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The Almost Christian Acts 26:19-29

Near the end of the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul is arrested by Jewish leaders, but because he is a Roman citizen he has the right to trial before a Roman judge. In chapter 26, he appears before the Roman governor Festus, and a Roman ally, King Agrippa. As always when he has an audience, Paul presents the gospel of Christ's resurrection. We pick up his speech just after Paul has described his conversion, reading Acts 26, verses 19-29:

¹⁹'After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. ²¹For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²²To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: ²³that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.'

²⁴While he was making this defense, Festus exclaimed, 'You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!' ²⁵But Paul said, 'I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. ²⁶Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.' ²⁸Agrippa said to Paul, 'Almost you would persuade me to become a Christian!' ²⁹Paul replied, 'I would to God that not only you, but also all who are listening to me today, were both almost and altogether such as I am – except for these chains.'

In every sermon Paul preached, the central message was that Christ rose from the dead, and that by doing so, he offered salvation to all people. This resurrection stuff was as difficult to believe in the first century as it is today, and it always inspired a response. Just look at today's reading: on the one hand, Governor Festus tells Paul he's lost his mind, and on the other hand Agrippa admits that he'd like to believe it. And that's typical. No one ever responded to the teachings of the Early Church by saying, "Oh, that's nice." People were either drawn to it or they rejected it out of hand.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had a unique take on this passage, though. He read the line, *Almost you would persuade me to become a Christian*, and thought, "Actually, that's true. A lot of people *have* been persuaded to become 'Almost Christians.' And most of them don't even know that's all they are." So, in 1743, early in his ministry, he wrote a sermon entitled "The Almost Christian" that became one of his most frequently re-published sermons.

Let me summarize his argument briefly – which is not a thing that John himself ever did. He began by asking his listeners to imagine a wonderful, virtuous, godly person. Imagine someone who is scrupulously honest, and not just when people are watching, who respects the property of others and doesn't take advantage of anyone, especially the poor. This person is compassionate, doesn't use vulgar language, doesn't gossip or criticize others behind their back, is temperate with both wine and food, lives at peace with neighbors, and is a hard worker. This paragon takes the Golden Rule seriously and treats others as he or she would like to be treated. We'll specify that this person is a churchgoer, too – faithful to the local church, and respectful in worship, generous in support, and regular in taking the sacraments. On top of all that this

person has an admirable family life. Basically a pillar of his community, a role model for anyone. “There,” Wesley says, “that’s what I mean by an ‘Almost Christian.’” He adds,

I did go thus far for many years, as many of this place can testify: using diligence to eschew all evil, and to have a conscience void of offense; redeeming the time, buying up every opportunity of doing all good to all men; constantly and carefully using all the public and all the private means of grace; endeavoring after a steady seriousness of behavior at all times and in all places. . . . Yet my own conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost that all this time I was but “almost a Christian.” (*John Wesley’s Sermons*, 65)

Feels a little harsh, doesn’t it? I mean, what more does Wesley want? What is difference between this admirable “Almost Christian” and, to use Paul’s phrase, the “Altogether Christian”? Wesley goes on to explain: It’s about love. The Altogether Christian may do the same acts of piety as the Almost Christian – for instance, go to church, pray, read scripture, partake of Communion, and so on – but does them entirely out of love for God. Both may do acts of charity for others, but the Altogether Christian does them for one reason: out of love for neighbor. The Altogether Christian does nothing in order to be good or to be virtuous, because those things are irrelevant. The Altogether Christian believes that God’s salvation comes entirely as a gift and has nothing to do with any goodness we might imagine we have. Having no other motivation to be pious or charitable, then everything the Altogether Christian does is done simply out of love.

Recently, the theme of this 275 year old sermon has been picked up again. A group of Christian youth leaders sponsored an exhaustive study – the National Study of Youth and Religion – that involved thousands of in-depth interviews with teenagers from churches. The study resulted in this description of the typical faith of the American adolescent. It is not Christianity, the researchers concluded, but rather something that they called *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*.

