

# Born to Win

## Christian Mysticism

by Ronald L. Dart

I'm *puzzled* about something and I'd like to talk it through with you. Why is it that some Christian folks become involved in mysticism? It's utterly foreign to me, but it has a *very* strong appeal to others. It seems to be based on the idea that there is knowledge that is only available to a few initiated ones—that you just can't get to it unless you are one of those who have been initiated. Now, here's my question: Is all the information that is important available to all people? (Is it exoteric?) Or is it limited to a chosen few? (That is, is it esoteric?) Jesus does seem to suggest that there is esoteric knowledge. He had just given the long *Parable of the Sower and the Seed* to the crowd, and he went back with his disciples. And they came to him and they said:

### Matthew 13

AKJV

<sup>10</sup> And the disciples came, and said to him, Why speak you to them in parables?

<sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

So, I would conclude from this that there is such a thing as inside knowledge. There are mysteries, and it's not given to everyone to understand them. But then the obvious question comes: Why not? And what's interesting about this, if you stay with Jesus in this discussion, he begins to explain it. He goes on:

### Matthew 13

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> For whoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that he has.

Now, this comes right on the heels of the statement “it is given to you to know”; “to them it is not given.” It would be a mistake here to overlook who Jesus is talking about. It was, in fact, the Jewish *religious establishment* he was talking about. So what does he mean, “whoever has”? Has what? “Whoever has not”...What is it they don't have? Well, he goes on. He says:

### Matthew 13

KJ2000

<sup>13</sup> Therefore speak I to them in parables: because seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

<sup>14</sup> And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, who said, By hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive:

Now, from what I read here, I don't get the impression that either Jesus or Isaiah is talking about something that is not *there* to be seen. People actually *see* it; they just don't *perceive* it—they don't grasp what it is that is right in front of their nose. They hear, and they don't grasp it. Why? Well, he goes on, quoting Isaiah:

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>15</sup> For this people's heart is waxed gross [*fat*], and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

It's irony, I think, the way he's developing this latter part of this. He says, "They have closed their eyes lest they should be healed." It's *striking* to me, though, that he says, "*their eyes they* have closed." It isn't that God closed their eyes; *they did*. Now, does that suggest why they could see something and not perceive it, or hear something and *just not get it*? You know, it is possible for people to lose the "want to". (Sometimes for a lot of complicated reasons—reasons of their own.) But Jesus comes back to his disciples and he said:

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

<sup>17</sup> For truly I say to you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them.

And here is the nexus of the revealing things that had been hidden from everybody: It was the words and the acts of Jesus that they were seeing and they were hearing. Men of old did not see these things *at all*. They weren't there for them to see. Now, they are there for *anyone* to see, and still men don't see them. You see, we're not really talking about esoteric knowledge; it was right there in front of *everyone* for them to see. But they had long since closed their eyes and their ears to God.

In fact, the story of the *Parable of the Sower* is something a thinking person ought to tumble to fairly quickly. It would be interesting to kind of take this story out of its context, read it to someone, and say, "What did it mean?" I think most English classes would figure it out very quickly. It's *obvious* what Jesus meant. So we aren't really dealing with anything mysterious unless you have blinded yourself to it by your prejudices or, perhaps, by your desire to justify yourself. But there are still some puzzling passages in the Bible, in Jesus' words, about this kind of thing. Take, for example, John 6, verse 44:

**John 6**

AKJV

<sup>44</sup> No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him: [...]

Now, if you take that at face value, it means here's a great mass of people out here, and God reaches down and fingers a set of them and draws *them* to Christ, and leaves the rest of them on the outside looking in. Well, maybe.

**John 6**

AKJV

<sup>44</sup> No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

<sup>45</sup> It is written in the prophets, [...]

And listen, now, to what's written in the prophets.

**John 6**

AKJV

<sup>45</sup> [...] And they shall be all taught of God. [...]

Not some. *All*.

**John 6**

AKJV

<sup>45</sup> [...] Every man therefore that has heard, and has learned of the Father, comes to me.

