

# When God Becomes Friend - Assurance

by Dennis Kinlaw

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*Christian doctrine provides a rational explanation of the universe and gives us keys to understanding reality, but sin has led to intellectual damage and confusion, requiring redemption and salvation.*

**Duration:** 33:40

**Scripture:** Genesis 3:6, Proverbs 14:12, Isaiah 55:8-9, Matthew 6:33, John 14:6, Romans 1:21, Romans 3:23

**Topics:** "Assurance"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that Christianity is not a simple or easy doctrine, but rather a complex and demanding one. He highlights the lack of knowledge about the teachings of the Church in society, even in a Christian country. The speaker shares his experience of ministering to an upper-class congregation and the challenges he faced in presenting the message of Jesus Christ to educated individuals. The sermon also touches on the universal sense of wrongness and anger that arises when death affects loved ones, and the need to impart values and improve moral character in education.

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## Transcript

We said that it's important to lay at least in two areas. One, that Christian doctrine gives us keys to understanding reality that we need to have in order to understand ourselves or our context. All of us need these in order to simply put things together in our lives.

We said that secondly, dogma gives us a platform from which to address the problems of our day and of our society. We quoted from Dorothy Sayers. Let me give you one more from her.

It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter. It matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling.

It is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and a consoling kind. It is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting, and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism.

And it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus

Christ. I remember when I, in my earlier life, thought that perhaps one day God in his goodness would permit me to serve in some mission capacity overseas, and I thought of what a privilege it would be to present the message of Jesus Christ and the gospel to people who had never heard it before.

God has not given me much of that kind of opportunity, but I remember when he sent me to an upper-class eastern city suburb where most of my congregation were centered around Ivy League graduates, and I found that for the graduates of Harvard and Yale and Dartmouth and Princeton we needed to put in the Sunday bulletin the page in the Bible on which our scripture lesson was to be found that day, because those people that could tell you all the rest of the things about an educated man's world did not have the vaguest notion where Isaiah was or who he was or what he had to say about human life and the human situation. I was interested that Mr. Perkins yesterday said that that is one of the great problems in the black context today, that we assume that because there is a patina of religiosity there that there is some understanding of the basic Christian message, but he spoke very pointedly to the fact that it is his conviction that it is not. I like Dorothy Sayers' statement that Christian doctrine gives to us a rational explanation of the universe, because you and I need that kind of thing.

It fits the facts better than any of the other options that we have, and that's the reason that we ought to be Christian. If we can find any other theory that fits the realities better, we ought in good conscience and in our commitment to truth to commit ourselves to it. But until we do find a better option, we are ethically obligated to commit ourselves and commit ourselves irrevocably to Christ.

As we said, it provides keys, and those keys open doors to a platform from which we can tackle the problems that we have about us. We tried, when we spoke about Christian doctrine as a platform, to say that the way to progress is to get some things settled, and if we get some theological questions settled and put behind us, then we can move on to some of the basic human problems that face us. Now, we said that in Wesley and in the early Methodist movement, there were some of these keys, and those keys opened doors that led to a platform from which they could tackle some of the problems of their day.

We mentioned one of these, that of original sin. We mentioned the fact that Wesley was quite committed to that, and that the longest single treatise that he ever wrote on a single subject other than his notes on the Old Testament and notes on the New Testament was devoted to this subject, in which he made the contention that this is the primary difference between paganism and Christianity, and that if a man does not hold to the biblical doctrine of original sin and the implications, the view of man that is there, and the implications about God, that that man is not a Christian, that it is essential as a point of view theologically, intellectually, to an understanding of what the gospel is all about. Now, why was he so concerned about this at this point? He felt and felt very strongly that this was the doorway to an understanding of the situation in which the average man finds himself, that if you will take that biblical doorway, you will find yourself entering into an understanding of life that fits the facts of your and my daily experience.

He believed, of course, that man originally came as a good creature, created in goodness and righteousness from the hands of a good and a loving God, and placed in a good and a satisfying world, and that it was God's will that man should be both holy and happy, and that there should be no conflict between those two things at all. But as he believed the scripture, he believed that a rebellion took place in the heart of that first couple, and what happened was that man doubted, first of all, the goodwill of his friend and his maker toward him. And out of that doubt about the goodwill of his maker toward him, there arose a desire that led to the choosing of his own will instead of the will of his friend and his father.

