



Born to Win

Christianity Lite

by Ronald L. Dart

We need to talk about Haiti. I know you've probably had more Haiti on your television than you'd like to see for some time; you've had enough. My question, though, is, "What more could Christians have done for that poor land?"

Haiti is actually a largely Christian country, with Roman Catholicism professed by 80% of the Haitians. Protestants made up about 16% of the population. And then there's Haitian Voodoo, which is practiced by roughly half of the population. Now it's in that demographic that you get a hint of the problem, don't you? Did you see it?

How can you have a population that is 96% Christian and 50% practitioners of Voodoo? Something is not quite right in Haiti, and it's a hard thing to say. Is there anything that we Christians might have done that we left undone?

Several years ago, I read a book entitled *White Man's Grave*. It was the story of the search for a missing son in Sierra Leone, Africa. The title was the name given to Sierra Leone by slavers who used to call there. I don't even remember what the purpose of the book was. I was so overwhelmed by the descriptions of tribal life, and the religion and superstitions of those people that I was left feeling hopeless. How on Earth, I wondered, could the Christian faith penetrate that darkness?

After some years, I began to see it in the chain that led to the tragic spread of AIDS in Africa. Being a Bible teacher (and in my career I've taught all of it, front to back), I came to see in the theories of the development of the disease in Africa a chain of broken laws. Laws the African people never knew because, in many cases, even the Christian missionaries didn't bother to tell them. The law that would have prevented AIDS from becoming epidemic in Africa, I concluded, was the Law of Moses.

If memory serves, in a previous program I did ("*A Covenant for AIDS*"), I found a sequence of about seven laws; any one of which, faithfully observed throughout Africa, would have prevented AIDS from ever getting a foothold in that continent.

Now, while I musing about the wretchedness of Haiti, an article arrived on my desk by Mary Eberstadt. I think she has coined a new term for the Christian failure that's been much on my mind, and I never got a title on it. Her article (which appeared in the January 2010 edition of *First Things*) was titled *Christianity Lite*.

Christianity Lite lies somewhere between traditional Christianity and total secularism (and it leans closer to secularism than it does to traditional Christianity). Ms. Eberstadt approached the problem from a completely different angle, but there was a resonance in what she said with what I had been thinking. What sent her off down this road was a recent announcement by Pope Benedict XX offering members of the Anglican Communion a fast-track into the Catholic Church. Some 1,000 Church of England priests may convert to Catholicism and some 300 parishes in England may turn over to Rome. They're invited to come in on the fast-track. And I think I heard somewhere that they're even going to accept married priests from the Church of England.

Now proceeding logically from this question and others, Mary Eberstadt went on to ask:

How will they [the progressives in the Anglican Church] possibly make peace with the real majority of Anglicans today — the churches in Africa, whose leaders have repeatedly denounced the Communion's abandonment of traditional teachings? Questions like these are why a few commentators now speak seriously about something that only recently seemed unthinkable: whether the end of the Anglican Communion itself might now be in sight.

Now, as fascinating as that very real possibility may be, it poses an even bigger issue. She continues:

Even so, it is the still longer run of Christian history whose outlines may now be most interesting and unexpected of all. Looking even further out to the horizon from our present moment (at a vista of centuries, rather than mere decades, ahead of us) we may well begin to wonder something else. That is, whether what we are witnessing now is not only the beginning of the end of the Anglican Communion but indeed the end of something even larger: the phenomenon of Christianity Lite itself.

By this I mean the multifaceted institutional experiment, beginning but not ending with the Anglican Communion, of attempting to preserve Christianity while simultaneously jettisoning certain of its traditional teachings — specifically, those regarding sexual morality.

Now, it's fascinating how she puts this because, essentially, they're trying to preserve Christianity. Not *in spite* of this rejection of traditional teaching but *because* of it. They think that by getting rid of the traditional teachings of Christianity they can save it. She went on to say:

Surveying the record to date of what has happened to the churches dedicated to this long-running modern religious experiment, a large historical question now appears: whether the various exercises in this specific kind of dissent from traditional teaching turn out to contain the seeds of their own destruction. The evidence— preliminary but already abundant— suggests that the answer is yes.

I think she's right. But the issue is more far-reaching than the very powerful issue of sexual morality. The problem may have even begun before this, in the disconnect between the moral teaching of the Christianity and their origins in the Law of Moses. Jesus, you know, did not teach a total revision of the Law of Moses. What he taught was a new interpretation from that which had been developed by the Jewish establishment of the time. The establishment had, kind of, re-manufactured the Law of Moses in what they call the Oral Law. They tried to connect it (some of them did) to the actual giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, but it doesn't really work, and Jesus rejected it out of hand. Take an example from one of his encounters with the Pharisees.

Mark 7

KJ2000

⁵ Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not your disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?

⁶ He answered and said unto them, Well has Isaiah prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

⁷ But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

What does he mean? Well, they throw aside the commandment of God and focus on things like washing your hands before you eat.

Mark 7

KJ2000

⁸ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such things you do.

