

“Thots” on John: Altogether Christian

Today’s message is about being an "altogether Christian" as opposed to an "almost Christian." This talk was heavily influenced by one of John Wesley's standard sermons, entitled: "The Almost Christian."

But first a little history:

'1720 Wesley to Oxford

'1725 Ordained an Elder

'1727 Takes up assistant pastorate at Wroote

'1735 John and Charles leave for Georgia mission

'1736 While still at sea, a storm kicked up on January 25, during a worship service on board the Simmonds...Wesley wrote in his journal:

The sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." "But were your women and children, not afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."

On May 24, 1738, 285 years ago, John Wesley, the founder of methodism, went quote, very unwillingly quote to a religious meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. He wrote about what happened in his journal, saying, "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Please keep this progression in mind as we get into the message.

“Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” - [Acts 26:28 \(KJV\)](#)

According to the New Testament book of Acts, an early Christian leader known as Paul the Apostle was once brought to trial before a king named Agrippa. King Agrippa ruled over various territories around the Jewish province of Judea in the Roman Empire during the first century. Some of the people of Judea were angry with Paul for allegedly violating their Jewish law. So, he, Paul kept getting passed on to

different ruling authorities to deal with the allegations against him until he eventually came to stand trial before King Agrippa.

After Paul made his case, King Agrippa responded with a question. The question is recorded in [Acts 26:28](#). Agrippa's response reads as a question, that is, in modern versions of the Holy Scriptures. For example, the New International Version of [Acts 26:28](#) reads this way: "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?'" In this version, it sounds like Paul is using this opportunity to try to persuade King Agrippa to become a Christian, and Agrippa seems incredulous ("Really, Paul? Did you actually think you could persuade me to become a Christian in just one courtroom speech?"). That seems to be the straightforward meaning of Agrippa's question.

But check this out: in the King James Version published over 400 years ago in the year 1611, [Acts 26:28](#) reads this way: "Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." That sounds a little bit different, doesn't it? In this older translation, the question is not a question. It's a statement. And King Agrippa does not sound incredulous. Instead, he sounds like he really is almost persuaded! "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." The impression one gets from the KJV is that Paul just about converted him. The king was almost persuaded by Paul's speech that day to become a Christian.

Which translation is correct? It's a fair question. I would be happy to address it on another occasion. But today, however, I am much more interested in pointing out that John Wesley, said to be one of the greatest Christian preachers of all time, was fascinated by King Agrippa's response as it appears in the King James Version. The Reverend Mr. John Wesley was a preacher in the England during the 1700s. He and his brother, the renowned hymn writer Charles Wesley, were some of the principal founders of the Methodist church. On July 25, 1741, John was invited to preach a sermon at the University Church of St. Mary on the campus of Oxford University. The title of the sermon he preached that day was "The Almost Christian." It was inspired by King Agrippa's response to Paul found in [Acts 26:28](#) in the King James Version.

The point of Wesley's sermon that day, however, was not to talk about people who were almost persuaded to convert to the Christian faith, as one might expect. Instead, his point was to address the difference between what he referred to as an "almost Christian" versus an "altogether Christian." You see, Wesley was convinced that there were plenty of church-going people in his day who were Christian by name only. They were not actually people of genuine, heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ. Based on King Agrippa's response to Paul in the King James Version of [Acts 26:28](#),

Wesley referred to these nominal, name-only Christians as “almost Christians.” And he believed they possessed a few basic characteristics.

One characteristic of an “almost Christian,” Wesley taught, is that they are basically good people. They are decent and honorable human beings. They live and act in the ways society expects **upstanding, respectable citizens** to act. They do not commit crimes. They do not steal. They do not cheat. They do not lie. They try not to hurt other people. They do not knowingly oppress those who are less fortunate than themselves. They try to do the right thing. They are trustworthy. They are good and decent and respectable people.

Another characteristic of an “almost Christian,” Wesley believed, is that they appear godly on the outside. They go to church. They may even serve in the church. They contribute financially to the church. They do not take the Lord’s name in vain. They agree that people should not go around sinning. They close their eyes during prayer and look really serious and holy when they sing songs at church and receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

In other words, Wesley believed an “almost Christian” is a person who fits the description found in the Holy Scriptures of people who as ([2 Timothy 3:5, NIV](#)) says, are “**having a form of godliness but [are] denying its power**”. Their “godliness” is nothing more than godliness in outward appearance. It is not actually sincere. It is not, genuine, true godliness. Their Christianity is not full, not authentic, not heartfelt, Christianity. It is almost Christianity.

