

Christians: Almost or Altogether?

by Warren Wiersbe

Becoming a Christian is not just a change of religion, it's a life change that involves trusting Christ as your Savior.

Duration: 37:17

Scripture: Acts 11:20-21, Acts 11:26, Acts 26:18, Acts 26:22

Topics: "Unity"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of trusting in the Lord Jesus based on the teachings of the prophets. He recounts the conversation between Paul, Festus, and Agrippa, where Paul appeals to their minds and emotions to persuade them to believe in Jesus. The preacher highlights the role of the Word of God in convicting and persuading individuals to accept Jesus as their Savior. He compares the process of salvation to a marriage proposal, where having knowledge and feelings about Jesus is not enough, but a personal decision to trust in Him is necessary.

Transcript

Acts chapter 26, beginning at verse 22, Paul is about to bring home the message of salvation. Having therefore obtained help from God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come. That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people and to the Gentiles.

And as he thus spoke 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.

Or it can be translated, in such a short time as this, do you expect to persuade 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. And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them. And when they were gone aside, they talked between

themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds.

Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar. Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. These are famous words, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

What King Agrippa meant when he made that statement was this, Do you think that in such a short time, Paul, you can persuade me to become a Christian? Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. Now it shows that King Agrippa understood what Paul was talking about. Paul was talking about becoming a Christian.

Paul was not defending himself, Paul was defending the gospel. Paul was taking the opportunity of addressing the governor, and the king, and his wife, and the other dignitaries who had come in with much pomp, taking the opportunity of presenting to them the only message that really is worth listening to, the message of the gospel. And the response was interesting.

Festus got a little bit uncomfortable and cried out, Paul, thou art beside thyself, much learning doth make thee mad. But Agrippa was a little calmer. He had more self-control.

But I think he was still stirred in his heart. And he says to Paul, Do you think that in such a short time, you can persuade me to become a Christian? King Agrippa got the point. It's amazing that many people today don't get the point.

They have no idea at all what it really means to be a Christian. My phone rang one day, and a gentleman said to me, Reverend, I want to change my religion. And I said, well, what religion are you practicing right now? And he told me.

And I said, you understand, sir, that changing your religion doesn't change your life. And he wasn't quite sure what I was talking about. Because he was sure that you could change religion, like you change brands of toothpaste or cereal or makes of cars, that for several years you've been driving a Chevrolet, and now you decide you'd like to drive something else.

And for several years, he'd been practicing a certain kind of religion, and now he thought he might just want to change. That's not what's involved at all. Because Christianity is much more than just a religion, a ritual.

It's even much more than a set of beliefs. Christianity is a life that is received. And so I'd like to chat with you today on this matter of understanding what it really means to be a Christian.

And perhaps the best way for us to approach it is just to take King Agrippa's statement, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian, and understanding what he meant by this statement, let's take the three key words that are in that statement. Christian, persuade, and almost, or in a little time, or with a short space of time. Christian, almost, and persuade.

Let's begin with Christian. That's the word at the end of the statement. Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

This is the despised word. You can understand Agrippa, this man of authority and wealth, and he's not about to identify himself with the Christian faith, because the Christian faith was a despised faith. Now,

there are many names for Christians in the Bible.

Interestingly enough, the word Christian, which we use so often, is found only three times in the entire New Testament. It's found back in Acts chapter 11, and the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. It's found here in Acts chapter 26, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

It's found over in 1 Peter chapter 4, but if any man suffer as a Christian, only three times. I was glancing through Acts chapter 9, and couldn't help but notice in that one chapter the many different names for Christians. Acts chapter 9, for example, and verse 1. Saul was breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.

Disciple, the learners, the ones who were following the Lord. Verse 1. Verse 2, if he found any of this way. Now, we don't call Christians that today, but back in this day, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ were called the people of the way, those who followed the way.

You see, Jesus said, I am the way. No man comes to the Father but by Me. Verse 13, they are called saints.

And Ananias said to the Lord, I have heard how much evil He hath done to Thy saints. The word saints means one who is set apart. So what is a Christian? Well, a Christian is a disciple.

One who is learning from the Lord and following the Lord. But he is much more than that. He is on the way.

He has trusted Christ as his Savior, and he is on the way. Ah, but it's much more than that. He has been set apart.

