

Three Pictures

by J.C. Ryle

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being a true Christian, not just someone who is 'almost' a Christian, and highlights the characteristics of those who are convinced of the truth of Christianity.

Scripture: Acts 26:24, Galatians 6:14

Topics: "The Cost of Discipleship", "Faith and Commitment"

Description

J.C. Ryle presents a compelling sermon titled 'Three Pictures,' where he contrasts the lives of Festus, Agrippa, and Paul to illustrate different responses to the Gospel. Festus represents those who live without regard for spiritual matters, while Agrippa embodies those who are close to faith but lack commitment. In stark contrast, Paul exemplifies the 'altogether Christian,' fully convinced of the truth of Christ and willing to endure suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Ryle urges listeners to reflect on their own spiritual state and strive to be like Paul, rather than settling for being 'almost' Christians. The sermon emphasizes the importance of a genuine commitment to Christ in a world filled with distractions and indifference.

Transcript

"God forbid that I should glory, save the cross of our lord Jesus Christ." (Gal. vi. 14.)

"And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. "But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. "For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. "Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. "And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."--ACTS XXVI. 24--29.

There is a collection of pictures in London called the National Portrait Gallery. It contains the likenesses of nearly all the great men who have made a mark in English history. It is well worth seeing. But I doubt whether it contains three portraits which deserve a more attentive study than the three which I am going to show you in this paper.

One striking feature of the Bible is the rich variety of its contents. That grand old Book, which for eighteen centuries has baffled the attacks of unfriendly ethics, is not only a storehouse of doctrine, precept, history,

poetry, and prophecy. The Holy Ghost has also given us a series of life-like portraits of human nature, in all its various aspects, which deserve our attentive study. 'Who does not know that we often learn more from patterns and examples than from abstract statements?

Reader, the well-known piece of Scripture before you supplies an admirable illustration of my meaning. It forms the conclusion of the chapter in which the Apostle St. Paul makes a defence of himself before the Roman governor Festus and the Jewish king Agrippa. Three pictures of three very different men hang before us. They are types of three classes of men who are to be seen among us at this very day. Their succession has never ceased. In spite of changing fashions, scientific discoveries, and political reforms, the inward heart of man in every age is always the same. Come and let us stand before these three pictures, as we would stand before the painting of a Gainsborough, a Reynolds, or a Romney, and see what we may learn.

I. Let us look, first, at Festus, the Roman governor.

This is the man who abruptly broke in upon St. Paul's address, exclaiming, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad."

Festus, no doubt, was a heathen, ignorant of any religion except the idolatrous temple-worship, which in the time of the apostles overspread the civilized world. From the language he addressed to Agrippa in a preceding chapter, he seems to have been profoundly ignorant both of Judaism and Christianity. He spoke of "questions of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." (Acts xxv. 19.) Most probably, like many a proud Roman, in the declining age of the Roman Empire, he regarded all religions with secret contempt, as all equally false, or equally true, and all alike unworthy of the notice of a great man. As for a Jew talking of showing "light to the Gentiles," the very idea was ridiculous! To keep in with the world, to have the favour of man, to care nothing for anything but the things seen, to please "my lord" Augustus,—this was probably the whole religion of Porcius Festus.

Now, reader, are there many among us like Festus? Yes! I fear there are tens of thousands. They are to be found in every rank and class of society. They walk in our streets. They travel with us in railway carriages. They meet us in the daily intercourse of the world. They fill the various relations of life respectably. They are often good men of business and eminent in the professions they have chosen. They discharge the various duties of their positions with credit, and leave a good name behind them, when their place is empty. But, like Festus, they have no religion!

These are they who seem to live as if they had no souls. From January to December, they appear neither to think, nor feel, nor see, nor know anything about a life to come. It forms no part of their schemes, and plans, and calculations. They live as if they had nothing to attend to but the body, nothing to do but to eat, and drink, and sleep, and dress, and get money, and spend money, and no world to provide for except the world which we see with our eyes.

These are they who seldom, if ever, use any means of grace, whether public or private. Praying, and Bible-reading, and secret communion with God are things which they despise and let alone. They may be very well for the aged, the sick, and the dying; for the clergy, the monk, and the nun; hut not for them! If they ever attend a place of worship, it is only as a matter of form, to appear respectable; and too often they never attend except on the occasion of some great public ceremony, or at a wedding, or a funeral.

