

Born to Win

Christian Origins #1 - Acts

by Ronald L. Dart

How many *hundreds of millions* of Christians are there in the world by now? What's your guess? Well, I looked it up—Christianity, of all stripes, is the largest religion in the world and Christians number (are you ready for it?) one-and-a-half *billion* people. You know, it hadn't been all that long ago till that was the population of the *world*. How did this happen? How could 12 men, bearing witness of one man, create a religion that has, in fact, *changed the world*? Everywhere Christianity of any stripe has gone, it is made men's lives better. Oh, I know of the abuses and the corruption and the harm that has been done, at times, in history in the name of Jesus Christ—but the evil done by Christians was *contrary* to the teachings of Jesus. It wasn't what *he* wanted; it wasn't what *he* said they should do. And the good brought to the world by those teachings? Oh my, it outweighs and overwhelms any evil that evil men have done in Jesus' name.

But how did it happen? How did it come to pass? How did you go from one hundred twenty disciples into a billion-and-a-half disciples just under 2,000 years? Everybody knows the Bible has been translated into every language and dialect in the world, and everyone knows about Jesus and his teachings. How did we get there?

Well, to properly explain this and make it clear to you, I have to take you back a lot further in time to a man named Abraham. Abraham was God's man. He's called in the Bible, "the *friend* of God" [**James 2:23**]. I don't think anybody else has an appellation like *that* in the Bible. It's plain that God thought a lot of Abraham. He stopped by to see him from time to time. He stopped by for a meal and conversation. He revealed things that he was going to do to Abraham, and he made *promises* to Abraham. One of these promises, believe it or not, had to do with Jesus Christ. The promise is found in Genesis 22, verse 16:

Genesis 22

AKJV

¹⁶ [...] By myself have I sworn, said the LORD, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son:

¹⁷ That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is on the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

¹⁸ And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice.

Now, what had happened here was that, some little time before this, God had appeared Abraham and said:

Genesis 22

AKJV

² [...] Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and get you into the land of

Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I will tell you of.

Nobody knows how *hard* that hit Abraham. He struggled with it, but he went—and he was ready to do it, until God stopped him and he made this promise. He said, “Because you have done this and you are not going to even withhold your son from me, that I’m going to give you this blessing.”

Now, mind you, there were no Jews at this time and there was no Judaism. This was the faith of *Abraham*—the religion of one man and his family. There would not be any Jews in the world for a very long time. In fact, it was the *grandson* of Abraham—his name was Jacob. His name was changed to Israel, and it is the children of *Israel* that form that nation that we read so much about in the Old Testament, and Judah and the Jews are one of 12 tribes of Israel, and their religion—Judaism—was a very late development. But there’s a small piece of *dynamite* in this passage that gets overlooked in most translations. The word for “nations” when he says, “in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”, is the Hebrew word “*goy*” [גוי, Strong’s H1471]. It’s the word that, elsewhere, is translated “Gentiles”. Now, isn’t that special? For what Abraham is now told, by God himself, that “in your seed shall all the *Gentiles* be blessed—all the nations of the earth.”

It was God’s intent that that the blessings of Abraham and that the blessings that came upon Abraham from knowing God should be taken out and transmitted and passed upon the *entirety* of the world—including the Gentiles. It’s clear by the statement that God was not satisfied to be the God of one little corner of the world and one small family of people. He did not mean to *merely* bless Abraham, but the Gentiles—all the nations. And it was in Abraham’s *descendants* that this was to take place.

Now, the apostle Paul read all this. And when he encountered a difficulty with the Galatians, he took a little time to explain his understanding of what God told Abraham. It’s found in Galatians three, in verse seven. He says:

Galatians 3

AKJV

⁷ Know you therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.

Now, this is a *fascinating* concept because what Paul has done is link back through *all* the centuries the faith of Jesus Christ, the disciples of Jesus, to the faith—not of Israel and not of the Jews—but to the faith of *Abraham*.

Galatians 3

AKJV

⁸ And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel to Abraham, saying, In you shall all nations be blessed.

Do you realize what Paul said here? He said that God *preached the gospel* to Abraham, saying “in you shall all the Gentiles be blessed.” The gospel of God is a blessing to the *people*—and, of course, in the New Testament sense, the gospel is the *message of Jesus Christ*. So, then, Paul says:

Galatians 3

AKJV

⁹ So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.

¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.

¹¹ But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

¹² And the law is not of faith: but, The man that does them shall live in them.

¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, [*That's because we've sinned and it broken it.*] being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree:

¹⁴ That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

“That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ.” You remember I said earlier in the program that, wherever the name of Jesus has gone, wherever the gospel has gone, Wherever the *teachings* of Jesus have gone, they have made men’s lives *better*—to the tune of a billion-and-a-half people on this planet, as a matter of fact.

Galatians 3

AKJV

¹⁵ Brothers, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man’s covenant [*or man’s agreement*], yet if it be confirmed, no man cancels, or adds thereto.

¹⁶ Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He said not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to your seed, which is Christ.

And so what Paul says is that God preached the gospel originally to Abraham and the *point* of this whole thing was that *his seed*—that is, Christ—would be the one who would actually bless the Gentiles with the truth. Paul made it very plain that Jesus was to do the same thing that Abraham’s seed was to do, and it has been so through Jesus Christ.

There are 18 million people in the world who follow Judaism and there are 1.5 billion who follow Christ. Now, I don’t mean to imply by that that because there are more of you that means you’re better or anything of the sort. But the lives *touched* by the teachings of the Bible mean a lot. And, in actual fact, in that first century the Christians didn’t *have* any New Testament—the Christians carried the Scriptures wherever they went. The Jews had *also* done that and *still* have also done that, but what I’m trying to say is that the Christians carried the Bible into every nook and cranny of the *world* to the extent that there are now one-and-a-half *billion* of them out there. Judaism—if they had gone to the world, if they had somehow found a way to be evangelists, to take the Word of God, to take the Bible to the world, to take the Law of God, to take the Torah and teach it to the Gentiles...who knows what good they could have done? Because the underlying ethical system of Judaism and Christianity is the same. It’s the faith of Abraham and it’s the Law that God gave to Abraham.

You know, a strong case can be made that it was God’s *original* intent to make the nation of Israel a *beacon* of faith in the world; that the entire world would be *blessed* through Israel; that Israel would be an example to all of them; that Israel would be a source of knowledge, of truth, and of the Law of God, that would spread throughout the world; that ancient Israel would take their God to the nations. But they never did. They acted as though God belonged to them. “He’s our God; he’s not yours.” And they didn’t take God to the nations.

You know, there’s nothing in the Law of God to lead an Israelite to think he could not eat with a Gentile. But by the time of Jesus, the Israelites had developed their own set of rules which, to all intents and purposes, *ruled out* the Gentiles. Now, don’t get me wrong—I see Judaism as an honest and faithful response of the Jewish people to the revelation of God. They have carried the Scriptures and their faith down through the generations in the face of *terrible* persecution. I have nothing but respect for the Jewish people in their religion. For, in their mind, their religion *does not call* for them to evangelize the world. But it appears to me that somehow it became *their* religion as opposed to a religion for the world, and they kept the faith of God to *themselves*. They have never evangelized. They have never taken their *magnificent Law* to the world. But then there was Jesus, and everything changed.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continually challenged the leadership—the religious establishment—and the religious establishment of his day was the Judaism of his day. And so consequently, Jesus was challenging Judaism at every turn—never mind that he was a Jew himself. He kept contrasting the rules and regulations of Judaism—their tradition—with the written Law of God, which he said was *from the beginning*. He was aiming back *beyond* Judaism to the faith of the fathers, even to the faith of Abraham.

Now, there's an interesting little statement in the Old Testament about Abraham that, I think, may help you understand this. It's in Genesis 26 and it begins in verse four. As part of his promise to Abraham, God says:

Genesis 26

AKJV

⁴ And I will make your seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these countries; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed;

⁵ Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.

Now, this is a curious thing, although it might not immediately strike you as so. The fact is that, if you read your way through the Book of Genesis, you encounter law every time you turn around. Men understand that there *is* a law; they know that there are things that are *sin* and things that are *not*; they basically have an idea of how to relate to God. And here we find out that they're not only *aware* of the Law, but that there is a *system* of law that makes differentiation between commandments and statutes and laws. Now, what's funny is that nowhere in the Book of Genesis is there any *record* of this system of law. There is no place in there where it says, "Here's where God sat down and revealed his Law, and this is what it was." But everybody knew it was there. Everyone knew there were sins.

