



# Born to Win

## If You Call Yourself a Christian...

by Ronald L. Dart

If you call yourself a Christian, what can I assume that you believe? If you call yourself a Christian, what can I depend on you to *do*? One fellow wrote to me last week or so and commented that he doesn't think Mormons are Christians. But you know what? It's even money that somewhere there is someone who wouldn't think he is a Christian either. Oddly, the term "Christian" is not part of Jesus' instructions to his disciples; he nowhere mentions the term *at all*. In fact, Christian was a descriptive term applied to the *disciples* of Jesus, apparently by the non-Christians in Antioch. They said, "Oh, those Christians. You can't tell what they're going to do next."

Now, the followers of Jesus seem gradually to have accepted that descriptor. (Although I think it turns up no more than three times in the New Testament.) That said, it appears that all the term means is that you are a disciple—that is, a *learner*. It doesn't say anything about your commitment. It doesn't say anything about your depth. It doesn't say anything about how far you would go or whether you'd die for it. All it means is you are a learner. Even Jesus experienced a situation one time when virtually everybody around him turned around and went back home and left him, because they were offended at some of the things they were learning.

Anyone can call himself a Christian. And if he does, well, I think Christ may take a personal interest in that fellow right then and there. And to whatever extent one *actually* believes Jesus and *acts* on the things he said, at some level his life will be made better, and the Holy Spirit will begin to work in his life.

So, if you call yourself a Christian, I'll take your word for it. But what assumptions about you can I make when you tell me that? If you call yourself a Christian, I think I can safely assume that you believe there was a *real* Jesus who walked the roads of Galilee and Judea early in the first century. Now, if that seems obvious consider that there are those who think Jesus was a *myth* invented by...well, God only knows who. But if you say, "I am a Christian", then I can except as far as it goes that you believe Jesus was there.

What else can I assume? Well, I can probably assume that you believe what is written in the four gospels to be true—that you believed Jesus lived, that he died, that he rose from the dead; because that's all part of the story. You have sat on the jury, you have considered the evidence, and you have said, "I believe it."

Now on the other hand, you may just have grown up in a Christian family or a church and never have read your way through the gospels. You just hear snippets of them in sermons from time to time. Or you may not consider yourself a Christian *at all*, and you wonder, "Well, what does a person have to do to become one?" Well, my suggestion to *both* of these categories—the people who grew up in the Church and never really looked hard at it, and the people who *know* they're not Christians but are curious and may want become one—my suggestion to *both* categories is to sit yourself down over a matter of a few days and read the testimony of the four witnesses to the life and works of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And when you have read through their stories, then you can decide if you believe their

testimony or not. After all, its just like being on the jury: You've got witnesses that come in and you get to decide as a jury member, "I believe him." "I don't believe him."

Now, there's an interesting early encounter here in the New Testament that opens up some discussions. It turns out that there was a man named Philip; he was one of the original first seven deacons of the New Testament Church.

### Acts 8

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<sup>26</sup> And the angel of the Lord spoke unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goes down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

<sup>27</sup> And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem to worship,

<sup>28</sup> Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Isaiah the prophet.

Now, there's a lot of money involved, in those days, in holding a complete manuscript of *Isaiah*. Here's a guy on his way to Ethiopia with it. My guess is that, being a Gentile, he was probably not reading the Hebrew Isaiah; he had a copy of the Septuagint Isaiah.

### Acts 8

KJ2000

<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join yourself to this chariot.

<sup>30</sup> And Philip ran to him, and heard him read the prophet Isaiah [*So he was reading aloud.*], and said, Do you understand what you read?

<sup>31</sup> And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.

(This is a chariot that there's riding along in. A wagon, really, probably.)

### Acts 8

AKJV

<sup>32</sup> The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth:

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.

<sup>34</sup> And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray you, of whom speaks the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?

<sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached to him Jesus.

Now, this is fascinating. You see, at this time *not one* of the original gospels had been written. This is very early. What Philip had was the oral gospel (which the Church had developed for some little years yet at this point—or quite some time). And as they went on down the road, he actually *told* him things that would eventually be written by Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John.

