

Wade St 4th October 2015 The Almost Christian

On July 25th 1741, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Society, what later became the Methodist Church, delivered what is known as the 2nd of 44 published sermons.

His 2nd sermon was entitled 'The Almost Christian' and for his text he based his sermon on just one verse from the passage we heard from Acts.

'Agrippa said to Paul 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian' (Acts 26:28)'

Wesley went on to say:-

'In every age there are those who will not go all the way to Christ. They are **almost** persuaded to be Christians but they falter at some point. The Church is full of 'Almost Christians' who have not gone all the way with Christ.'

Well that was 1741, I hear you say, things are different now surely. Society has changed and so has the church. But, if we examine closely the nature of the 'Almost Christian', we find the being a true disciple, a follower of Christ, is still, if not more, challenging, than they were in 1741.

If we examine the nature of the 'Almost Christian', Wesley argues that we see the following qualities:-

1. The Almost Christian knows the word of God is true – but will not commit to following it.
2. He or she might lead a good, moral, even religious life and go beyond some others with acts of compassion.
3. The humanitarian spirit prompts the 'Almost Christian' to give to others in need.
4. All sin and unrighteousness is hated but not recognised in the life of the 'Almost Christian'.
5. A form of Godliness is displayed.
6. The 'Almost Christian' does not partake of things forbidden by God and life is conducted in line with divine principles.

7. The 'Almost Christian' abstains from alcohol, does not party and is not a glutton.
8. The 'Almost Christian' desires to live in peace with everybody.
9. The 'Almost Christian' never thinks to be unkind to others and would never return evil for evil.
10. The 'Almost Christian' may pray stirring prayers but such devotion is simple hypocrisy.

However the 'Almost Christian' does not see the need to be 'born again' as his life and character are good enough.

The bible is full of warnings for those who only display the outward signs of Christian life.

- In 1 Timothy 6:19 the 'Almost Christian' will not 'lay hold of eternal life'.
- They will in fact wish to serve both God and man.
- Their lack of commitment makes them lukewarm for which we know there is a stark warning to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:16.
- The 'Almost Christian' does not in fact love the Lord with all his heart, soul, might as given to us in Deuteronomy 6:5.

So, if this is the 'Almost Christian', a life of godly qualities, virtues, some sacrifice for others, where does that leave us in our faith journey today?

In the passage from Acts, Paul gives his testimony to Festus and Agrippa, seeking to persuade them to see the way of Christ. Paul explains that he started out as an enemy of Christian faith but through a dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road, God empowered him to be a man of Christian faith and a leader of the Christian faith to the Greek world and beyond, a missionary to the Gentiles.

In The 'Almost Game', where we looked for what is missing, is a way of thinking about the 'Almost Christian'. In the examples given in the game, we mislead ourselves if we believe

we have named all the planets when one of them is missing. We claim a knowledge and truth which is flawed and have no more than an 'almost faith'

So we cannot claim a monopoly on the virtues of love, charity, morality, living a good life, but we can look for the source of all life which is not found in humanity alone. For the 'Almost Christian', they simply show the outward signs of goodness with a sense of their own worthiness and importance. The 'Almost Christian' is a church goer who parades their wealth, jewellery and expensive clothes. Wesley says this:-

'I wish to God that there were no people here, even in this congregation, who believed this way.'

What does it mean to be an 'Altogether Christian'? Someone who loves God with his whole heart, soul, mind and strength. In the reading from Mark we are reminded of these important commandments where the reading of 'love my neighbour' really means love everybody, enemies as well.

The 'Altogether Christian':-

1. Loves God with heart, mind, soul and strength.
2. Loves neighbour includes enemies, those who persecute you. The kind of love which this is about is clearly laid out for us in 1 Corinthians 13.
3. The 'Altogether Christian' has true faith – everybody who believes is born of God. Being born again is not an option.
4. The 'Altogether Christian' perhaps most importantly, knows his sins are forgiven and yes is delivered for damnation through the blood of Jesus.

What is the essential difference between the 'Almost' and the 'Altogether' Christian?

It is a heartfelt love for Jesus as the driver for a godly lifestyle.

Wesley in this sermon turns the focus from preaching to the crowd about their condition to confessing his own personal experience. He describes his own life and how he saw himself as an 'Almost Christian'. He did all the things he describes of the Almost Christian but hadn't taken the deeper step to show a heartfelt love for Jesus.

What does a heartfelt love for Jesus actually look like when we think of our own lives? Wesley talks about the kind of love which fills every corner of the soul. In that song we sang; what kind of love is this, we are reminded of the following lines in that song:-

I am the guilty one, yet I go free. By grace I have been saved, it is the gift of God.

