

Module 411: John and Charles Wesley

Sermons on Several Occasions, by John Wesley. Introduced and edited for the web by Dan Graves.

“It is diligently to be noted, the faith, which brings not forth repentance, and love, and all good works, is not that right living faith which is here spoken of, but a dead and devilish one.”

John and Charles Wesley Introduction

John and Charles Wesley are among the most notable evangelists who ever lived. As young men, they formed a party which came to be derisively called Methodists, because they methodically set about fulfilling the commands of scripture. In due course they learned that works cannot save, and discovered salvation by faith in Christ. Afterward, they carried that message to all England in sermon and in song. John Wesley is credited with staving off a bloody revolution in England such as occurred in France.

Although the brothers did not set out to establish a church, the Wesleyans and the Methodists are their offspring.

Both preached, both wrote hymns. But John is more noted for his sermons and Charles for his hymns. Here we present two hymns by Charles and a sermon by John.

Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be that I Should Gain”

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood! Died he for me? who caused his pain! For me? who him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me? Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: th' Immortal dies! Who can explore his strange design? In vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine. 'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; let angel minds inquire no more. 'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; let angel minds inquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above (so free, so infinite his grace!), emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race. 'Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me! 'Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned sprit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night; thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed you.

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine; alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine, bold I approach th' eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own. Bold I approach th' eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

John Wesley. The Almost Christian

Preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University, July 35, 17-11. "*Almost you persuade me to be a Christian,*" (Acts 26: 28).

And many there are who go thus far: ever since the Christian religion was in the world, there have been many in every age and nation, who were "almost persuaded to be Christians." But seeing it avails nothing before God, to go only thus far, it highly imports us to consider,

First, What is implied in being *almost*; Secondly, What in being *altogether* a Christian.

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(II.) 4. A second thing implied in the being almost a Christian, is, the having a form of godliness, of that godliness which is prescribed in the gospel of Christ; the having the outside of a real Christian. Accordingly the almost Christian does nothing which the gospel forbids. He takes not the name of God in vain: he blesses and curses not: he swears not at all, but his communication is yes, yes; no, no. He profanes not the day of the Lord, nor allows it to be profaned, even by the stranger that is within his gates. He not only avoids all actual adultery, fornication, and uncleanness, but every word or look, that either directly or indirectly tends thereto; nay, and all idle words, abstaining both from all detraction, backbiting, tale bearing, evil speaking, and from "all foolish talking and jesting," a kind of virtue in the heathen moralist's account; briefly, from all conversation that is not "good to the use of edifying," and that, consequently, "grieves the Holy Spirit of God, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption."

5. He abstains from "wine wherein is excess;" from revellings and gluttony. He avoids, as much as in him lies, all strife and contention, continually endeavoring to live peaceably with all men. And, if he suffers wrong, he avenges not himself, neither returns evil for evil. He is no railer, no brawler, no scoffer, either at the faults or infirmities of his neighbor. He does not willingly wrong, hurt, or grieve any man; but in all things acts and speaks by that plain rule, "Whatsoever you would not he should do unto you, that do not you to another."

6. And, in doing good, he does not confine himself to cheap and easy offices of kindness, but labors and suffers for the profit of many, that by all means he may help some. In spite of toil or pain, "Whatsoever his hand finds to do, he doeth it with all his might;" whether it be for his friends, or for his enemies; for the evil, or for the good. For, being not slothful in this, or in any business, as he hath opportunity he does good, all manner of good to all men; and to their souls as

well as their bodies. He reprove the wicked, instructs the ignorant, confirms the wavering, quickens the good, and comforts the afflicted. He labors to awaken those that sleep; to lead those whom God hath already awakened to the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness, that they may wash therein and be clean; and to stir up those who are saved, through faith, to adorn the gospel of Christ in all things.

7. He that hath the form of godliness, uses also the means of grace; yes, all of them, and at all opportunities. He constantly frequents the house of God; and that, not as the manner of some is, who come into the presence of the Most High, either loaded with gold and costly apparel, or in all the gaudy vanity of dress, and either by their unseasonable civilities to each other, or the impertinent gayety of their behavior, disclaim all pretensions to the form, as well as to the power of godliness. Would to God there were none even among ourselves who fall under the same condemnation: who come into this house, it may be, gazing about, or with all the signs of the most listless, careless indifference, yough sometimes they may seem to use a prayer to God for his blessing on what they are entering upon; who, during that awful service, are either asleep, or reclined in the most convenient posture for it; or, as yough they supposed God was asleep, talking with one another, or looking round, as utterly void of employment. Neither let these be accused of the form of godliness. No; he who has even this, behaves with seriousness and attention in every part of that solemn service. More especially when he approaches the table of the Lord, it is not with a light or careless behavior, but with an air, gesture, and deportment, which speak nothing else, but "God be merciful to me a sinner."

