

In the section of *The Brothers Karamazov* called "The Grand Inquisitor," Dmitri imagines a conversation between the representative of the Church and Jesus Christ himself. The Inquisitor chastises Jesus for having resisted the temptations in the wilderness, because he passed up the opportunity to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he possessed divine power as the Son of God. Now, the Inquisitor laments, belief must always be voluntary, not compelled. In his view, that does a disservice to human beings, who are weak and fragile and need something strong and reliable to lean on—something strong and reliable like irrefutable proof that Jesus is the Son of God. In the story, Jesus never answers the Inquisitor, but finally simply kisses him and turns away.

Obviously Dostoevski is using the Grand Inquisitor as a devil's advocate, because he wants to consider faith more subtly, as something that does not rely on claims that can be pinned down, but as something more /fluid and mysterious/. But he's picked the right scripture for the argument, because in the story of Jesus' temptation right after his baptism and before he begins public life, Jesus completely resists the devil's offers to establish himself beyond a shadow of a doubt.

One of my former students, whose family belongs to a conservative church, complained to me recently about how frustrating he finds Sunday school. Apparently they spend their time establishing arguments for intelligent design and other staples of biblical literalism. He wrote to me, 'People abuse the teleological argument like, "Hurr Durr the human eye is too complex to have come together by accident, shake a bunch of gears in a box and it don't make a watch so how could the eye exist"'. He's frustrated because he finds the arguments intellectually

inadequate; but I think he's also frustrated because they're *not* talking about things he cares about, like how to live wisely and compassionately, or where people find hope, or how they handle their own racial bias. They don't talk about metanoia, or transformation. It strikes me as a symptom of enormous anxiety, this desire to prove over and over again that God must *be*, and *be* a certain way—this constant attempt to silence the imaginary adversary.

Stephen Vincent Benet's short story "The Devil and Dan'l Webster" offers a counterpoint to this anxiety about God's reliability. The premise is that a farmer, Jabez Stone, impulsively made a Faustian bargain with the devil in order to have a prosperous life. When the devil shows up some years later to collect his soul, Stone goes to the lawyer Daniel Webster to try to get him out of his debt. Webster, of course, was a New England lawyer who had served in the congress and gained renown as an orator. In the story, Webster agrees to defend Jabez Stone as a debtor, and even allows the devil to select the judge and jury to hear the case.

So here's who hears the case:

If Jabez Stone had been sick with terror before, he was blind with terror now. For there was Walter Butler, the loyalist, who spread fire and horror through the Mohawk Valley in the times of the Revolution; and there was Simon Girty, the renegade, who saw white men burned at the stake and whooped with the Indians to see them burn. His eyes were green, like a catamount's, and the stains on his hunting shirt did not come from the blood of the deer. King Philip was there, wild and proud as he had been in life, with the great gash in his head that gave him his death wound, and cruel Governor Dale, who broke men on the wheel. There was Morton of Merry Mount, who so vexed the Plymouth Colony, with his flushed, loose, handsome face and his hate of the godly. There was Teach, the bloody pirate, with his black beard curling on his breast. The Reverend John Smeet, with his strangler's hands and his Geneva gown, walked as daintily as he had to the gallows. The red print of the rope was still around his neck, but he carried a perfumed handkerchief in one hand. One and all, they came into the room with the fires of hell still upon them, and the stranger named their names and their deeds as they came, till the tale of twelve was told. Yet the stranger had told the truth—they had all played a part in America.

"Are you satisfied with the jury, Mr. Webster?" said the stranger [the devil] mockingly, when they had taken their places.

The sweat stood upon Dan'l Webster's brow, but his voice was clear.

"Quite satisfied," he said. "Though I miss General Arnold from the company."

"Benedict Arnold is engaged upon other business," said the stranger, with a glower.

"Ah, you asked for a justice, I believe."

He pointed his finger once more, and a tall man, soberly clad in Puritan garb, with the burning gaze of the fanatic, stalked into the room and took his judge's place.

"Justice Hathorne is a jurist of experience," said the stranger. "He presided at certain witch trials once held in Salem. There were others who repented of the business later, but not he."

The jury and the judge are all damned souls, men who are remembered as ruthless and cruel in American history.

The trial begins, and it's totally rigged. Webster's objections are always struck down, and his opponent's objections are always upheld. So Daniel Webster starts to get angry as he waits for his turn to speak.