These are they who profess their inability to understand anything like zeal or earnestness about religion. They regard the Societies, the Institutions, the literature, the Evangelistic efforts of Christians, at home or abroad, with sublime contempt. Their maxim is to let everybody alone. The comparative claims of Church and Dissent, the strife of parties within our pale, the debates of Convocations, Congresses, and Diocesan Conferences, are all alike matters of indifference to them. They look coldly at them from a distance, like the philosopher described by the Latin poet Lucretius, and regard them as the childish struggles of weak folks, unworthy of the notice of a cultivated mind. And if such subjects are ever brought up in their company, they brush them away with some satirical remark, or some oft-repeated old smart saying of scepticism.

Will any one deny that there are multitudes of people around us such as I have tried to describe,--kind people, perhaps, moral people, good-natured people, easy to get on with, unless you get on the subject of religion? It is impossible to deny it. Their name is "legion," for they are many. The tendency of these latter days to make an idol of intellect,--the desire to be independent and to think for yourself,--the disposition to worship private judgment, to exalt your own isolated opinion, and to deem it finer and cleverer to go wrong with a few than right with a crowd,--all this helps to swell the ranks of the followers of Festus. I fear he is the type of a large class.

Such people are a melancholy sight. They often remind me of some grand old ruin, like Melrose or Bolton Abbey, where enough remains of beauteous arches, and columns, and towers, and traceried windows to show what the building once was, and what it might have been now if God had not left it. But now all is cold, and silent, and gloomy, and suggestive of decay, because the Master of the house, the Lord of life, is not there. Just so it is with many of the followers of Festus. You often feel, when you observe their intellectual power, their gifts of speech, their taste, their energy of character, "what men these might be if God had His rightful place in their souls!" But without God all is wrong. Alas, for the crushing power of unbelief and pride, when they get complete mastery of a man, and reign over him uncontrolled! No wonder that Scripture describes unconverted man as "blind,--sleeping,--beside himself,--and dead."

Is Festus reading this paper to-day? I am afraid not! Religious tracts and books, like Sunday services and sermons, are not in his line. On Sundays Festus probably reads the newspaper, or looks over his worldly accounts, or visits his friends, or goes a journey, and secretly wishes an English Sunday was more like a Continental one, and the theatres and museums were open. On week-days Festus is constantly employed in business, or politics, or recreations, or killing time in the trifling pursuits of modern society ; and he lives like a butterfly, as thoughtless as if there were no such thing as death, or judgment, or eternity. Oh, no: Festus is not the man to read this paper

But is a man like Festus in a hopeless condition, and beyond the reach of mercy? No: indeed! I thank God he is not, he has yet got a conscience at the bottom of his character, which, however much seared, is not quite dead,--a conscience, which, like the great bell of St. Paul's at midnight, when the roar of city business is over, will sometimes make itself heard. Like Felix, and Herod, and Ahab, and Pharaoh, the followers of Festus have their times of visitation and, unlike them, they sometimes awake before it is too late, and become different men. There are seasons in their lives when they are driven in upon themselves, and feel "the powers of the world to come," and find that mortal man cannot get on without God. Sickness, and solitude, and disappointments, and losses of money, and deaths of loved ones, can sometimes make the proudest hearts bow down, and confess that "the grasshopper is a burden." Manasseh is not the only one who "in time of affliction" turned to God, and began to play. Yes, reader, I have long felt that we must never despair of any one. The age of spiritual miracles is not past. With Christ and the Holy Ghost, nothing

is impossible. The last day will show that there were some who began with Festus and were like him, but at last turned round, repented, and ended with St. Paul. While there is life we must hope, and pray for others.

II. Let us now turn to a very different picture Let us look at King Agrippa. This is the man who was so much struck by St. Paul's address that he said, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.",

"Almost." Let me dwell for moment on that expression. I am well aware that many think our authorized English Version of the Bible is in fault here, and fails to give the true meaning of the original Greek. They assert that the phrase would be more correctly rendered, "In a short time," or "with weak and feeble argument thou art persuading me." I am bold to say that I cannot accept the view of these critics, though I admit that the phrase is rather obscure. But in questions like these I dare not call any man master. I hold with several excellent commentators, both ancient and modern,* that the translation given in our authorized version is right and correct. I am fortified in my belief by the fact that this is the view of one who thought, and spoke, and wrote in the language of the New Testament, I mean the famous Greek Father Chrysostom. And last, but not least, no other view appears to me to harmonize with the exclamation of the Apostle St. Paul in the verse which follows. "Almost!" he seems to say, taking up Agrippa's words. "I want thee to be not almost, but altogether a Christian." On these grounds I stand by our old version.

