

Born to Win

The Reality of Christ

by Ronald L. Dart

Years ago, a friend told me what I was. Most of us have had that experience at one time or another. (If not who we are, at least where we can go.) My friend told me that I was an *apologist*. I would have been flattered if I'd known what that meant. It was somewhat later I encountered one of the greatest of Christian apologists, C. S. Lewis. And then recently I came across a quotation from C. S. Lewis that explained a vague disquiet that follows me around. He concluded,

That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself.

C. S. Lewis - Christian Apologetics (God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics)

Now, Lewis was *remarkable* in this regard: he was an *intelligent, highly-educated, well-read* man who also had the good sense to *doubt himself*—to examine himself, which one cannot do without self-doubt. Lewis understood the spiritual dangers of vanity, and he also understood what a thin web is woven by a good argument. He said,

[...] no doctrine is, for the moment, dimmer to the eye of faith than that which a man has just successfully defended.

C. S. Lewis - The Founding of the Oxford Socratic Club (God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics)

Now, doctrine and apologetics are essential, otherwise you would never know where you are, you would never know what you should do next. But they are also a temptation to vanity. This was never more clear to me than when I read that quotation from the dean of apologists.

[...] apologists [...] can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments [...] into the Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself.

C. S. Lewis - Christian Apologetics

There's a fairly well-known denomination that believes *no one* is going to be saved except members of their own church. I remember there was a time in *my* past...I had been baptized by a Baptist church, and I was struggling at that time with certain things, and I remember distinctly having a picnic with

some friends of ours who were members of this other denomination (which shall remain unnamed), and once they realized that I was a little bit at loose ends, they became very urgent about getting me baptized into their church. They wanted to take me down to their church *that day, that hour*, and get me under the water. And so they, I know, were very concerned that if *didn't* get baptized, and something happened to me, I would go to hell. I would go *straight* to hell. Now, I think those people will be *profoundly* surprised when they find me standing right next to them on the sea of glass before the Lamb of God in the resurrection. In fact, *I* might be as surprised as *they* are. I've been too far down that road myself.

Now, think about this just for a moment: imagine that you have made it; you've been raised from the dead; you're standing there before Him the judge of all the earth. You can see him as he is. And there standing alongside of you are two figures you recognize immediately who come from *entirely* separate religious backgrounds. They are Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II. Now, if you know very much about Catholic and Baptist doctrine, you have to ask yourself, "Now, how on earth can that be possible?" Well, I think I finally understand. They will not owe their presence there to the fact that they had a correct set of doctrines. They will not be there because they kept this or that law, or followed that particular rite or ritual. But then, you see, *you* won't be there for that reason either. What makes it possible for you or anyone else to stand before God is *the grace of God*. And that grace, if it can't transcend our doctrinal differences, if it can't transcend our little picky arguments, doesn't amount to much. And what makes that grace possible? It is Christ himself. There is this incident in the ministry of Jesus Christ where one of the rulers of the Jews named Nicodemus came to him by night. Why did he come by night? I don't know, unless he just didn't want to be seen. But after a certain amount of conversation, Jesus told this man,

John 3

AKJV

¹³ And no man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

¹⁵ That whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Now, that's a *tremendously* encouraging thing that Jesus is saying here. He is basically saying that just as Moses lifted up the serpent, the Son of man has to be lifted up so that we can *look to him*. So that every eye that looks to him... And if you remember the story from the Old Testament about that serpent [Numbers 21], there was a plague that had broken out. There were serpents biting people all over the place and people were dying. And they put this brazen serpent up. And if they looked up to that serpent, they lived; if they didn't look to it, they died. It had nothing to do with their character, their personality, whether they were obedient or disobedient. They had to look to the serpent that had been lifted up. Then Jesus said to Nicodemus,

John 3

AKJV

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Now, that's a *tremendous* promise. But there is a catch in it: you must *believe* in him. You must *look* to him. You must *place trust* in him.

John 3

AKJV

¹⁷ For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through

him might be saved.

¹⁸ He that believes on him is not condemned: but he that believes not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, [...]

Now, this is something else that Jesus tacks on the end of this that sometimes people don't get to. Listen to what he said:

John 3

AKJV

¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, [...]

Why?

John 3

AKJV

¹⁹ [...] because their deeds were evil.

²⁰ For every one that does evil hates the light, neither comes to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

²¹ But he that does truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are worked in God.

Now consider for a moment what makes *all the difference*. It's their deeds. It is *what they actually do*. And what this tells me is that you can tell whether a person *believes* or not by how their belief alters their lives. Because if you just say you believe in Christ, and don't do anything he said, I think a person is justified in saying, "*You don't believe*. You do not really believe in him." And the truth is that in many cases, their arguments about doctrine, about law, about whatever it is they want to argue about in religion are mere spiders' webs. And you know how you handle a spider's web at your house on the porch. You take a broom, you reach up there, and you brush it away. Remember, apologists only can be saved by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments *into the reality*—from Christian apologetics into Christ himself. Now, what exactly does that mean?