⁹ And he said unto them, Full well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your own tradition.

You reject the commandment of God that you may keep your own tradition.

Mary Eberstadt's going back a few generations to the change in the sexual teachings of the Church in modern times. The problem is deeper than that, and it goes to "improving" on God's Law. Jesus had no objection to the Law of God. The tradition of the Pharisees was another matter altogether. They had adapted their faith. I guess to make it work better. They thought they knew better than God. So, just so no one misunderstood, Jesus clarified this in the Sermon on the Mount. He said:

Matthew 5

AKJV

¹⁷ Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

¹⁸ For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

¹⁹ Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Now, it took a long time before someone pointed it out to me and I saw directly what Jesus is driving at. He is affirming the written law. Did you catch that? Not one jot or one tittle will pass from it? Those are little things you put on paper. The letter of the law, written, he says, is not going away. It is the oral law that is the problem. I suppose that one could say that there was a "Judaism Lite" then just as there is today.

Christianity Lite and Judaism Lite contain a common thread. We think we can improve on the Law of God. Antinomianism, that is anti-Law sentiment in Christianity, is as old as the 1st Century, and it opens the door to what Mary Eberstadt is talking about and may lead eventually to the kind of inadequate Christianity that we have seen in Haiti. For what has Christianity in Haiti done to improve the lives of the people or the economy of the country?

Mary Eberstadt, continuing in her thought that the Anglican Communion may cease to exist said:

If this is so, then the implications for the future of Christianity itself are likely to be profound. If it is Christianity Lite, rather than Christianity proper, that is fatally flawed and ultimately unable to sustain itself, then a rewriting of much of contemporary thought, religious and secular, appears in order. It means that secularization itself may be fundamentally misunderstood. It means that the most unwanted and unfashionable traditional teaching of Christianity, its sexual moral code, demands of the modern mind a new and respectful look.

As of now, this has been true for some time. Those churches increasingly define themselves as dissenting on one issue above all others. They have jettisoned one or another...or all...of the teachings of traditional Christian sexual morality.

Ms. Eberstadt wondered how sex, of all subjects, came to occupy such a prominent place in the division in Christendom. And it is kind of sobering when you stop to think about it. She said:

Yet to say that the sexual revolution made Christianity Lite inevitable, as many people would, is to miss an important historical point. It was the Anglicans who first started picking apart the tapestry of Christian sexual morality — hundreds of years ago, long before the sexual revolution, and over one particular thread: divorce. In fact, in a fascinating development now visible in retrospect, the Anglican departure over divorce appears as the template for all subsequent exercises in Christianity Lite.

I've felt for a long time, myself, that few understand the reasons the state has for concerning itself with marriage. And it's crucial. I mean, after all, why fool with it? Why care about it? Let the church and married people do whatever they want to do. The state has no business sticking it's nose into this thing.

Oh, yes it does. The reason is protecting the innocent: the children. It is the children who were the first victims in the explosion of divorce, just as they are the primary victims right now in abortion. I suppose now you would have to say that the main reason for abortion would be as a slightly late version of birth control. She went on to say:

Thus does the Anglican attempt to lighten up the Christian moral code over the specific issue of divorce exhibit a clear pattern that appears over and over in the history of the experiment of Christianity Lite[.]

But what does all this have to do with Haiti, or Sierra Leone, or too many other places where missionaries have gone off to — with great sacrifice to themselves? Well, when you go back to the Law of Moses, you find a profound moral code applied to a people who had been born in slavery. You got to remember that. If you forget that, when you're watching the movie *The Ten Commandments* or reading about the Exodus, these people were born in slavery, their mother and father were born in slavery, their grandparents were born in slavery. They did not know anybody in their families who had not been a slave. They went on a long march. They were going to conquer a people who were, in fact, stronger than they were.

And it's a bit shocking, when you really understand what they had to be told as they left Egypt and went out on the march to the Promised Land. Just as an example:

Deuteronomy 23

AKJV

¹² You shall have a place also without the camp, where you shall go forth abroad: ¹³ And you shall have a paddle on your weapon; and it shall be, when you will ease yourself abroad, you shall dig therewith, and shall turn back and cover that which comes from you: ¹⁴ For the LORD your God walks in the middle of your camp, to deliver you, and to give up your enemies before you; therefore shall your camp be holy: that he see no unclean thing in you, and turn away from you.

In other words, you make yourself a personal latrine. Now holiness was the given reason, but it's no accident that this was a major health issue as well. Sanitation had to be taught to these people from the

ground up, as it were. Dig a hole, “ease yourself”, then bury it, folks. I mean some animals even display a kind of an instinct to cover what they have just left behind.

Now it may be a little difficult for us to understand this, but this is only one tiny, little example out of a broad moral code that existed in the Old Testament that had to do with health, cleanliness, relationships between people, how to deal with business, how to see to the safety of the community, a whole raft of things. All of these things Jesus affirmed in the Sermon on the Mount. He said he wasn't doing away with one jot or one tittle from that Law. Why? Well, because it is based on human welfare: relationships, children, and so forth. That's why it's a good law and forms the basis for everything that Jesus Christ taught, in terms of morality. He didn't just come and bring his Gospel and his moral code and place it in midair. It was founded on Moses.