Why didn't Moses tell us what that law was? Actually, he did. And this is the thing that is easy to overlook, if you just start reading from the beginning of Genesis right on through Exodus. You don't realize, necessarily, that Genesis was written by Moses, and he wrote the Book of Genesis *long* after the Exodus, after they had crossed the Red Sea, after they had gone to Mount Sinai, after they had received the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. *Then* Moses sits down and writes Genesis, and he says in there that God says, "Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws", Moses didn't bother to elaborate—because he was elaborating in Exodus what those laws were. This actually shows us that Abraham had essentially the *same Law*—the same ethical system, the same moral system—that God would later give to Israel. So there was no *need* to record it in Genesis, since it was recorded in Exodus.

And this is why Jesus was at such *pains* to emphasize that his rejection of the traditions of Judaism *did not* involve a rejection of the Law, because the Law had been around from the *very beginning*, and it's the Law that is the *basis* of the ethical system he wanted his disciples to *take to the world*. So, returning to our original question: How did Christianity make this move into the world? Well, it came about in response to some *clear* instructions given by Jesus to his disciples. It's in that passage called the Great Commission, and it's found in Matthew 28, beginning in verse 18. Jesus came and spoke to his disciples and said this:

Matthew 28

KJ2000

¹⁸ [...] All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

¹⁹ Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Now, if you're Christian you probably already know this scripture quite well. It's the Great Commission; it's our mantra; it's that which drives us to spread the gospel, and indeed has *done so* since Jesus ascended to the Father and his disciples took off with that gospel. But you may not realize what a *bombshell* it was to the man who first heard it, for the translation that we carry around with us obscures what Jesus *actually* said. Here's what he said:

Matthew 28

KJ2000

¹⁸ [...] All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

¹⁹ Go you therefore, and teach all [*the Gentiles*], baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

And we take it a step further when we understand what he really said. He didn't just say, "teach them", he said make him into *disciples*.

Matthew 28

ESV

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of [*the Gentiles*] [...]

This is actually what Abraham's blessing was all about. It wasn't merely a matter of *having a religion*, it was a matter of *using* that religion to change the lives of men—and not the men of your own nation only, but to be a blessing to the *entirety of the visible world*. You know what's strange about this is that, even though Jesus dropped this on them, even though these were men, many of whom, up until this time, would not have *eaten* with a Gentile, wouldn't have had anything to *do* with a Gentile, would have assumed the Gentiles were outcasts and were not even *relevant* to the plan of God—what is really strange is that, when Jesus dropped his word on them, they didn't get it at first.

Now, mind you, throughout the New Testament there are many references to Gentiles, and when you read them you understand that when they use this word they were talking about non-Jewish people in the world—and they were *not* Jewish people, they were not God's people. Jews were God's people; the Gentiles were not, okay? Now, Jesus says, "I want you to make *disciples* of the Gentiles. I got it. You got it?" (Well, the disciples didn't really, but we'll talk about that.) The story of their reluctance and of the final breakout of the gospel is in the Book of Acts—the first book of Christian Origins.

The Book of Acts is written by a familiar friend. His name is Luke. The same fellow, right, that wrote the Gospel According to Luke, sat down and wrote the Book of Acts. He wrote it to a fellow named Theophilus. We have *no* idea who he was, but Luke says:

Acts 1

KJ2000

¹ The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,

And he's talking about his Gospel account. He wrote all that down:

Acts 1

KJ2000

² Until the day in which he was taken up, after he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen:

³ To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen

of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God:

⁴ And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, said he, you have heard of me.

⁵ For John truly baptized with water; but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

You know, I don't think those men had *any* idea what was about to happen to them. They listened to Jesus, and they blinked, and they took the words in, and they were able to write them down for future generations to know them, but all the evidence is that they *could not have known* what was going to happen. It is easy to look back, frankly, down through all the centuries and listen to these men as they tell their story and say, "Boy, they were obtuse at the time. So many things Jesus said they just didn't get." But you've got to understand, they had no frame of reference for it. They had grown up with a certain set of beliefs and presuppositions and ideas about things, and when Jesus came along he blew a lot of that stuff out of the water. And they were left trying to figure out, in some cases, where they were. I'm quite certain, in fact, that they did not come to understand the significance of many things that Jesus said until maybe even decades had gone by after his ascension.