And when he chose his own will and his own desires, he appropriated the world that God had given to him for his own selfish ends and began to use his world to satisfy himself, and that that was where the trouble, all of it, came from, when men turned away from God and turned to themselves to satisfy their own desires first. Now, look at the picture that Wesley saw and that I think is very biblical here, coming as the result of this, and see if it does not check with the human situation that you find in contemporary literature, on the contemporary stage, in the contemporary scene wherever you turn. First of all, the matter of guilt and the matter of shame.

You will remember that man then became conscious that he was naked and he took leaves and tried to cover himself. And Wesley would say, We have been putting up fronts ever since and have been trying to protect ourselves from a world about us that if they really knew what we really are like, that they could not live with us, and so in our own self-interest we had better be something less than candid with the world that is about us. And so we have been dissembling ever since and we have been trying to assuage our guilt.

Guilt and shame. All you have to do is talk to any psychiatrist or psychoanalyst to know the reality of that is a part of every human situation. Next came fear and anxiety.

That was an experience that man had never known before, coming from the hand of his loving father and cradled in a context of perfect provision, his life had been one of joy and one of confidence. And now fear lays its icy hand on his heart and on his mind. And he is afraid of all things of his best friend.

And the most priceless relationship now is perverted and destroyed, basically. And so he hid himself. As the text says, Adam said, I heard thy voice in the garden and knew that I was naked and I was afraid.

His fear gripped him and caused him to flee from the very one who was his only hope. And with that fear came, inevitably, anxiety. And what is more characteristic of the typical person today than fears and anxiety? The next thing that happened was, or in concurrence with this, alienation and separation.

The man, as God confronted him, turned and accused his other half, his companion, his mate that God the Father had given to him, and said, the woman that you gave me, and men have been blaming women ever since. Eve, in that rather helpless situation, turned and blamed the world that was about her, which really was simply an indirect way of saying, God, it's your fault. That serpent which you created and put into my world, he tricked me up, and really it's not my responsibility.

The fault goes out there, and she meant up there, if you will let me use those figures. Rationalization became a basic part of human experience, and it has been a part of human experience ever since. And with that alienation now from God, and alienation from our closest companions and from our friends, alienation at the human level, came an alienation from ourselves, and also an alienation from nature.

And for the rest of the story, you find that nature and man are not in harmony, and not working together, one working with the other. The whole environmental, ecological problem today is an evidence of that. And all of the problems that we have of feeding our world are an evidence of that.

Man against man, man against God, man against nature, and nature against God. Wesley looked around himself and saw a world that he felt that accurately described. But along with this came an action of God, and that action produced pain and travail.

God looked at the woman and said, When you bear your children, you will suffer. And he looked at the man and said, As you perform your daily labors, you too will suffer. And the same word is used in the Hebrew for the laboring pain of the woman and the laboring pain of the man.

I never read this passage now, but I think of Chuck Kaiser, who tried at one stage of the game to get me to do a little writing, and he pulled out of me, wrenched out of me a composition or two. And that's not my style or not my medium normally. And when I got through, he looked at me and he noticed the obvious relief, and he said, You know, I always feel, I think, about as close as a man will ever get to what a woman feels when the doctor places that baby in her arms when I have finished one of my articles.

Same word is used. And, you know, that's a universal experience, too. Isn't it interesting that there is a different mentality about starting a job from completing it? Wouldn't it be interesting if you could begin every job with the same feeling that you have when you successfully complete it? I remember a friend of mine was interviewing Paul Reese, and he said, Now, Dr. Reese, do you like to write? And he said, Heavens, no.

He said, Well, you've published, what is it, twenty-some books? And he said, Yes, that's right. Well, he said, Why is it that you've published that many books if you don't like to write? He said, Very simply, I like to have written. And, you know, the text says that when the childbirth is over, the woman will forget the pains because of the joy that a child is in her arms.

And, you know, it's amazing the pain that men forget when the job is completed and they can look at their work and it in some sense satisfies them and they feel that they have been in some sense creative and fulfilled. But notice that the most fulfilling thing that ever comes to a mortal being, one side is fulfillment but the other side is travail and pain. And that is characteristic of life.

It may be that this is a little bit of a variation on that theme, but I think it is relevant here. I notice that most successes in life have certain costs to them. I will never forget listening the first time I heard Chuck Colton telling about the night that Richard Nixon pulled down the greatest plurality that any president had ever pulled in American history.