### Acts 8

AKJV

<sup>36</sup> And as they went on their way, they came to a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what does hinder me to be baptized?

So would do we conclude from that? I conclude from that that Philip had gotten as far as baptism in his discussion of what that scripture meant. Well, he wanted to know: “Well, can I be baptized here?”

**Acts 8**

AKJV

<sup>37</sup> And Philip said, If you believe with all your heart, you may. [...]

There's that word: believe.

**Acts 8**

AKJV

<sup>37</sup> [...] And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

That all my itself isn't a lot, you think. But in fact, it *really is* a lot more than it seems.

**Acts 8**

AKJV

<sup>38</sup> And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

<sup>39</sup> And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

I don't know that this is a giant vanishing act, or anything of the sort; just that the spirit told Philip, “Let's leave here immediately”, and he left.

Now, the four gospels, as I said, didn't exist at this time; but the story did, in all of its parts. And during this period of time, riding along down there, they actually heard the story; and the Ethiopian *believed* the story. The man made a start. I don't think he had a complete gospel. I don't think he had everything—all his ducks in a row. I don't think he understood everything *you think you understand* or *I think I understand*, but he had *made the start*. I wish we heard more about him. But there was, in years to come, an Ethiopian church. And one wonders if it came from that encounter on his way home.

Now, considering that the man was now a Christian believer, let me return to my other question: If you call your yourself a Christian, what can I depend on you to *do*? Well, back in Matthew—the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus dropped a little thing that I think is important to know. Matthew 7, verse 15:

**Matthew 7**

AKJV

<sup>15</sup> Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Oh? Well, how am I supposed to know that these people are false prophets? He said:

**Matthew 7**

AKJV

<sup>16</sup> You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

<sup>17</sup> Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit.

<sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Now, you know, I *understand* that. That's simplicity. I don't go out to a pear tree expecting to find peaches. (If you know the difference. Now, maybe you don't; but I think I would.) So he then says:

**Matthew 7**

*KJ2000*

- <sup>19</sup> Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.  
<sup>20</sup> Therefore by their fruits you shall know them.

Now, here comes a statement that you need to really nail down.

**Matthew 7**

*KJ2000*

- <sup>21</sup> Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Ah! So, if you claim to be a Christian, I should be able to depend on you to *do* the things—the will of Jesus' Father in heaven. It should actually show up in your life and in the way you live. "Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Jesus went on:

**Matthew 7**

*AKJV*

- <sup>22</sup> Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? and in your name have cast out devils? and in your name done many wonderful works?  
<sup>23</sup> And then will I profess to them, I never knew you: depart from me, you that work iniquity.

Now, there's an interesting word: iniquity. The Greek word is *anomia* [ἀνομία, Strong's G458], and it's a combined form of the word *nomos* [νόμος, Strong's G3551] (for "law") and the negative (a-). "Get away from me", he said, "you who nullify the Law." And this is something that, it seems to me, a lot of Christians have trouble getting their mind around. Jesus' teaching about moral conduct, from beginning to end, is all based on the Law of the Old Testament. It is the foundation; it's underlying. And why not? He was the one that gave them the Law in the first place. Why would he say something different now from what he told Moses? Jesus said:

**Matthew 7**

*AKJV*

- <sup>24</sup> Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man, which built his house on a rock:

I dare say, somewhere along the line you've heard a sermon about this.

**Matthew 7**

*AKJV*

- <sup>25</sup> And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it fell not: for it was founded on a rock.  
<sup>26</sup> And every one that hears these sayings of mine, and does them not, [...]

Notice: Doesn't just believe them, but *does* them not...

**Matthew 7**

AKJV

<sup>26</sup> [...] shall be likened to a foolish man, which built his house on the sand:

<sup>27</sup> And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

So if you call yourself a Christian, can I depend on you to *do* the sayings of Jesus—to live the life? Actually, no I can't. *Far too many* people name the name of Jesus, but simply *do not do* the things he said. Old Testament, New Testament, they just don't live by any of it. Then there is this one from Luke. Luke chapter 6, verse 43:

**Luke 6**

AKJV

<sup>43</sup> For a good tree brings not forth corrupt fruit; neither does a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

<sup>44</sup> For every tree is known by his own fruit. [...]