He is one of the saints. You see, there are those who think that a saint is someone who is manufactured by a religious group after the person dies. These were people who were alive and were saints.

I note that down in verse 14, these Christians were called them that call on Thy name. You see, some people were calling on the name of some Greek god or some Roman goddess, but these were people who called on the name of the Lord. For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

They are the people who call on His name. I like the name in verse 17. Brother Saul.

They are brethren. We don't do this so much up north, but when I was pastoring down south, everybody was brother and sister. And they would call you brother pastor.

Well, it's perhaps a cultural thing, but you see, back in the New Testament, Christians were brothers and sisters because they belonged to the same family. Having received Jesus Christ as their Savior, they belonged to the family of God, and so were brethren. I suppose the one word we use more than any other is the word Christian, but they use disciples more than any other.

They also use the word believers. Oftentimes, you'll find this word believers back in chapter 5 verse 14. And many believers were added to the Lord.

But the word that Agrippa used was not disciples or people of the way or those that call upon His name. He didn't use the term brethren or believers. He said Christian.

He knew what that term meant. Almost Thou persuadest me to be a Christian. Now look with me at Acts chapter 11 where that word was born.

Persecution had broken loose through the work of Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul. Believers were scattered in verse 19, and they began to preach to the Jews. But in verse 20, some of them came to Antioch and began to share the gospel with the Gentiles.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, verse 21, and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord. Now when the Jerusalem church heard about this, they sent one of their representatives, Barnabas, who went up to check out what was going on. Verse 23, who when he came and had seen the grace of God, was glad.

Look at verse 26, the last sentence. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. Now the word was given to them by their enemies.

I don't think that the word was manufactured by the church. They were called this. They were given this name.

They were the Christians. They were the Christ ones. They were the ones who belonged to this Christ.

You have here a Gentile suffix being added to a Jewish word and a Greek word. Christ, Messiah, Christ, a Greek word. And this suffix is being put on there meaning one who belongs to Christ.

The disciples were called Christians. Now it's interesting to note who these disciples were. I notice that they were Greeks, they were Gentiles, but there were also some Jewish disciples up in Antioch.

You see, a Christian isn't one of a certain race or a certain culture. You aren't born into a certain nation. Whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile, whether he's bond or free, whether he's a man or whether she's a woman, it makes no difference whatsoever.

The Gospel is open to all. And so all may become Christians. I notice how they became Christians.

Verse 21, they believed and turned. Repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. They turned from idols.

They turned from sin. Turned from their empty way. Believed in the Lord.

That's how you become a Christian. That doesn't say they went through some ritual by some holy person. No.

They became Christians, Christ ones, by believing and turning. I notice in verse 23 that all of this was by the grace of God. Did you see that? When he had seen the grace of God.

It's God's grace that saves us. It's the grace of God that brings salvation. God's grace means He does for people who don't deserve it.

Now this is still the despised word. Christian. The Lord Jesus said, now look, in the world you're going to have tribulation.

They're going to hate you because they hated me. And they're going to hate you for my name's sake. Imagine, if you will, a group of men working on a construction site here in Chicago.

And one of them is a Christian. They're having lunch together. And religion is a good thing to discuss occasionally.

Perhaps some preacher's been through town and they're talking about him. Or they watch somebody on television. And someone says, you know, I was raised a Methodist.

Nobody will criticize him for that. Somebody else says, well, quite frankly, man, I'm an agnostic. Well, they'll respect him for this.

But let somebody speak up and say, I am a Christian. Get the name of Jesus Christ into the conversation. And invariably the temperature goes down.

You see, you can tell people what race you belong to or what religion you belong to. You'll not have too much of a conflict. But you say, I belong to Christ.

That's the despised word. You see, He was despised and rejected of men. And if you identify your name with His name, you may be despised and rejected of men.

Peter says, if any man suffers a Christian. You see, a Christian is a person who has experienced a change. They believed and turned.

A Christian is a person who has made a choice. Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. A Christian is a person who has accepted a challenge.

If any man suffers a Christian, don't you come and give your heart to Jesus Christ. Unless you're prepared to identify with this despised name. He was despised in His birth.

They looked at Him one day and said, we be not born of fornication. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? He was despised in His life. He's a glutton and a wine bibber.

He's the friend of publicans and sinners. Look at Him. Look at the crowd He runs with.