And he was at a celebration and his beeper or whatever it was buzzed and he was notified and it was the Oval Office and President Nixon was sending for him. And when he got there, President Nixon was gloating somewhat in the fact that it was the greatest majority that any president had ever made, gained in American history. And he said, Chuck, I wanted somebody to sort of help me celebrate it.

And then he began to tell Chuck Colton, feeling that he was about as much responsible for that as anybody else, he began to tell about the sort of empty futility that was within his heart. You will often find that your greatest moments of exaltation have an underside to them. Now, Wesley said, that's life.

Now, after this came sickness and death, and you cannot separate the two. If a world is going to have death in it, it's going to have sickness. That's the way God has put these two things together.

Now, it is well-nigh universal, and all of us feel the wrongness about it. Have you ever noticed the anger that arises in people when death lays its hand upon those that are dear to them and near to them? It doesn't matter how old they are. As a pastor, one of the things that intrigued me was that if a person was young, we said it's unfair, he ought to have had a chance to have lived his life.

And if the person was older, people said he was just at the point where he had the wisdom that he could contribute something significant to us, and now he's taken away. Instinctively and intuitively, we strike out against it and say it ought not to be, but there it is. It's a fact of human experience.

But another thing, and this is the one we so often miss, but is the most significant, perhaps, of them all, that window on the other world closed. Because at the end of this experience, man is on the outside of the garden, and knowing God immediately is a thing of the past, and knowing the eternal world immediately now is a thing no longer experienced by men. Man moves through his life controlled by what he can see and hear and touch and feel and smell, those things that come to his senses.

And yet deep within him there is an anxiety that maybe there's something you can't see and feel and touch and smell. Maybe there is a world there. Way out yonder, there's a world.

It may not be so far away, but there's a feeling that there may be another world. We tend to put it at the other end of time. But if it's an eternal world, it's not out that way chronologically, it is simply out that way empirically.

There has come a cutting off of our ability to see it and to know it and to experience it. The visible world now has taken the primacy. And you know, I have no question in my mind about there being two worlds.

And of course, as a Christian, you have no option about that, because if you're a Christian, you believe that Jesus lives. And you believe that he's just as alive today as he was when he fed 5,000 people on the hills in Galilee, or when he raised Lazarus from the dead just a few minutes out of Jerusalem, or when he let Mary anoint him. You see, we believe that he lives.

Okay, if he lives, where does he live? He does not live in the realm of the empirical. How far away is he? Now, sin is the thing that cut us off from that world, and that's the world where we find the ultimate key to our existence. And so we stumble.

You know, I've fascinated at the interest in our generation in the occult. When I was growing up, all of my university friends told me that's what they talked about in the medieval days, and that's medieval stuff, and we've long since outgrown that. And if anybody had spoken in a university circle in my center, say the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1940, and said there would be a day when we would be having exorcisms in 1977, trying to get the demons out of people, they would have laughed and said, You're looking at history in the wrong direction.

That's behind us, not in front of us. But there's something deep within ourselves that says there is a world out there. And so it may even be an agnostic who produces the exorcist, or that type thing, but that agnostic knows that enough people around him believe that there is that kind of thing, that there is a market with which he can play.

The window on that world that is the real world that explains this one is now shut, and our access to that world immediately is gone. With this, evil inevitably becomes more attractive than good. What you can see and feel, and what satisfies the self, becomes more impressive than what will meet the needs of others and those things that move more nearly in the realm of the intangible.

Take the interest in the occult. How successful do you think a film would be or a novel would be on a good angel who came and helped you? Walt Disney might be able to get away with one, but you will notice that the exorcist can produce omen, and we're much more interested in liliths and incubus than we are holy

spirits who might come and cleanse us and make us righteous. There is a natural allure now within us for that which is evil.

Malcolm Muggeridge said something that I have never been able to get away from, very helpful to me. He said, That's the reason it is so difficult to write a Christian novel, because a novel appeals to your imagination. And in imagination, evil is always better than the good, while in reality, good is always better than evil.

In reality, you can live a lot longer with good, more comfortably than you can with evil. But in imagination, evil always wins out. It's more appealing than the good.

That is characteristic of us. That is characteristic of man's condition. All the rest of the Bible indicates that there is within us a bent, as Wesley said, toward sinning and toward the evil.

Now, Wesley said, that just simply describes the world as it is, the world that I know out there. Don't blame me if I accept that biblical account. It keeps me from illusion and from expecting that which isn't going to occur.