It's basically just the same thematic stuff. And then in verse 46:

**Luke 6**

AKJV

<sup>46</sup> And why call you me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?

For some people, I'm sorry, it is "Lord" this and "Lord" that, and they mention the Lord five times in a sentence, and never get around to living the life.

Now, there is one area that, it seems to me, Christians *really do* seem to measure up to. This is the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. Now, Matthew 24 and 25 are an interesting combination; because the disciples came to Jesus and asked him a question about his coming and the end of the age, and he gave them a two-chapter answer. Most of the time people look at the prophecies of Matthew 24 not realizing that he goes *right on* into 25. What I'm going to right now is the third parable of Matthew 25; it begins in verse 31.

**Matthew 25**

AKJV

<sup>31</sup> When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory:

<sup>32</sup> And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats:

<sup>33</sup> And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

<sup>34</sup> Then shall the King say to them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

Ah, now this is what we're talking about. What are the *conditions* that lead to this gift of inheritance? He goes on, verse 35:

**Matthew 25**

KJ2000

<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in:

<sup>36</sup> Naked, and you clothed me: I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came unto me.

And I can see the puzzlement growing on the faces of all of these people, hearing all of this and saying:

**Matthew 25**

*KJ2000*

<sup>37</sup> [...] Lord, when saw we you hungry, and fed you? or thirsty, and gave you drink?

<sup>38</sup> When saw we you a stranger, and took you in? or naked, and clothed you?

<sup>39</sup> Or when saw we you sick, or in prison, and came unto you?

And those of us in the twentieth century, who've never laid eyes on Jesus in person, would certainly say that. "I didn't give you any food. I didn't come you in prison."

**Matthew 25**

*AKJV*

<sup>40</sup> And the King shall answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me.

One of the things God loves about this nation of ours is the way we respond to disasters in other nations. You think about what we're seeing going on in Haiti, and how we have tried to (more than once in history) already had to try to help those people out. We are doing it again, and we will have to do it yet another time, at least, sooner or later, because *bad stuff happens*. What on Earth leads us to spend *our own treasure*, take risks with our *own lives*, to actually climb into a dangerous building while earthquakes and post-earthquakes are going on? What leads people to *do* this kind of thing on other people, other nations, around the globe? It is the Christian values among us that takes us there to help. We're never going to get anything back from Haiti. What kind of a fool would think that we're down there trying to profit ourselves by the work we do in Haiti? Isn't it strange what we do? It's almost as though *we can't help ourselves*; it's a reflexive reaction. Where did that come from?

When I was thinking about this, I remembered back when my dog (I had a German short-haired pointer) was giving birth to puppies for the first time in her life. And she was in labor and, you know, very unhappy about the whole thing (probably didn't have *a clue* what labor was all about), but she *popped* one of those puppies out. It was still in its little sac. As soon as that puppy was gone, she yelped with pain (because it hurt) and turned around and *barked* at the little thing. But what was funny was it was as though, as soon as she got her nose close to that little thing, something went off in her brain and she began to do what had to be done—to lick this little puppy clean, to lick the membrane away from him. If she hadn't done it (or if *we* hadn't done it), the thing would have *died*. She couldn't *help* herself. She barked it because it hurt her, but as soon as that smell reached her brain she began to do her motherly duty. And we are, in some ways it seems, like that. People are dying in Haiti? We've got to get over there and help them. People are dying in Afghanistan? We've got to get over there and help them. You know, we just *have it* to do. Where does this come from? I think it comes from the depth of the Christian heritage in this country—which has long been very, very strong among us.

**Matthew 25**

*KJ2000*

<sup>41</sup> Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, [...]

Now we're turning our attention to the poor goats. (I feel sorry for goats, having to sit in in this way, but nevertheless...) He said:

**Matthew 25**

KJ2000

<sup>41</sup> [...] Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

Now, that's serious business, right?

**Matthew 25**

KJ2000

<sup>42</sup> For I was hungry, and you gave me no food: I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink:

<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger, and you took me not in: naked, and you clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and you visited me not.

<sup>44</sup> Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we you hungry, or thirsty or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto you?

<sup>45</sup> Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Since you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.