Let me unpack that. *Moralistic* means that the teens firmly believed that God wanted them to be good people. They should be nice to others, nice to animals, nice to the unfortunate, nice to the planet, and, well, basically *nice*. The word *nice* appeared over and over in the interviews. Yes, God wants people to go to church and stuff, and not to be all judgy with others, but mostly God wants us to be just really, really nice. *Moralistic*.

The second descriptor, *Therapeutic*, describes teenagers’ conviction that God wants us to be *happy* and can be called on to help us feel better when we’re not. God is perceived as a comforter, a best friend who always listens and isn’t – you know – all judgy. God cares about our comfort and wants us not to have to go through hard things. *Therapeutic*.

Finally, the researchers used the theological term *Deism*. This was a philosophy, popular in the Enlightenment, that imagined a God who set the cosmos in motion, then stepped back, leaving it to run by the laws of pure Reason. Like these Enlightenment thinkers, the adolescents of the survey thought of God as *nice*, but distant. I mean, except when God is rushing in to help us not feel sad or lonely, God stays out of the way. One interviewed youth compared God to a sort of cosmic life guard, always watching over us, but not at all intrusive. *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*.

One of the researchers on this project was Princeton Divinity School professor Kenda Creasy Dean, who also by coincidence is a United Methodist elder, and she wrote up her response to the survey in this book: *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. And yes, she was intentionally referring to Wesley’s sermon. In

2010, I went to a week-long pastor's conference led by Dr. Dean. On the first day, she spent several hours explaining this not-exactly-Christian faith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and when she had finished one of the other pastors in the conference raised his hand and said, "But Dr. Dean, you've just described the faith of most of my congregation."

She nodded. "Yes. Where do you think the kids learned it?"

For the next several weeks in our sermons, we're going to be looking at John Wesley's question: What is an Altogether Christian? Not an Almost Christian. Not a person who looks Christian or has Christian membership credentials or Christian values. Not someone who has a general air of Christian-ishness. Along the way, we're going to look at some of the different varieties of not-quite-Christian that appear in our society, so that we can see what being a Christian actually *is*.

But let me say this up front. This is absolutely not so that we can determine who is "saved." That is not our call. All I am confident in saying about that is that God's love and grace are bigger and wilder and way more inclusive than any of our categories. God is perfectly able to decide who to receive with grace without my suggestions, or anyone else's. No, I'm not asking the question "Who is a Christian?" so that we can figure out who to exclude. I want to ask that question so that we can be sure that we know who *we* are.

You see, every religion, in every society, has a tendency to drift into some user-friendly form unworthy of the name. Sometimes, as with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, it morphs into something shapeless, benign, unobtrusive, and undemanding – a faith that offers comfort without expectations. Other times it can drift into a sort of smug, holier-than-thou, loveless virtue – the thing that so irritated John Wesley. An unexamined faith inevitably degrades over time, and that degraded faith can take a variety of forms. Every now and then we should take some time to ask, *Who are we really?* What do we actually stand for? What are the convictions and behaviors that distinguish a Christian from people who just look sort of Christian-y.

Because, remember back in Acts 26, there was no wishy-washy middle for the gospel that Paul preached. It was not benign. You either felt irresistibly drawn to it, even if it would change your life, or you thought it was nutty. I propose that the same should apply to those of us who claim to follow that gospel. We might seem compelling, or we might seem nuts, but the one thing no one should say upon beholding an Altogether Christian is, "Well, isn't that *nice*?"

I close with another passage from Wesley's sermon "The Almost Christian": "The great question of all, then, still remains. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Can you cry out, 'My God, and my all'? Do you desire nothing but him? . . . And is this commandment written in your heart, 'that he who loveth God loveth his neighbor also'? Do you then love your neighbor as yourself? Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul? As Christ loved you? Yea, dost thou believe that Christ loved, *thee*, and gave himself for thee? . . . May we all thus experience what it is to be not almost only, but altogether Christians!" Amen. (*John Wesley's Sermons*, 67-68)