But He performs miracles. He performs miracles by the power of the Prince of Hell. He was despised in His death.

They nailed Him on a cross between two thieves. He didn't die as a martyr in some great battlefield. No, He died alone, forsaken even of the Father on a cross.

He was despised and rejected of men. And that word is still despised. And that name is still the despised name.

And this is why some people won't trust Him. Because they don't want to be identified with one who was despised and rejected of men. This was Agrippa's problem.

He was important. This was Festus' problem. He was a governor.

They had rich friends. They had friends in high places. Would they ever identify themselves with the cursed name of Jesus Christ? And I suppose here in the city of Chicago and perhaps here in the Moody Church, there are people who say, If you offer me religion, I'll take it.

Everybody needs a religion. But don't talk to me about Jesus Christ. I don't want to be identified with Him.

Christian. That's the despised word. Now before we look at the second word, persuade, let me drop this into your thinking.

That word may be despised on earth, but it is honored in heaven. When our Lord Jesus Christ went back to the throne of glory, heaven received Him with all of the praises, and all of the glory, and all of the honor. God has given Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

Christian. That's the despised word. Now the word persuade.

That's the decisive word. You see, if I can persuade you to make that decision to become a Christian through faith in Christ, I have accomplished the purpose of this message. Persuade.

Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. That's the decisive word. Now may I remind you that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not forced upon people.

Paul says very carefully, we don't use trickery, we don't use psychological devices. We simply openly, lovingly present the gospel of Jesus Christ and commend ourselves to every man's conscience. We don't force people into becoming Christians.

We persuade them. I took my concordance and began to note the different times the word persuade is used in the book of Acts of the Apostle Paul. And he persuaded Jews and Greeks, and he persuaded people, and he went into the synagogue and persuaded.

This is the way to win souls. Persuasion. Now the gospel appeals to the whole man.

May I just speak to you and remind you that you have a mind to think with, and emotions to feel with, and a will to decide with, and I am aiming at your will. And I'm going to come at your will through your heart and through your mind. Now Paul did this.

Paul looked at Agrippa and he said, now Agrippa, you are an intelligent man. The things I'm talking about were not done in a corner. You don't have to go to some dusty library and dig out old tomes.

Agrippa, you know these things happened openly and publicly. You know about the life of Jesus Christ and the death of Jesus Christ. You are an expert in these matters.

He appealed to his mind. He said, Agrippa, Christ died for your sins. And he was buried and he arose again.

And he's gone back to heaven. Paul preached the gospel. Facts that go to the mind.

Now I'm not talking to you today about a myth or a story or something someone invented. These are facts. Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

This is a fact of history. He lived a unique life, sinless. This is a fact of history.

He died a sacrificial death. This is a fact of history. He arose again.

He's alive today. This is a fact of history. And I commend this to your mind.

If you reject the truth today, I want to ask you, how do you explain Jesus Christ? So Paul appealed to the mind. And then Paul appealed to the emotions. The gospel appeals to the emotions, so much so that

Festus began to get a little bit nervous.

And he cried out, Paul, much learning doth make thee mad. And Agrippa, a little more self-control on his part, smugly said, it's going to take more than this to make me a Christian. Festus, you may be all shook up.

I'm not shook up. Oh, but he was. The gospel appeals to the emotions.

Can I talk to you about the love of God for you? Can I talk to you about the fear of the Lord? Paul says, knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. Oh, my friend, there is a judgment coming. It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this, the judgment.

And the gospel appeals to the will. Once the mind has been enlightened, and you know the facts, and your heart has been stirred, and you desire this truth, then the next step is to make an act of the will. Faith is an act of the will.

And you say, I will receive Christ as my Savior. Paul said, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. That's the will.

It's something like marriage, if I may use that illustration. Here is a young man who goes to work, and lo and behold, here's a new young lady at the reception desk, and he notices her. And his mind begins to go to work, and he starts asking questions.

Who is she? Where did she come from? And then something happens to his heart, and he wants to get to know her. Now, he has the facts in his mind and the feelings in his heart, but he's not married yet. Finally, one day, he says to her, Will you marry me? She said, Yes, I will.

I love you, and you love me. And then they stand before the preacher, and the question he asks is not, Do you know the facts about this man? He says, Will you? Do you have feelings for this girl? Will you? And at that point, when the bride and groom say, I will, that's what seals their vows. Now, salvation is this way.