<sup>46</sup> And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

You know, truth to tell, churches do pretty well about this in my part of the country. There's a Methodist church down the road from us that runs a food bank. The biggest Baptist church here opened up their facilities to refugees from hurricane Katrina. And it just goes on and on as Christian communities find expression and do *his* work across the country. That's said, you and I know that everyone who claims to be a Christian doesn't do those things. What about that?

No. Sad to say, not everyone who says they are a Christian does these things. For example, earlier in the same chapter there's a completely different parable that approaches this from a completely different angle. Verse one:

**Matthew 25**

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened to ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

<sup>2</sup> And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

<sup>3</sup> They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:

<sup>4</sup> But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

Okay, got the picture.

**Matthew 25**

AKJV

<sup>5</sup> While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

Which, of course; it's nighttime, nothing's going on...naturally.

**Matthew 25**

AKJV

<sup>6</sup> And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom comes; go you out to meet him.

<sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.

<sup>8</sup> And the foolish said to the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.

Now, when you look at this in terms of humans... You realize this isn't just a *literal* thingy here; it's all about a broad picture of things. There *are* those people who seem to think that they can just drift on through life, and when the crisis arises they can rely on someone else to bail them out. But in this case:

**Matthew 25**

AKJV

<sup>9</sup> [...] the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you [*Sorry. I don't have enough for both of us.*]: but go you rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.

Now, that's interesting; because it implies you aren't required to harm yourself, or take from your own family, or put your family at risk in order to help *fools* that had *every reason* to know better.

**Matthew 25**

AKJV

<sup>10</sup> And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

<sup>11</sup> Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

<sup>12</sup> But he answered and said, Truly I say to you, I know you not.

And there's something about that that opens up an understanding. He says, "I don't recognize you." Which implies that he hadn't known them *before*. They had *claimed* the position. (Actually, they *were* virgins in this parable.) But you could say: Well, they *said* they were Christians, and yet he'd never known them. Why? Because they didn't believe, or they didn't really quite *get* it, or they didn't *do* it. Then he said:

**Matthew 25**

KJ2000

<sup>13</sup> Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of man comes.

Now, I doubt that we are supposed to take this as a hard 50/50 split; because each of us has choices to make, and we can change our minds, and we start doing things differently. We could have been in the one group before, and wised up a few days before the Lord came and went and bought some more oil, right? It's given to us so that we will know this: A substantial number of us who *say* we are Christians can't be depended on to do what Jesus said we should do. (And, as a warning to those of us who are Christians in name only.)

If you say you are Christian, can I safely assume that nothing bad will ever happen? Hardly. Can I assume that if you are a *good* question nothing bad will ever happen to you? No, not that either. We know that Christians have been killed for their faith. Can we assume then that those who were killed for their faith were unfaithful Christians? No! We can't. There are at least two things here we're going to have to think about. One: Good people are allowed to be killed as a witness to the world. Earlier in Matthew 23, verse 34, Jesus said:

**Matthew 23**

KJ2000

<sup>34</sup> Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them you shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall you scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

<sup>35</sup> That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of



righteous Abel [*the son of Adam*] unto the blood of Zachariah son of Barachiah, whom you slew between the temple and the altar.

In other words, these people were standing around saying, “Oh, well, if we lived in the days of our fathers, we wouldn’t have mistreated those prophets.” And Jesus is saying, “Oh, yes, you would. I’m going to demonstrate it to you, because I’m going to *send good men* and you’ll kill them, too.”

The second thing to think about: If you take upon you the name of Christ, then you give him license to do what must be done to make you into what you ought to be. Now, that sounds a little complicated, but here’s a good illustration of what it’s all about. It’s in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1:

## Hebrews 12

NIV '84

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

<sup>2</sup> Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [...]

<sup>5</sup> And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:  
My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

<sup>6</sup> because the Lord disciplines those he loves,  
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

No exceptions, I guess. And, you know, what all this comes down to me it: If you call yourself a Christian, there is hope for you if you mean it; for you have taken upon you the mantle of Christ, and he will not let you go easily.

I have one concern about us as a people: There are those who think they can make us into good people without Christ. Trust me, that won’t work.

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