Now, in a way, this is a difficult passage, but there's one shining light in it: Those Jews who had heard and learned of the Father... Where did they do that? Well, from the Old Testament. They read the Scriptures, they believed the Scriptures, they naturally gravitated to Jesus... unless—because they wanted to justify themselves; unless because they were grinding some sort of political axe—they had ended up blinding themselves to Jesus and to Jesus' message and work. Those who had learned nothing from God tended to naturally hate him, because he threatened the status quo. When we are all comfortable—when we're all settled down, we're enjoying life, the status quo is here—someone comes along and tells us, “Hey, this picture is all wrong”, we don't like him. So, in a way, this whole idea is suggestive of the good soil of the *Parable of the Sower and the Seed*, which is what we started with. Here is Jesus' explanation of the parable that follows on the heels of it. He said:

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> Hear you therefore the parable of the sower.

<sup>19</sup> When any one hears the word of the kingdom, and understands it not, then comes the wicked one, and catches away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.

Not a good place to sow seed. No thinking agricultural guy would toss his seed into the ditch by the roadside. He basically is saying, “You hear it and you don't understand it.” Well, why wouldn't you understand it? It's not because it's that difficult. It's not because it's obscure. It may be because of the blindness of your own eyes.

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>20</sup> But he that received the seed into stony places, [...]

Now what fool would sow his seed in the stone? He said:

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>20</sup> [...] the same is he that hears the word, and immediately with joy receives it;

He's really happy about this.

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>21</sup> Yet has he not root in himself, but endures for a while: for when tribulation or persecution

rises because of the word, by and by he is offended.

And where was the fault? It was in him.

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>22</sup> He also that received seed among the thorns is he that hears the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

And you can see that fairly quickly if you look around yourself; even looking at some of your friends—your Christian friends—who may be *so wrapped up* in the care of this world, in the acquisition of the things of this world, that the Word has been choked in their life and they're not fruitful. And, in fact, that may even been talking about you.

**Matthew 13**

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> But he that received seed into the good ground is he that hears the word, and understands it; which also bears fruit, and brings forth, some an hundred times, some sixty, some thirty.

Yeah, some of us *do* do better than others. But the key element involved in it all is that *the soil is good*. So it does, after all, depend to some degree on *the kind of people we are*. Some people have gone too far down the wrong road. And Jesus can come and feed 5000 of them, teach them, heal their sick, and they *still* cannot grasp what is right in front of their eyes. Well, nevertheless, there is in Man an *insatiable* thirst for the meaning of life. What on earth shall these people do for meaning when they have *rejected* that meaning that is right in front of them?

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the German concentration camps, and he wrote a book called *Man's Search for Meaning*. I consider that a *landmark* book; it is very high on my must-read list. In this book he spoke of something he called a "*drive to meaning*". I take that to mean that it's as innate in Man as the sex drive, and just as demanding. We have got to be able to make sense of the world around us. Now, the question we're going to have to answer is where that meaning is going to come from. Is it from experiences with the spirit world—experienced religion? Experiences with God? Now, there *are* those who claim that a spirit came and spoke to them and gave them special insights and special knowledge. Now, to these people John writes in First John, chapter 4:

**1 John 4**

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: [...]

Why?

**1 John 4**

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> [...] because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

<sup>2</sup> Hereby know you the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:

<sup>3</sup> And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: [...]

That's serious.

**1 John 4**

AKJV

<sup>3</sup> [...] and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

Now, *what in the world* is John driving at? Well, it's hard to say. His test that he wanted to put upon these people probably had more to do with what was going on in the church *at that time* than with what we see around us today. What's important about this is that John says we should "try" the spirits. Okay, by what standard? What do we measure the spirits against? The answer is clear enough if we haven't dismissed some of the important witnesses in this case. For example, take Isaiah. If you're a reader of the Old Testament, you would have come across this somewhere. Isaiah chapter 8, verse 19:

**Isaiah 8**

NIV '84

<sup>19</sup> When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?