The reality is that there was young Jewish girl one day, in a little town called Nazareth, who all of a sudden was visited by an angel. The angel's name was Gabriel. He was real. The girl's name? Mary. *She* was real—very possibly a real teenager, because women got married much younger in those days than I think they do today. The angel came to her and said,

Luke 1

AKJV

²⁸ [...] Hail, you that are highly favored, the Lord is with you: blessed are you among women.

²⁹ And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. [*What in the world is he talking about?*]

³⁰ And the angel said to her, Fear not, Mary: for you have found favor with God.

³¹ And, behold, you shall conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS.

³² He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give to him the throne of his father David:

³³ And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Now, Mary, young as she was, would have had to have understood the significance of what he just said. He is basically telling Mary, “You’re going to be the mother of *the Messiah*. He’s going to sit on the throne of David. He’s going to reign over the house of Jacob. Of the increase of his kingdom there’ll be no end.” Well, Mary put two and two together (and a *marvelous* aplomb this young lady has). She says,

Luke 1

KJ2000

³⁴ [...] How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

³⁵ And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.

Now, it’s hard to imagine how she might have felt at that time, but she managed somehow to handle it. And from that day forward, a babe would be growing in her womb. A *real* child would be born nine months later. And when you think about it, day by day, week by week, she went through the *very real* symptoms of pregnancy: the cessation of her monthly period; the beginning swelling of the abdomen; the realization that there was a baby on the way; and, of course, the *very real* problem that her betrothed husband had...it wasn’t his. But just man that he was, and when it was explained to him—the angel had to come back and tell him, and I can understand that—all was well. And here was a very real pregnant woman in this occasion. The story picks up again in the second chapter of Luke where...

Luke 2

AKJV

⁴ [...] Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem[...]

He went there to be taxed along with Mary, his espoused wife, who was, in Luke’s expression “being great with child”. Kind of brings images to mind of ladies who are pregnant, and who are beginning to get very tired of this *very large* abdomen that they have with the baby that’s growing inside; and I can visualize the poor woman riding on a donkey, then getting off of it, and holding her back which is sore and hurting from all this, and making her way to the place where she could deliver the child—hopefully with a little modicum of comfort. They went into a *stable*, because it was the *only place they could find*. Now, again...*reality*. There are many things that can be explained about this, but the *reality* is they went into a *stable*—the only place they could sleep—and while she was there she went into labor and

Luke 2

AKJV

⁷ [...] she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger[...]

A feeding trough. It was *all they had*.

Now, when I remind myself of how *real* this is, I have to lay aside all the imagery, all the nativity scenes I’ve ever seen, and I have to go back to that place; because *I know* what that stable smelled like. It smelled of hay, and straw, and the dung of cattle. There is no place quite like this. I mean, as a boy growing up, my cousins and I used to play around the barn, and we would jump out of a high-level window (or the opening where they put the hay in the barn) into a large stack of hay below, yelling and

enjoying that experience of falling and hitting something soft. And I *know* that smell—the smell of hay, the smell of the barn, the smell of cattle; and it’s not particularly unpleasant. For me it has a...a *very strong* recollection. The child that was born there was as *real* as I am. He was as *real* as any baby anyone ever held in their arms. He was as *real* as any baby any mother ever put to her breast. And he had to drink mother’s milk just like I did. The reality of Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus comes home to me as well from this.

John 3

AKJV

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

And the reality of giving up a son has to be considered. I hadn’t really thought about it as much as I did later on when I saw the movie *The Bible*, and George C. Scott played the part of Abraham who was told by God to take his son—his *only* son Isaac—and go to a place that he would show him, and offer him there for a burnt offering. I know I had read the story in the Bible [**Genesis 22**], I understood it fully, but George C. Scott’s portrayal of Abraham’s *agony*...and his faith...brought it home to me. This is *real*. It was sort of a two-staged thing. First of all, the actor plays the part—which made it real; and then secondly, the realization that what he is acting out is something that *really* happened to *real* people in *real* time.

Well, the world waited for 30 years for this child to become a man, and three years more for him to accomplish what he came to do; but on that night before his death three years later, knowing *full well* what waited for him the next day, he got up from supper, he laid aside his garment and girded himself with a towel, and began to wash his disciples’ feet. It was a familiar thing to have happen on that night—on any supper—but usually it was done with servants. For Peter on this night, it was a very real thing that Jesus was *actually holding his feet in his hand*. Jesus took water and splashed it up over Peter’s feet. He rubbed his feet cleaning them. He put the water between his toes and opened them up to rinse out whatever might have been there. And then he took the towel that he was girded with, and the *real Jesus* dried Peter’s feet carefully—again, going between all the toes to be sure they were dry. For Peter, this could not have been more real.