Agrippa, whose picture now demands our attention, was in many respects very unlike Festus. Of Jewish extraction, and brought up among Jews, if not of pure Jewish blood, he was thoroughly familiar with many things of which the Roman governor was utterly ignorant. He knew and "believed the prophets." He must have understood many things in St. Paul's address, which were mere "wards and names" and raving fancies to his companion in the place of hearing. He had a secret inward conviction that the man before him had truth on his side. He saw, and felt, and was moved, and affected, and conscience-stricken, and had inward wishes and longing desires. But he could get no further. He saw; but he had not courage to act. He felt; but he had not the will to move. He was not far from the kingdom of God; but he halted outside. He neither condemned nor ridiculed Christianity; but, like a man who is paralyzed. He could only look at it and examine it, and had not strength of mind to lay hold on it and receive it into his heart.

Now, reader, are there many professing Christians like Agrippa? I fear there is only one answer to that question. They are an exceeding great army, a multitude which it is difficult to number. They are to be found in our churches, and are pretty regular attendants on all means of grace. They have no doubt of the truth of the Bible. They have not the slightest objection to the doctrine of the Gospel. They know the difference between sound and unsound teaching. They admire the lives of holy people. They read good books, and give money to good objects. But, unhappily, they never seem to get beyond a certain point in their religion. They never come out boldly on Christ's side, never take up the cross; never confess Christ before men, never give up petty inconsistencies. They often tell you that they "mean, and intend, and hope, and purpose some day to be more decided Christians. They know they are not quite what they ought to be at present, and they hope one day to be different. But the "convenient season" never seems to come. Meaning and intending they go on, and meaning and intending they go off the stage. Meaning and intending they live, and meaning and intending, too oft, they die,--kind, good-natured, respectable people; not enemies, but friends to St. Paul, but, like Agrippa, "almost Christians."

How is it, you may well ask, that men can go so far in religion, and yet go no further? How is it that they can see so much, and know so much, and yet not follow the light they have to the "perfect day?" How is it that intellect and reason and conscience can make such progress towards Christianity, and yet heart and

will can lag behind?

The answers to these questions are soon given. The fear of man keeps back some. They have a cowardly dread of being laughed at, mocked, and despised, if they become decided Christians. They dare not risk the loss of man's good opinion. Like many of the Jewish rulers in our Lord's time, they "love the praise of men more than the praise of God." (John xii. 43.) The love of the world keeps back others. They know that decided religion entails separation from some of the fashionable amusements and modes of spending time which are common in the world. They cannot make up their minds to this separation. They shrink from their baptismal vow to "renounce the pomps and vanities of this world." Like Lot's wife, they would like to be delivered from the wrath of God; but, like her, they must "look back." (Genesis xix.26.) A certain subtle form of self-righteousness keeps back many. They take comfort in the secret thought that., at any rate, they are not so bad as Festus. They are not like some people they know: they do not despise religion. They go to church. They admire earnest men like St. Paul. Surely they will not be lost on account of a few inconsistencies! The morbid dread of being party-spirited keeps back many, and especially young men. They are oppressed with the idea that they cannot take a decided line in religion without committing themselves to some particular "school of thought." This is what they do not want to do. They forget that the case of Agrippa is not one of doctrine, but of conduct, and that decided action about duty is the surest way to obtain light about doctrinal truth. "If any man will do God's will, he shall know of the doctrine." (John vii. 17.) Some secret sin, I fear, keeps back not a few. They know in their own hearts that they are clinging to something which is wrong in God's sight. There is an Achan's wedge of gold somewhere, or an Herodias, or a Drusilla, or a Bernice in their private history, which will not bear the light of day. They cannot part with this darling. They cannot cut off the right hand, or pluck out the right eye, and so they cannot become disciples--Alas! for these excuses. Weighed in the balance, they are worthless and vain. Alas! for those who rest in them. Except they awake and cast off their chains, they will make shipwreck for ever.