<sup>20</sup> To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. [*They have no daylight in them.*]

Now, in a very real sense Isaiah is telling people to look to the *Word* of God—capital "W", Word. The Law was the sum of the scriptures available in Isaiah's day (which is something, I think, sometimes we forget)—that by the time Isaiah wrote there was no Old Testament as we know it. He was actually in the process of writing one of the books; and a lot of them would be written after Isaiah. What *was* Scripture—what was *recognized* as Scripture—was what we today call the Pentateuch, the Law, the Torah. And so he says we've got to look in that direction for these things. The term, by the way, "the testimony" (as in "the law and the testimony") is quite specific. It is the singular title given to the Ten Commandments. So when you, in the Bible, see the term "the testimony", it's talking about the Ten Commandments. In fact, you may not realize this, but the Ark of the Covenant was originally called the Ark of the Testimony because it *contained* the two tablets with the Ten Commandments. So I would gather that we are to try the spirits against the written Word of God.

And one more thing which I will come to, where does our knowledge, where does our insight, where does our special meaning of things, come from? Is it from philosophy, from reason, from wisdom? Well, the apostle Paul tackles this question head on. Is it, on the other hand, from the Word of God? In 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 17, Paul starts out to analyze this. And he says:

**1 Corinthians 1**

AKJV

<sup>17</sup> For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

The word rendered "wisdom" is the Greek *sophia* [σοφία, G4678]. Combine it with *philos* [φίλος, G5384] and you get *philosophy*—the love of wisdom. Unfortunately, among the Greeks it meant rather more than that. Among philosophers it involves a search for meaning by *pure reason*. Paul, with a great sweep of his hand, takes that all off the table. He goes on to say:

**1 Corinthians 1**

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> For the preaching of the cross [...]

And by that—“the preaching of the cross”—means the preaching of the crucifixion, the death, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And, I think, would also include his resurrection (because that’s what Paul *did* preach). He says:

**1 Corinthians 1**

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but to us which are saved it is the power of God.

<sup>19</sup> For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent [*the intelligentsia*].

You know, you can kind of lay aside all the philosophy and all the dreamers that come along with their ideas. Paul (switching to the NIV now) asks this in verse 20:

**1 Corinthians 1**

NIV '84

<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

<sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

The Jews? The Jews always have to have a sign. The Greeks? Well, they’ve got to have philosophy [verse 22].

**1 Corinthians 1**

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness;

<sup>24</sup> But to them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

<sup>25</sup> Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

You know, some time ago, I read something that suggested if you want to minister to teenagers, you need to “get real”. (To “get real” is a term popular with teenage people.) Teens aren’t looking for philosophy, they aren’t looking for signs, they aren’t looking for all that stuff. They are looking for something *real*. And I think that’s a crucial idea for us to get in mind. When Paul came to people to preach, he preached about the very *real* Christ who walked the streets of Galilee, who walked through Jerusalem and healed the sick people, who was crucified, who died on the stake, was buried and rose again the third day. And *it was real*, not philosophy. And he goes on to say to the Corinthians:

**1 Corinthians 1**

KJ2000

<sup>26</sup> For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

<sup>27</sup> But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

And, you know, it’s true to say that God has a sense of humor. You can often see it in things, because he seems to take a certain amount of delight in sticking things right under people’s nose. And they can’t see them. They are there in plain sight and they can’t find them. You may have played a game when

you were a kid called “Hide the Thimble”. (They still had thimbles in those days when I was young.) And you take some small object and you place it *in plain sight* in a room. And the question is how long it will take a person to come into the room and look, and look, and look, and *see* this thing that is right there in plain sight. Well, God has chosen the...

### 1 Corinthians 1

AKJV

<sup>28</sup> [...] base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yes, and things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are:

Why would God now go through this whole exercise? Well, here was the answer.

### 1 Corinthians 1

AKJV

<sup>29</sup> That no flesh should glory in his presence.

