understand mercy and truth being tied around your neck—in other words, just really get close to this; don't let these things get away from you—then you come to "write them up on the table of your heart." How do you do that? Well, I think I can tell you what they did in ancient times: they *memorized* the principals that were involved in it, that were shown in the Bible as to how you live your life. You'd almost think, "Well, the Old Testament is kind of harsh. But mercy and truth, that's New Testament." But, hey, we're in the Old Testament here. Don't let mercy and truth get away from you.

And this is another thing that's really important in understanding. When you're talking to somebody—even if he is a fool, an abject fool—if, somehow or other, you can be merciful to him—not unkind, not provoke him to get him madder than he is now—if you can try to understand, at least as far as common sense dictates that you go, it's possible, just possible he might try to *understand you*. So do this. He says if you do this:

Proverbs 3

KJ2000

⁴ So shall you find favor and good understanding in the sight of God and man.

Wow! We're talking about something...I mean, all of us want to have favor in the eyes of God. Having favor in the eyes of man is *also* important, in some ways. It's not *more* important, but it's important right here and right now. It may be important to you on your job (or in getting one) to be perceived as a man of *good understanding*. And that doesn't happen by accident. It's not in your genes. It doesn't fall down on you from heaven. It is something you have to *apply your heart to*—just simply trying to understand other people. How you do that? You do it by asking questions—kind questions—and listening to the answer and following up in the interest of plainly (not manipulating) trying to grasp what the other person is all about.

Proverbs 3

KJ2000

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding.

Don't lean on that. Don't put your weight on it. What you've got to *really* trust is the understanding that comes from God. Where does that come from? What route does it come to you? It comes to you from the *pages of your Bible* which, after all, if you're going to be a Christian, you got to sit down and read that book again and again.

Proverbs 3

KJ2000

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.

Wow. Now there is a piece of instruction. Just be very careful to acknowledge God in *everything you do* and he will direct your paths.

Proverbs 3

KJ2000

⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.

You know, that last instruction is one that just has to stick in a person's mind. You really got to be careful about this. Everybody knows and everybody encounters and nobody likes the know-it-all. That being the case, be *painfully aware* of the temptation. Don't ever let anyone think of you as being another one of those *know-it-alls*. Don't be wise in your own eyes. Lean on God. Lean on his words. Be a man of understanding.