Is Agrippa reading this paper to-day? Are there any like him whose eyes are on this page? Take a kindly warning from a minister of Christ, and try to realize that you are in a very dangerous position. Wishing, and feeling, and meaning, and intending, do not make up saving religion. They are but painted corks, which may enable you to float on the surface for a time, and keep your head above water, but they will not prevent you being carried down the stream, and being at last swept over a worse fall than that of Niagara. And, after all, you are not happy. You know too much of religion to be happy in the world: you are too much mixed up with the world to get any comfort from your religion. In short, you are neither happy in the world nor out of the world. Awake to a sense of your danger and your folly. Resolve by God's help to become decided. Draw the sword, and cast away the scabbard. "If you have no sword, sell your garment and buy one." (Luke xxii. 36.) Burn your ships, and march straight forward. Do not merely look at the ark, and admire it; but enter in, before the door is shut and the flood begins. One thing, at any rate, may be laid down as an axiom in the elements of religion. An "almost" Christian is neither a safe nor a happy man.

III. Let us turn now to the last picture of the three. Let us look at the man whom Festus thought "beside himself," and by whom Agrippa was "almost persuaded to be a Christian." Let us look at St. Paul. This is the man who boldly said, "I would to God, that not only thou, but all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." He wished his hearers no chains or imprisonment, such as he was suffering when he spoke. But he did wish them to be of one mind with him about the one thing needful; and to share his peace, his hope, his solid comfort, his expectations.

"Altogether such as I am." A weighty and memorable saying! It is the language of one who is thoroughly convinced and persuaded that he is in the right. He has cast overboard all doubts and hesitations. He

holds the truth with the firm grasp of both hands, and not with finger and thumb. It is the language of the man who wrote in one place, "I know whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day."--And in another place, "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (2 Tim. i. 12; Rom. viii. 38, 39.)

(a) St. Paul was altogether convinced of the truth of the facts of Christianity. That the Lord Jesus Christ was actually "God manifest in the flesh,"--that he had proved His divinity by doing miracles which could not be denied,--that he had, finally, risen from the grave and ascended up into heaven, and was sitting at God's right hand as man's Saviour,--on all these points he had thoroughly made up his mind, and had not the slightest doubt of their credibility. On behalf of them he was willing to die.

(b) St. Paul was altogether convinced of the truth of the doctrines of Christianity. That we are all guilty sinners, and in danger of eternal ruin,--that the grand object of Christ coming into the world was to make atonement for our sins, and to purchase redemption by suffering in our stead on the cross,--that all who repent and believe on Christ crucified are completely forgiven all sins,--and that there is no other way to peace with God and heaven after death, but faith in Christ,--all this he most steadfastly believed. To teach these doctrines was his one object from his conversion till his martyrdom.

(c) St. Paul was altogether convinced that he himself had been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and taught to live a new life,--that a holy life, devoted and consecrated to Christ, was the wisest, happiest life a man could live,--that the favour of God was a thousand times better than the favour of man,--and that nothing was too much to do for Him who had loved him and given Himself for him. He ran his race ever "looking unto Jesus," and spending and being spent for Him. (Heb. xii. 2; 2 Cor. v. 13; xii. 15.)

(d) Last, but not least, St. Paul was altogether convinced of the reality of a world to come. The praise or favour of man, the rewards or punishments of this present world, were all as dross to him. He had before his eyes continually an inheritance incorruptible, and a crown of glory that would never fade away. (Phil. iii. 8; 2 Tim. iv. 8.) Of that crown he knew that nothing could deprive him. Festus might despise him and think him "mad." The Roman emperor, to whom he was going, might order him to be beheaded or thrown to the lions. What matter? He was firmly persuaded that he had treasure laid up in heaven which neither Festus nor Cæsar could touch, and which would be his to all eternity.

This is what St. Paul meant when he said "altogether such as I am." About the facts, doctrines, practice, and rewards to come of Christianity, he had a rooted, settled, firm conviction--a conviction which he longed to see all men sharing. He was confident he wanted others to enjoy the same confidence. He had no doubt or fear about the future state of his soul. He would fain have seen Festus, Agrippa, Bernice, and all around them, in the same happy condition.