So there's a key right there. It isn't that you have to have particular insight. It doesn't mean that you have to be smart. It doesn't mean that you have to be able to reason better than somebody else. For if you could do that, and if that's how you came to it, then you could be proud of yourself. It doesn't work that way. It works strictly by believing God. He says:

### 1 Corinthians 1

AKJV

<sup>30</sup> But of him are you in Christ Jesus, who of God is made to us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

<sup>31</sup> That, according as it is written, He that glories, let him glory in the Lord.

As opposed to himself, or some philosopher, or some guru. Paul continues in First Corinthians 2:

### 1 Corinthians 2

KJ2000

<sup>1</sup> And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.

<sup>2</sup> For I determined not to know anything among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Now, I suppose I have to take Paul at his word that he was not a great speaker. Reading his letters makes that a little hard to believe, but never mind. I think what he meant was that he was into the *real*, not into clever argumentation. “I’m talking about real stuff here.”

### 1 Corinthians 2

AKJV

<sup>3</sup> And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

<sup>4</sup> And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:

“Why did I do that?”

**1 Corinthians 2**

AKJV

<sup>5</sup> That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

What we want is not for you to be buying some stupid philosophy. We want you to be believing in the *real*—the real God. He does say:

**1 Corinthians 2**

AKJV

<sup>7</sup> But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world to our glory:

<sup>8</sup> Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

<sup>9</sup> But as it is written, Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him.

What a *powerful* statement he makes.

**1 Corinthians 2**

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

He goes on to talk about how the natural man doesn't *receive* the things of the Spirit of God; they are foolishness to them, because they are *spiritually* discerned. But what does Paul mean when he said things that are "spiritually discerned". Well, later on in Second Corinthians he will write this:

**1 Corinthians 4**

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

<sup>2</sup> Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Now, can you get that? Forget about mysticism, forget about secret stuff, forget all that stuff. Paul says, "We're setting forth *the truth*—reality—plainly."

**1 Corinthians 4**

NIV '84

<sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

<sup>4</sup> The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Even though it's right there in plain sight, they can't see it. Paul said:

**1 Corinthians 4**

NIV '84

<sup>5</sup> For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

Paul hid nothing. But the mindset of the people who heard him made all the difference. The gospel was not hidden; it was just that men *did not want to deal with it*. They had closed their eyes. Not only that, but the God of this world had blinded them to the real. They were made to believe that what they *see* is not the truth. It reminds me of the famous Groucho Marx line, “You gonna believe your eyes, or are you gonna believe me?”

But what do you do when your drive to meaning—the innate desire for meaning to life, yours and others—comes up a flat brick wall? What do you do then? Well, you can manufacture your own meaning. You can begin to listen to your own feelings. Maybe, after all, your feelings represent the Spirit speaking to you. Or, perhaps, you can find a guru and follow him—someone who claims hidden meaning that he can reveal to the chosen few. You know, it’s an odd truth that many people, not satisfied with the real (which is right in front of their eyes) try to look for something else.

Take the obvious story of what happened on 9/11. What *really* happened seemed so unreal, so incredible, so *unthinkable*, that some people think there must be another explanation. So conspiracy theories come to the rescue and ascribe a *hidden, secret meaning* to all of this. (It’s not clear to me that the conspiracy theories have any more credibility than the real story, but never mind.)

And I think it is this drive to meaning that leads some people into Christian mysticism. The real is not enough for them. They have to have a *deeper* meaning, a *more personal* meaning. But it is important to remember: That meaning must *always* be tested against what is *real*. And nothing could be more *real* than the Ten Commandments. Nothing could be more *real* than the teaching and the example of one Jesus Christ.

The struggle with life can be hard enough with these to go by, but it is a battle that *can be won*. But the battle has to be won on a *real* playing field, against *real* challenges. Mysticism is a *retreat* from the real. In effect, it abandons the struggle for real life and seeks meaning they think is denied to others. In Jesus Christ there is no mystery.

Until next time.

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