After Jesus had washed their feet, and he put his garment back on and he sat down, he said,

John 13

AKJV

¹² [...] Know you what I have done to you?

¹³ You call me Master and Lord: and you say well; for so I am.

¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.

¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.

¹⁷ If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.

And, you know, there are many Christian churches to this day who will actually do this. They will wash one another’s feet, because after all, Jesus said, “If you know these things, happy are you—*blessed* are you—if you do them.”

After supper, he took bread, he broke it, and distributed it among them, and told them to eat it. He said,

1 Corinthians 11

KJ2000

²⁴ [...] Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

²⁵ After the same manner also he took the cup, after he had eaten, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do you, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

Now, I tell you the truth: I think a lot of us partake of the symbols of Christ's body and blood as *mere recipients* of God's grace. I can hear someone say, "Well, of course. That's what we are. We are recipients of God's grace." But *more* than that. We don't seem to realize that we have entered into a *new relationship*. We have a *family* we didn't have before, a *brother* that we never had, and we have *all the obligations* of family. Why? Because we have partaken of this cup of *the new covenant* in his blood. A covenant isn't a one-way street. It isn't just something handed down. It is something we enter into *voluntarily*. Now, it's true that we can do nothing to justify ourselves. We can do nothing to save ourselves. Just as Israel standing outside the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement, there is *nothing* for us to do [**Leviticus 16, 23**]. Our reconciliation is accomplished by our high priest with no help from us at all. All Israel was expected to do was *fast*. But that's not doing something; it's doing *nothing*.

Now having said that, that does not mean there is nothing for us to do when we walk *away* from the moment of reconciliation. The entry into the new covenant is *not a passive event for us*. We partake of Christ's body and blood, having examined ourselves, and we go away from the Passover to *walk in a different way*—as brothers of Jesus Christ. The disciples knew what a covenant meant, and they knew there were obligations that came with it. And somehow that truth gets away from us. Let's take a moment to fall back into reality, away from arguments and into Christ.

After all the events of this Last Supper, Jesus then sat and talked with his disciples for a while. He said,

John 13

AKJV

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, That you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

³⁵ By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another. [*Because of the way you treat one another.*]

John 14

AKJV

¹² Truly, truly, I say to you, He that believes on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to my Father.

¹³ And whatever you shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

Now, remember I said that if you enter into a covenant you take on certain obligations. What follow here in John 14, verse 14, are the obligations:

John 14

AKJV

¹⁴ If you shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.

¹⁵ If you love me, keep my commandments.

Did you catch this? Notice the two-directional aspect of it: If *you* ask anything, *I'll* do it. But here's what comes behind it: If *I* ask anything, *you've* got to do it. The disciples would not understand how

real this was for a few hours yet. They *would* come to know the meaning of an old passage out of Isaiah:

Isaiah 50

AKJV

⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back.

⁶ I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.

⁷ For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.

You know, scriptures like this would come clear as crystal to these disciples in a way that even George Frederick Handel, who wrote them into the *Messiah*, could not fully grasp. You know, if you have been able to embrace Jesus—to put your arms around him to give him a hug—your arms would have been around a *real* man. Your hands would have been on the back that was *given to the smiters*. The whiskers that brushed your cheek would be those that others would later that night *pluck out*. And the *real* Jesus would cry out from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” [**Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34**]. Why? Why did that have to happen? Well, that’s easy: He had to be tempted in all points like we are; and which of us have not felt at times like God has gone away completely. The blood that gushed out when the soldier pierced his side was real enough [**John 19:34**].

The disciples had three days to *deal* with what had happened, and then an even greater reality descended on them. They came face to face with the risen Christ. They touched him. Thomas, who had not been there at the time, didn’t even believe it. It was unreal to him. Finally, the next time when Jesus appeared, he said, “Thomas, come here. Put your finger in this wound in my hand. Stick your hand in my side. It’s *real*” [**John 20:27**].

He was alive. He was real. And then they all stood there and watched him ascend into heaven. As unreal as that may have seemed to all of them, it was *real enough*. And know this: There was not a web of arguments about the Lord’s Supper or the Passover, nor about “three days and three nights”; this was the *real* Son of God suffering *real* pain and *real* death...in our place. I think it is far past time for us to learn to stand in awe of *the reality* of Christ himself—not of our arguments *about* Christ.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I *believe* what I say. I *believe* what I teach. But I have come to see that what I teach is not *real*. It is a web of arguments that may be *true enough*, but they are only *a shadow* of the body of Christ. I’ll continue to argue for what is right, but I hope I will increasingly fall back from the web of my own arguments into Christ himself.

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