I wonder in our daily lives with the struggles, maybe illness, family problems, addictions, distractions we forget that being an 'altogether Christian' is not a matter of self-effort and personal achievement but simply an acceptance of a free gift from God. In accepting that free gift we hand over the daily struggles allowing our faith to grow and we enter into a fullness of life which the world can never provide. This is not to say that life is still a struggle for some but with God it is the difference between a life preoccupied with self and a life in which the Holy Spirit is dwelling and as such leading and guiding.

We are guilty through our own efforts because everything we do is tainted with sin. All our best intentions are marred if we do them from a sense of pride. Why? Because we know that love is not proud and does not boast. Loving neighbours means loving everyone because neighbour includes enemies and those who persecute us. Jesus taught this through the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Almost Christian will love but not sacrificially; not freely with no thought of the consequences.

Today the challenge is to reflect on our own lives and examine whether we have somehow allowed a less than faithful life to allow us to miss out on being an altogether Christian?

For 9 am service continue; For 11 am stop at this point.

What Kind of Christian am I?

There are no Christian life plans. Options for how we want to be a Christian are not available. There are not various schemes into which we can opt in or opt out depending on how much of Jesus we want to receive. In today's consumer society, the pressure to opt in or out is a major weapon available to Satan. He says to us; it's ok to come to church as an when we feel like coming; it's ok to accept that some people will choose certain times of the year to come to church. It's ok to let people come and go as they please as we understand the pressures of family life at the weekends. There are many things happening

on a Sunday which are now more important to family life than worship. Recent government proposals to extend the opening hours for major retailers on a Sunday is yet a further onslaught on the day of rest which God ordained in the opening chapters of Genesis.

As Christians do we stand up for injustice? Do we challenge the policies of governments when we see the most vulnerable people being targeted for cuts? I read a short time ago in the Lichfield Mercury a headline which said:-

Council has ignored pledge to start talks on the Living Wage.

As Christians, do we not think it is right that people are paid a wage which enables them to live?

In the passage we have just heard from Romans, we read 'Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of the mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God. Then you will know what being an Altogether Christian is about. It is allowing God to change our minds when we are trapped in our own sin and prejudice that is a gateway to being an altogether Christian. If we have accepted the free gift of grace from God surely then we are guided by Him into ways of truth and justice.

Love must be completely sincere. Hate what is evil; hold onto what is good.

Wesley told his congregations that the difference between an almost and altogether Christian was sincerity. Love must be completely sincere.

If we allow decisions to be made without reflecting on whether these decisions have been made from a standpoint of sincere Love, then we cannot call ourselves Altogether Christians.

So what kind of Christian are you?

Each person has a life of experiences, family background, social and political views which have been shaped by events, the media, colleagues, friends etc. It may be refreshing to see in very recent times that new political leaders are able to carve out a set of personal beliefs without feeling the need to have these tempered by spin or journalists.

Jesus himself defied all the institutional constraints of his day and sought to overturn all the customs which were often barriers to the Gospel of Love being allowed to break into the hearts and minds of those who society had rejected.

If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink- words from Romans to show us how a Christian must be.

What kind of Christian are you?

- Did you offer your life to Christ as a young person and perhaps have just accepted that this alone will be the road to salvation?
- Have you been on a long journey and not sure where you are in your relationship with God?
- Are you a new Christian who wants to put roots down in good soil but the world is too tempting and distracting?
- Are you fixed in your views about God? Are you open to the Holy Spirit prompting you?
- Is God and Church just a weekly activity which is part of your social calendar?

There are many other ways Christians identify themselves and claim an allegiance to Jesus? There is a whole spectrum of views on controversial issues which Christians will argue based on their understanding of scripture or in some cases with no reflection on what the bible is teaching.

We must come back to The Great Commandment in Mark's gospel. To love God and love ones neighbour form the bedrock of all that we believe and we must show these through our faith and actions.

FAITH WITHOUT ACTIONS IS DEAD. We read this in the book of James. So...

Will we stand by whilst poor people get poorer?

Will we love those fleeing persecution in other countries and will we provide a refuge?

Will we allow our Christian life to be eroded by the consumer society in which we live?

Will we be distracted by the celebrity culture which creates its own false heroes and distractions?

Paul has presented his compelling evidence to Agrippa and to all of us as we read about his conversion and know the way that God is calling each one of us. Agrippa said to Paul: Do you think in this short time you will make me a Christian? Our challenge every day with those we meet is the same question. People will ask you; Do you think you will make a Christian?

Are you playing the 'almost game'? You sense that you have enough in your life but you know something is missing. Are you an almost Christian who wants to be an Altogether Christian?

Are we willing to be obedient to all that God requires of us as believers? It is only Christ who saves our souls from sin.

Will you accept the free gift of grace today and let it transform your minds and hearts? Let's pray.

The greatest day in history

Death is beaten, You have rescued me

Sing it out, Jesus is alive

The empty cross, the empty grave

Life eternal, You have won the day

Shout it out, Jesus is alive

He's alive

Oh, happy day, happy day

You washed my sin away

Oh, happy day, happy day

I'll never be the same

Forever I am changed