You can have the facts about the Lord Jesus, and you can have the feelings. You say, Oh, when I listen to you preach, something happens down inside. But my friend, until you say, I will, I will trust Christ as my Savior, you don't become a Christian.

Persuade. Now, how does God persuade us? He wants to talk to the mind, and he wants to talk to the heart, and he wants to get a hold of the will. How does God persuade us? Well, I think Paul tells us here in Acts chapter 26, verse 27.

He says, King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? Now, Paul couldn't say, Do you believe the Gospel of John? It hadn't been written yet. Do you believe what I wrote in Romans? Well, that had been written, but Agrippa hadn't seen that. Do you believe the prophets? Agrippa was expert in all matters pertaining to the Jews.

He was a good king in that he learned about his people. Do you believe the prophets? And Paul doesn't even wait for an answer. He says, I know that you believe.

And that's what got Agrippa in the corner, because if he believed the prophets, then he had to believe in the Lord Jesus. Our Lord Himself said, You read Moses. You think that by searching the Scriptures, by reading the Scriptures, you're going to have eternal life.

These are they which testify of Me. If you really believed Moses, you'd believe in Me. After His resurrection, our Lord walked down the road with two discouraged men who thought that the world had come to an end.

And He said to them, Don't you know what the prophets have to say about this? And beginning at Moses through the Law and the prophets, He expounded the Scriptures about Himself. Agrippa, you believe the prophets. Moses said that Jesus was going to come.

It's there in the book of Genesis, the promise of the Redeemer. You believe Daniel. He said when He's going to come.

You believe Isaiah. He tells us why He's going to come and how He's going to come. Agrippa, I've got you in a corner.

You claim to believe the prophets. You say, I believe the Word of God. If that's the case, then you've got to trust the Lord Jesus.

And that's when Agrippa spoke up and said, Well, it's going to take a little more than this to convince me, Paul. Ah, but he had been convicted. You know how God persuades you? Through His Word.

The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and begins to talk to you. I don't know what verses in the Scripture God wants to use to talk to you. Maybe they are verses of love.

Maybe they're verses of judgment. Maybe God wants me to say to you, God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Or perhaps He wants me to say unto you, How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? Maybe what you need today is the medicine of love.

And maybe what you need today is to be jarred by judgment. I don't know. But God's going to use His Word to persuade you.

The Word gets into your mind and enlightens you and says, You are a sinner and Jesus is the Savior. The Word gets into your heart and begins to stir you and you know you need to believe. Well, then the next step is just to, by an act of your will, say, I receive Christ as my Savior.

I've met people who are one-third saved. They've got the facts in their mind. I've met people who are two-thirds saved.

They've got facts in their mind and feelings in their heart. But oh, that we might, as Paul says, be all together, not just almost. The despised word, Christian.

The decisive word, persuade. I would not force you. I would not frighten you.

I would persuade you in love to give your heart to Christ. Now that leads us to the third word in this statement. Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

Christian, that's the despised word. Persuade, that's the decisive word. Almost.

That's the dangerous word. Almost. A famous military man once made the statement, quote, the idea that we have plenty of time is our biggest enemy, close quote.

This is true. There are people in hospitals today who are not going to make it because they waited too long. Almost.

Almost is the dangerous word. Now Paul says there are two kinds of people. He said, I would tell God that not only almost, but all together you were a Christian as I am.

Which of those categories are you in today? Are you the almost person? Almost. Now let's describe the almost person. I suppose to some degree, Festus is a picture of the almost Christian.

He had known who Paul was. He had listened to Paul preach. Now he is listening to Paul's testimony.

And something begins to stir him up down inside. You see, Festus had the facts in his head and the feelings in his heart. But instead of really facing the issue and saying, Paul, this is what I need.

He says, Paul, you know what, you are crazy. Have you ever noticed that when a man loses the argument, he attacks the person? So often this is the case. Festus had no argument.

Agrippa had no argument. Paul's reasoning had been so logical. Paul's life had been so transformed.

They had nothing to argue with. He presented the Word of God, the facts of the Word of God. He stood there, a transformed man.

They had nothing to argue with. And Festus had the facts in his head and the feelings in his heart, but he would not commit himself. I have to chuckle when I hear Festus say, Paul, much learning doth make thee mad.