Now, Mary Eberstadt, as she worked her way through this, talked about what she called “the hidden power of the Christian moral code”. She didn't go on to explain that this moral code had its earliest expressions in the Law of Moses, a law particularly designed for, and applied to a people newly released from degrading slavery. And in that program, “*A Covenant for AIDS*”, I made the point that what Africa needed was a good, strong dose of the Law of Moses. For, in fact, out of about seven different laws that you count in a chain of things that leads from healthy people to people dying of AIDS, any one of those laws, if it was kept, would have stopped the spread of AIDS in Africa.

The primary difference in what Jesus taught and what the Pharisaic establishment taught was the difference between the spirit and the letter of the law. It was not that Jesus tossed out the Old Testament Law and introduced a new one. It's in the application of it.

Mary Eberstadt noted that this strong moral code not only froze some people out, it drew many people in. You know, I think there's a lot of truth in that. She went on to say:

What was true as Christianity took the Greco-Roman world by storm remains true today. The more decadent the age, the more does the forceful insistence that there is a right and wrong about matters of sex exert a gravitational pull all its own. The failure to recognize that power—one experienced by converts from St. Paul, to St. Augustine, to some of the Anglicans studying the Catechism today — may be one final and under-appreciated factor that has led to Christianity Lite's undoing.

What's that? There is a strong moral code that, while it does freeze some people out, draws people in as well. For there is something inside of human beings that recognizes that there is a difference between what is right and what is wrong, and that they'd really like to get away from the pain. They want to know more.

So here we are. We're looking at what almost looks like two separate religions: Christianity proper and Christianity Lite. And the difference makes a world of difference to people, especially a primitive people you're trying to bring out of their wretched past. The truth is... Christianity is not easy. It is hard. And that runs completely counter to Christianity Lite, which seems to be bending over backwards to allow any human sin you want to bring with you into the church. “Oh, come along. Christ loves you anyway.” Well, he does. He loves you. But don't make the mistake of thinking that just because he loves you he's not going to teach you a thing or to.

Now no one is saying that we should make Christianity harder. It's hard enough without us adding anything to it. But those who have tried to make Christianity easier are misleading people. Listen to what Jesus said, in his own words:

Matthew 7

KJ2000

¹³ Enter in at the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many there be who go in there:

¹⁴ Because narrow is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it.

Good grief! Do you think that we can walk up to the gate and make it wider by our own words, our own actions, and our own doctrine? On another occasion, Jesus said this:

Luke 13

NIV

²⁴ Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

Really? They actually will want to come in. They'll want to be in the Kingdom. They will want to come to Christ and they can't get there?

Luke 13

NIV

²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

²⁶ Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

²⁷ But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

²⁸ There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.

Now that seems kind of brutal, in a way, doesn't it? But it agrees with what I told you: Christianity is not easy, it is hard. And, I don't know why, but people seem to want to do away with the Old Testament. They throw the Old Testament off and here he says, "Oh, no. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets will be in the Kingdom of God and you will be thrown out." Who are the ones who are going to be thrown out? They include people who ate and drank with Christ, people who went to church with him, and yet would not live up to the standards that he taught.

Do you think that when Jesus ate with publicans and sinners he intended that as an endorsement of those people's practices? I don't think so. I think he ate and drank with them because they needed to hear what he had to say so they could turn their lives around. And that would involve *stopping* their bad behaviors. Those who were sinners could understand and respond better than those who thought they had no need of repentance. Jesus return to this theme again and again throughout his ministry.

Luke 14

AKJV

²⁶ If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

Now this is a very troubling expression here. You mean I have to hate my children? What he is saying here is that you cannot put any of those things ahead of him.

Is that easy? Or is that hard?

Luke 14

AKJV

²⁷ And whoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

At this point I often wonder what in the world his disciples thought he meant by this since they had not seen him carrying his cross, falling under it, and needing another man to carry it for him to go to Golgotha. And here he tells us, if you don't pick up your cross and follow him you can't be his disciple.

Luke 14

AKJV

²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, sits not down first, and counts the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

Can you really do this? Are you sure you really want to? Now, why would he have to ask that question if it's easy? He concludes this passage by saying:

Luke 14

NIV

³³ In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

Is that easy? Or is that hard?

I think what he means by this is that you have to give it up in your heart. You may still be living with your mother and father. You may still have your children living in your house. You don't have to send them out into the street. That's not the point. The point is that you have to be ready to give up anything to serve him. Now, to be sure, salvation is a gift of God and there's nothing you can do to earn it. So what can we conclude, then? Is it possible for us, even though we can't earn it, to lose it? Jesus told his disciples:

John 16

NIV

¹ All this I have told you so that you will not fall away.

² They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.

Is that easy? Or is that hard?

Can we come to the place where we understand that we may have to give up certain aspects of conduct to serve God?

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