In sum, Wesley preached that if a person is a good and decent human being, and if they at least appear godly on the outside, they are almost a Christian. They are just about there.

Wesley also preached that being almost a Christian will do a person no good before God. Nominal Christianity is useless.

What a person needs instead is to move from being an “almost Christian” to being an “altogether”.

What is the difference between an “almost Christian” and an “altogether Christian”? Just as Wesley did with the “almost Christian,” he also identified some characteristics of an “altogether Christian.” He recognized three defining characteristics in particular.

First of all, an “altogether Christian” is a person who genuinely loves God. They have an authentic love for the Lord. It is not that they simply love the idea of God, or the things of God. They actually and truly love God. An “altogether Christian” takes with

absolute seriousness the teaching of Jesus Christ when he taught ([Matthew 22:37-38, NIV](#)), **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ This is the first and greatest commandment”**.

Also, they pray with the Psalmist, **“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you”** ([Psalm 73:25, NIV](#)).

An “altogether Christian” desires God. They have a hunger for God. Their heart yearns for God. They want to know God. They want to know God’s heart, to know God’s will, and to go deeper in their relationship with God. They delight in God, and find joy in God, because they genuinely love God.

The second characteristic of an “altogether Christian” is this: They really do love other people. They genuinely care for other human beings. They take seriously what Jesus declared to be the second greatest of all of God's commandments, to **“Love your neighbor as yourself”** ([Matthew 22:40, NIV](#)). An “altogether Christian” lives toward others with the kind of love described in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians: **“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”** ([1 Corinthians 13:4-7, NIV](#)). An “altogether Christian” lives toward others in these kinds of ways. They truly do love other people.

Third and finally, an “altogether Christian” is a person of heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ. They have true faith in the Son of God. They possess the kind of faith through which a person is saved by grace: genuine, authentic, heartfelt faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Their faith is not simply a general, vague kind of faith, nor is it faith merely that God exists somewhere out there. It is faith in the person of Jesus, faith in the absolute necessity and merit of his atoning death on Good Friday and the reality of his resurrection on Easter Sunday. And it is faith that has truly found its way into their heart. It is real, sincere, honest, heartfelt faith in Jesus.

ARE YOU AN ALMOST CHRISTIAN OR AN ALTOGETHER CHRISTIAN?

I have to confess that Wesley’s labels here, the “almost Christian” and the “altogether Christian,” make me somewhat uncomfortable. In some ways they feel too dualistic, too “either-or.” I am much more comfortable thinking of the Christian life as a process, as more of a journey of growth. On the surface, these two categories don’t seem to allow too much room for that.

However, just because I am uncomfortable with the labels does not mean the labels are wrong, or that they are not useful. My discomfort with them may in fact say more about me than it says about them. Perhaps the value in the labels is in their ability to help me think about the kind of Christian journey I am on, and about

whether that journey truly is a Christian one—one that is true to the actual life and teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Is your vision of Christianity limited to simply being a good and decent human being? Listen: you do not need Christianity for that. There are plenty of good and decent human beings who do not identify with the Christian faith. They are good people. They are respectable neighbors. They would watch out for your kids. They would help you if you needed a hand. They may not be disciples of Jesus Christ, but that does not mean they are bad people. You can be a good person without being a Christian. To be a Christian--an altogether Christian--must mean something more than simply being a good and decent human being.

Are you content with a version of Christianity that makes you look good in the eyes of others but does not really change you on the inside? Are you content to simply be seen by others as a person who does a bunch of churchy things, regardless of whether or not those things actually increase your love for God, your love for people, and your faith in Jesus Christ?

If so, may you receive these two categories as an invitation to move from nominal Christianity to Scriptural Christianity.

May you receive them as an invitation to ask the Holy Spirit to give you a full-hearted, full-souled, full-minded, full-strengthened love for God.

Closing Prayer

We pray Lord, that You would gift us with real, sincere love for other people.

Open our hearts to heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ.

Persuaded us today.

Help us to refuse to settle for almost Christianity.

And become an altogether Christian.

Amen!