When he got up to speak he was going to flay that stranger with every trick known to the law, and the judge and jury too. He didn't care if it was contempt of court or what would happen to him for it. He didn't care any more what happened to Jabez Stone. He just got madder and madder, thinking of what he'd say. And yet, curiously enough, the more he thought about it, the less he was able to arrange his speech in his mind. Till, finally, it was time for him to get up on his feet, and he did so, all ready to bust out with lightnings and denunciations. But before he started he looked over the judge and jury for a moment, such being his custom. And he noticed the glitter in their eyes was twice as strong as before, and they all leaned forward. Like hounds just before they get the fox, they looked, and the blue mist of evil in the room thickened as he watched them. Then he saw what he'd been about to do, and he wiped his forehead, as a man might who's just escaped falling into a pit in the dark. For it was him they'd come for, not only Jabez Stone. He read it in the glitter of their eyes and in the way the stranger hid his mouth with one hand. And if he fought them with their own weapons, he'd fall into their power; he knew that, though he couldn't have told you how. It was his own anger and horror that burned in their eyes; and he'd have to wipe that out or the case was lost. He stood there for a moment, his black eyes burning like anthracite. And then he began to speak.

He started off in a low voice, though you could hear every word. They say he could call on the harps of the blessed when he chose. And this was just as simple and easy as a man could talk. But he didn't start out by condemning or reviling. He was talking about the things that make a country a country, and a man a man. And he began with the simple things that everybody's known and felt—the

freshness of a fine morning when you're young, and the taste of food when you're hungry, and the new day that's every day when you're a child. He took them up and he turned them in his hands. They were good things for any man. But without freedom, they sickened. And when he talked of those enslaved, and the sorrows of slavery, his voice got like a big bell. He talked of the early days of America and the men who had made those days. It wasn't a spread-eagle speech, but he made you see it. He admitted all the wrong that had ever been done. But he showed how, out of the wrong and the right, the suffering and the starvations, something new had come. And everybody had played a part in it, even the traitors.

Then he turned to Jabez Stone and showed him as he was an ordinary man who'd had hard luck and wanted to change it. And, because he'd wanted to change it, now he was going to be punished for all eternity. And yet there was good in Jabez Stone, and he showed that good. He was hard and mean, in some ways, but he was a man. There was sadness in being a man, but it was a proud thing too. And he showed what the pride of it was till you couldn't help feeling it. Yes, even in hell, if a man was a man, you'd know it. And he wasn't pleading for any one person any more, though his voice rang like an organ. He was telling the story and the failures and the endless journey of mankind. They got tricked and trapped and bamboozled, but it was a great journey. And no demon that was ever foaled could know the inwardness of it—it took a man to do that.

The fire began to die on the hearth and the wind before morning to blow. The light was getting gray in the room when Dan'l Webster finished. And his words came back at the end to New Hampshire ground, and the one spot of land that each man loves and clings to. He painted a picture of that, and to each one of that jury he spoke of things long forgotten. For his voice could search the heart, and that was his gift and his strength. And to one, his voice was like the forest and its secrecy, and to another like the sea and the storms of the sea; and one heard the cry of his lost nation in it, and another saw a little harmless scene he hadn't remembered for years. But each saw something. And when Dan'l Webster finished he didn't know whether or not he'd saved Jabez Stone. But he knew he'd done a miracle. For the glitter was gone from the eyes of judge and jury, and, for the moment, they were men again, and knew they were men.

"The defense rests," said Dan'l Webster, and stood there like a mountain. His ears were still ringing with his speech, and he didn't hear any thing else till he heard Judge Hathorne say, "The jury will retire to consider its verdict."

Walter Butler rose in his place and his face had a dark, gay pride on it. "The jury has considered its verdict," he said, and looked the stranger full in the eye. "We find for the defendant, Jabez Stone."

Benet's character of Daniel Webster declines to make an irrefutable argument. He was tempted to, because he wanted to demolish his opponents, all of

them wicked and in fact damned souls. But he realized that that would play into the devil's hands—that what the devil wanted, and what all of them wanted, was for Webster to be angry and to hate them. So instead he recognized their humanity, and called forth from them tender memories of beautiful places and sweet relationships. And when Daniel Webster called on the goodness of these damned souls, their goodness woke up, and they found for the defendant, a man who was both good and bad, like all of us. Even the damned have redemption within them.

Jesus' refusal to foreclose all argument, his willingness to leave his status uncertain, is a refusal to force people to follow him. He's not in the business of conscripting an army. He's about the business of offering us an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, in which domination and violence have no place. You follow Jesus because he offers transformation, *metanoia*, not because he guarantees security. You follow Jesus because the truth is that there is beauty, light and hope in every single one of us, and his Way calls it forth from even the damned. That's why I want to follow Jesus, not because he is a known quantity but because he will change me in ways I don't even anticipate, and call forth the kingdom of heaven for my life too.

God of strength, your son Jesus withstood the temptation to dominate, and instead emerged from the wilderness to invite us to transformation. May we enter willingly, even eagerly, into *metanoia* so that we may discover the kingdom of heaven that is so near. Amen.