Paul says, wait a minute, there was a time when I was mad. Back in verse 11, in his testimony, I punished them, the Christians, often in every synagogue. I compelled them to blaspheme and being exceedingly mad.

You see, when Paul was a persecuting religious leader, he thought he was sane. When he got sane, he looked back and said, I was mad. When Paul was a persecuting religious leader, people looked at him and said, my, isn't he wonderful? Then he gets sane, they say, he's crazy.

See, the unsaved world doesn't understand these things. Let a person get drunk every weekend, beat his wife, waste his money gambling. People say, well, it's really too bad.

Let him get converted. Let him go down to Pacific Garden Mission or Moody Church and get converted. Start reading his Bible and praying and going to church.

What does his wife say? He's crazy. Festus was an almost Christian. To some degree, Agrippa was an almost Christian.

He knew the truth. Agrippa was no dunce when it came to the Old Testament Scriptures. He knew what they taught.

He knew the facts about the Lord Jesus. And he was trying to control his real feelings down inside by being rather smug and sophisticated. It'll take more than this to convert me.

Ah, but you see, he was almost. Almost. Now, what is an altogether Christian? Look at Paul.

Paul said, I wish you were like me, except for these chains. I'm chained in body, but oh, I'm free in soul. I've been forgiven.

You're sitting on a throne. You're a king. It makes no difference to me.

I'm richer than you are. I have an inheritance among them that are sanctified. And you're wearing a crown.

It makes no difference to me. I've been made a king and a priest through Jesus Christ. And you exercise authority.

Oh, it doesn't bother me one bit. I have more authority than you do. I have power through the Lord Jesus Christ.

I've been forgiven. I've been set free. I have life.

That's what an altogether Christian is. Verse 18, to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified through faith in Christ. That's an altogether Christian.

Do you have that? Or is it with you? Almost. Almost is the dangerous word because almost gets you so close but doesn't get you in. Oh, but you say I can take more time.

Can you? Oh, God is long-suffering, not willing that any should perish. But life is short and life is uncertain, and my Bible says now is the accepted time. Behold, now is the day of salvation.

That's the dangerous word. Almost. I remember getting a phone call when I was in my last pastorate.

They said, oh, you must rush down to Booth Hospital. Mr. So-and-so is dying. Now, I had been to his home to witness to him.

His wife was a devoted Christian. She had passed away before. The daughter is a believer, but Dad was so hard and so rebellious.

I got to the hospital and the chaplain met me, a godly soul winner. He said, we must go see him. We went into the room and there he lay.

And you could tell he was just a few hours away from eternity. And I said to my chaplain friend, well, can we even talk to him? Oh, he said, he can hear. Watch.

He took him by the hand and he said, I'll make up a name so that no one listening will know who I'm talking about. Mr. Black, if you can hear me, squeeze my hand. And he squeezed his hand.

I said, that's amazing. He said, yes. He said, hearing is the last thing to go when people die.

And so we talked to this man. How much better it would have been if five years before, this man would have opened his heart to the Lord. I trust he really made a decision for Christ.

But the chaplain and I talked with him through these little signals. And the man, in his final moments, we hope, made a profession of faith in Christ. I conducted that funeral service.

But, you know, I didn't have a great deal of assurance of what really had happened. Who knows what's going on with the reflexes of a dying man. I wouldn't wait that long.

But if Mr. Black truly was converted, he stepped just over the borderline. He almost was lost. Now, my friend, I'm trying to persuade you.

If I can come in through the mind, I'll do that. If I can come in through the emotion, I'll do that. I prefer to do both.

I want to get a hold of that will so that you will say, I will give my heart to Jesus Christ. Almost persuaded. Now to believe.

Almost persuaded. Christ to receive. Seems now some soul to say, Go Spirit, go Thy way.

Some more convenient day on the alcove. Almost persuaded. Harvest is past.

Almost persuaded. Death comes at last. Almost cannot prevail.

Almost is but to fail. Sad, sad that bitter wail. Almost, but lost.

Almost Thou persuadest me to be a Christian. Almost is a dangerous word. The decisive word is persuade.

Will you right now give your heart to Christ? Let's pray together. Now our Father, for those who don't know the Savior, we pray that this very hour they will trust Christ and be born again. For it's in Jesus' name that we pray, Amen.

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