Now, reader, are there many in the present day like St. Paul? I do not, of course, mean, are there many inspired Apostles? But I do mean, is it common to meet Christians who are as thorough, as unhesitating, as full of assurance as he was? I fear there can be only one answer to this question. "Not many," whether rich or poor, high or low, "are called."--"Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (1 Cor. i. 26; Matt. vii. 14). Look where you please, search where you like, in town or in country, there are few "altogether" Christians. Festus and Agrippa are everywhere: they meet us at every turn. But there are few thorough, whole hearted followers of St. Paul. Yet one thing is very certain.

These few are the "salt of the earth," and the "light of the world." (Matt. v. 13, 1 4.) These few are the glory of the Church, and serve to keep it alive. Without them the Church would be little better than a decaying carcase, a white-washed light house without light, a steam engine without fire, a golden candlestick without a candle, a joy to the devil, and an offence to God.

These are the kind of men who shake the world, and leave an indelible mark behind them. Martin Luther, and John Wesley, and William Wilberforce were hated and lightly esteemed while they lived; but the work they did for Christ will never be forgotten. They were "altogether" Christians.

These are the kind of men who enjoy true happiness in their religion. Like Paul and Silas, they can sing in prison, and, like Peter, they can sleep quietly on the very edge of the grave. (Acts xii. 6; xvi. 25.) Strong faith gives them an inward peace, which makes them independent of earthly troubles, and compels even their enemies to wonder. Your lukewarm Laodicean Christians have little comfort in their religion. It is the "thorough" men who have great peace. The first Marian martyr, John Rogers, when he was going to be burned alive for Protestantism, is said to have walked to the stake in Smithfield as cheerfully as if he were going to his wedding. The outspoken, courageous words of old Latimer, before the faggots were lighted, in the day of his martyrdom, in Broad Street, Oxford, are not forgotten to this very day. "Courage! Brother Ridley," he cried to his fellow-sufferer. "We shall light a candle in England to-day, by God's grace, which shall never be put out." These men were "altogether" Christians.

He that would be safe and prepared to meet his God at a moment's notice, at evening, at cock-crowing, or in the morning,—he that would enjoy felt peace in his religion, peace unaffected by sicknesses, bereavements, bankruptcies, revolutions, and the last trumpet's sound,—he that would do good in his day and generation, and be a fountain of Christian influence to all around him, influence known and recognised long after he has been laid in his grave,—let that man remember what I tell him to-day, and never forget it. You must not be content to be an "almost" Christian, like Agrippa. You must strive, and labour, and agonize, and pray to be an "altogether" Christian, like St. Paul.

And now, reader, let us leave these three pictures with self-inquiry and self-examination. The time is short. Our years are quickly passing away. The world is growing old. The great assize will soon begin. The Judge will soon appear. What are we? To whom are we like? Whose is this image and superscription upon us? Is it that of Festus, or of Agrippa, or of St. Paul?

Where are Festus and Agrippa now? We do not know. A veil is drawn over their subsequent history, and whether they died as they lived we cannot tell. But where is St. Paul, the "altogether" Christian? That question we can answer. He is "with Christ, which is far better." (Phil. i. 23.) He is waiting for the resurrection of the just, in that paradise of rest where sin and Satan and sorrow can trouble him no more. He has fought the good fight. He has finished his course, he has kept the faith. A crown is laid up for him which he will receive in the great review day of the Lord's appearing. (2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.)

And, reader, let us thank God, though St. Paul is dead and gone, the Saviour who made St. Paul what he was, and kept him to the end, still lives and never changes,—always able to save, always willing to receive. Let the time past suffice us if we have trifled with our souls hitherto. Let us turn over a new leaf at the beginning of 1882. Let us arise and begin with Christ, if we never began before. Let us go on with Christ to the end, if we have begun with Him already. With the grace of God, nothing is impossible. Who would have thought that Saul the Pharisee, the persecutor of Christians, would ever become the "altogether Christian" himself, would become the great Apostle of the Gentiles, and would turn the world upside

down? While there is life there is hope. The follower of Festus and Agrippa may yet be converted, and live for years, and he down in the grave at last an "altogether" Christian like St. Paul.

FOOTNOTE

* Luther, Beza, Grotius, Poole Bengel, Stier, and Dean Howson.

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