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁶ When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, will you at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

Now, you have to realize that *all* their upbringing, *all* their knowledge, *all* their belief system concerning prophecy was that when the Messiah came he would *restore the kingdom*. They would rally around him, and they would throw the Romans out, and all the glory days of the kingdom—like Solomon and David before him—these glory days would come back again. And so they said, "Are we going to do it now?"

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁷ And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power.

And I suppose it's just as well. Can you imagine the impact on these fellows if Jesus had said, "Oh, relax boys. It's going to 2,000 years. You're going to go through a long dry spell here. You're going to struggle. You're going to get hurt. You're going to become discouraged and downhearted. You're going to grow old and you're going to *die*. And you'll never see it until the resurrection." No, he had a little more care for them than that. He just said:

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁷ [...] It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power.

⁸ But you shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, [...]

That, they would have expected.

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁸ [...] and in all Judea, [...]

That was probably expected.

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁸ [...] and in Samaria, [...]

And that's probably the *last* thing they imagined that he would say—and then he went *further*. He said:

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁸ [...] and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

If there's one thing that's consistent in Jesus' teachings, all the way through, is that from the beginning it was his intent that this thing has got to go to the *whole world*—to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The expression Paul uses, “to the Jew first but also to the Gentile” [**Romans 1:16**], is the pattern that was followed throughout. And so they were to be witnesses in Jerusalem and then in Judea, but they were also to go to Samaria and, finally, to the end of the world.

Acts 1

KJ2000

⁹ And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. [*He just disappeared in the cloud.*]

¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up [*I expect, with all their mouths open.*], behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

¹¹ Who also said, You men of Galilee, why stand you gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven.

And then, I guess, that angel disappeared. It's really something to consider. Here they were on the Mount of Olives, and when you go back to the Book of Zechariah, you find that in the end time—the return of Christ, when the Kingdom of God is ultimately established—his feet stand in that day on the Mount of Olives.

Zechariah 14

AKJV

⁴ And his feet shall stand in that day on the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall split in the middle thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.

Not only is he coming back in the same way, he's coming back to the same place. So the disciples (once they were able to close their mouths):

Acts 1

KJ2000

¹² [...] returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a

sabbath day's journey.

¹³ And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the brother of James.

¹⁴ These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

But they had some unfinished business to take care of. Due to Judas' betrayal and his ultimate suicide, they were one apostle short, and it seemed clear to Peter that there had to be 12 of them. So in those days Peter stood up in the midst of disciples and said... And, by the way, he says there were about 120 disciples at this point. Now, let's stop a moment and consider that. That's not very many, really, considering three-and-a-half years, and when you consider that Jesus went up and down the hills of Galilee and Judea—he healed sick people, he made blind people see, he made lame people walk. I mean, he was a point of controversy all over the place. He must have had disciples numbering in the *thousands*—at least people who followed him around. He was *feeding* people in their thousands who were coming to hear him. What happened to all these people? How do you wind up, after all that time, with 120 disciples?

Well, you know, it's not that hard to figure if you think about it. Sure, there were a lot of people who were *impressed* by Jesus and, yes, there were a lot of people who really *believed* his teachings and liked him and admired him, but when the time came that he was arrested and condemned to die and killed, a lot of these people were no longer to be found. Disillusionment set in, they assumed that this was not the Messiah, and they turned away from him completely. No, that's not too hard to figure—human nature being what it is. I'm afraid, you and me, we might just have been in the same circumstance if we had seen him die, and see him taken down, and see him buried. We might have gone home and thought *no more* about Jesus. So the 120 of them were there, and Peter stood up in the middle of them and said:

Acts 1

KJ2000

¹⁶ Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit by the mouth of David spoke before concerning Judas, who was guide to them that took Jesus.

¹⁷ For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry.

He was a part of everything we're doing—and he betrayed the master and killed himself.

Acts 1

KJ2000

²⁰ For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his office let another take.

But we'll have to talk about this next time. Until then, this is Ronald Dart.

Transcript of a *Born to Win*
radio program by
Ronald L. Dart.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311
❖ www.borntowin.net ❖

Christian Origins #1

DATE: 9/10/98
ID: CO1

Rev 1.1