I know how to anticipate life. But Wesley was not only concerned about the world out there, history and society, Wesley was concerned about the world in here and spent a great deal of time dealing with that inner man that we know as John Wesley. When he came to speak of the impact of sin on the individual, he had a certain pessimism about him.

Some people have spoken about his pessimism of nature and his optimism of grace, but pessimistic he was, because he said man was in trouble. That when man sinned, he said, one of the first effects of that was, as Paul says in Ephesians 4, his mind was affected and his understanding was darkened. That's quite an expressive way of saying it.

Why would man's understanding be darkened? Simply because the light has gone out. And let me remind you that Jesus, in describing himself, said, I am the light of the world. And John said about him that he was the light that lightens the life of every man that comes into the world.

But he came to his own and they received him not, and went on in their darkness. There is an intellectual damage that has been done, the scripture says, to man that leaves us in intellectual confusion. We do not understand and cannot see clearly.

I'm always, when I think of this, I think of that chapter in C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, where he tells about in heaven the little liberal preacher who came up to visit and see how he liked heaven and found that it really wasn't real compatible for him. And so he was going back down below and his friend was trying to get him to stay and ask him what he had to go back down below for. He said, I think I can work it out for you to stay up here.

And he said, no, I have a paper to read. I'm a member of an ethical society down there. And he said, I'm supposed to read a paper at the next meeting.

So the fellow said, well, tell me about your society. Well, he said, we discuss philosophical, theological questions, always a little tenuously. We never seem to come to any great conclusions or specific conclusions, but the dialogue, you know.

I'm in the field of education, and one of the truly great educators in America is the man who currently is a president of Harvard University. In the winter and spring of 1975, 76, Daedalus magazine, which is the publication of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, devoted two issues to the situation in higher education in America. And they had 88 major educational figures address themselves to that question and to the future.

And Derek Bopp wrote on the role of the liberal arts college, Harvard College being typical, he would say, of that. I was intrigued by the way he began. He said, every college president, when he is speaking to people, would like to tell them about the kind of alumnus that his institution produces.

And every college president does do that. Now, of course, he picks out the best of his alumni to tell. Now, that's the kind of person we produce.

I remember I was being introduced in one group, and a fellow introduced me. He said, I'm a graduate of Asbury College. He said, you will remember what they say about Asburians.

You will find them everywhere. Of course, what I thought about was Zaire, Korea, and Nepal, and so forth. He said, early in my ministry, I was assigned to be the chaplain of a state penitentiary.

So he said, I went to choir practice. And the men were coming in when he said, a fellow walked in the door, got all the way through the doorway, looked at me, and his face fell, and he turned around and walked out. He said, in a few minutes, he came back.

He said, you will remember what they say at Asbury. You'll find one everywhere. But now, those are not the kind that I talk about when I go along public relations missions.

Derek Bopp said, we try to pick out the most virtuous, the most upright, the most civic-minded, the most intelligent, all the rest of that, you know. But he said, now let's get down to the facts. He said, as of now, there is not one iota of evidence to suggest that a college education has anything to do with a man or creative imagination.

Now, he said, college presidents may not tell you that. But he said, there's no evidence to support that. Of course, he was a little defensive in those days, because some of the best-known Ivy League graduates were people like Ehrlichman and Haldeman and Dean and Coulson.

But now, here is a great educator who says that my institution, which is training young people, makes no contribution in terms of honesty, integrity, generosity and creative imagination. Let me say very frankly, if I believed that about Asbury College, I'd resign today. I'm glad I believe that there is an element that you can add.

And let me say, I think it is Christian truth. When you're on the wrong platform, you're not going to get the right product. But when you're on the right platform, you can tackle certain problems and get some results.

Now, I was intrigued just a few months ago, I picked up an article by Derek Box, the thrust of which was that one of the most crucial problems facing the college world today is how to impart values to our college students. Really, is there much point in educating people if you can't improve their moral and ethical character, their generosity, or their creative imagination? But now, we do not know where to turn for the solutions to our problems. When I finished reading Derek Box's article, two things were clear.

One, he did not feel that God or Christianity had anything to do with it. If so, he didn't feel free to say so. And I don't mean this in any sense as a judgment on his personal Christian life, I'm just simply saying his article.

And two, he really was not very sure how we were going to go about doing it. It was simply a problem to which we must address ourselves. Man's mind is now uncertain as to how to tackle its problems.

Now, it's amazing how we can use our reasons to get what we want, isn't it?

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