8. To this, if we add the constant use of family prayer, by those who are masters of families, and the setting times apart for private addresses to God, with a daily seriousness of behavior; he who uniformly practises this outward religion

has the form of godliness. There needs but one thing more in order to his being almost a Christian, and that is, sincerity.

(III.) 9. By sincerity, I mean a real, inward principle of religion from whence these outward actions flow. And, indeed, if we have not this, we have not heathen honesty; no, not so much of it as will answer the demand of a heathen Epicurean poet. Even this poor wretch, in his sober intervals, is able to testify,

Good men avoid sin from the love of virtue: Wicked men avoid sin from a fear of punishment.

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10. Sincerity, therefore, is necessarily implied in the being almost a Christian; a real design to serve God, a hearty desire to do his will: it is necessarily implied, that a man have a sincere view of pleasing God in all things; in all his conversation; in all his actions; in all he does, or leaves undone. This design, if any man be almost a Christian, runs through the whole tenor of his life. This is the moving principle, both in his doing good, his abstaining from evil, and his using the ordinances of God.

11. But here it will probably be inquired, Is it possible, that any man living should go so far as this, and nevertheless, be only almost a Christian? What more than this can be implied in the being a Christian altogether? I answer, first, that it is possible to go thus far, and yet be but almost a Christian, I learn, not only from the oracles of God, but also from the sure testimony of experience.

12. Brethren, great is "my boldness towards you in this behalf." And "forgive me this wrong," if I declare my own folly upon the house top, for yours and the gospel's sake. Allow me then, to speak freely of myself, even as of another man. I am content to be abased, so you may be exalted,

and to be yet more vile, for the glory of my Lord.

13. 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 offence; 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; and, God is my record, before whom I stand, doing all this in sincerity; having a real design to serve God; a hearty desire to do his will in all things; to please him, who had called me to "fight the good fight," and to "lay hold on eternal life." Yet my own conscience bears me witness in the Holy Ghost, that all this time I was but almost a Christian.

II. If it be inquired, What more than this is implied in the being altogether a Christian, I answer,

(I.) 1. First, The love of God. For thus says his word, "you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Such a love of God is this, as engrosses the whole heart, as takes up all the affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul, and employs the utmost extent of all its faculties. He that thus loves the Lord his God, his spirit, continually "rejoices in God his Savior." His delight is in the Lord, his Lord and his All, to whom "in every thing he gives thanks." "All his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name." His heart is ever crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside you." Indeed, what can he desire beside God? Not the world, or the things of the world. For he is "crucified to the world, and the world crucified to him." He is crucified to the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life. Yes, he is dead to pride of every kind; for, "love is not puffed up;" but "he that, dwells in love, dwells in God, and God in him," is less than nothing in his own eyes.

(II.) 2. The second thing implied in the being altogether a Christian, is, the love of our neighbor. For thus said our Lord, in the following words, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." If any man ask, Who is my neighbor? we reply, every man in the world; every child of his, who is the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Nor may we at all except our enemies, or the enemies of God and their own souls. But every Christian loves these also as himself, yes, "as Christ loved us." He that would more fully understand what manner of love this is, may consider St. Paul's description of it. It is "longsuffering and kind." It "envies not." It is not rash or hasty in judging. It "is not puffed up," but makes him that loves, the least, the servant of all. Love "does not behave itself unseemly," but becomes "all things to all men." She "seeks not her own," but only the good of others, that they may be saved. "Love is not provoked." It casts out wrath, which he who has, is not "made perfect in love." "It thinks no evil. It rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth. It covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

(III.) 3. There is yet one thing more that may be separately considered, though it cannot actually be separate from the preceding, which is implied in the being altogether a Christian, and that is the ground of all, even faith.

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4. But here let no man deceive his own soul. It is diligently to be noted, the faith, which brings not forth repentance, and love, and all good works, is not that right living faith which is here spoken of, but a dead and devilish one. For, even the devils believe that Christ was born of a virgin; that he worked all kinds of miracles, declaring himself very God; that, for our sakes he suffered a most painful death, to redeem us from death everlasting; that he rose again the third day, that he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and at the end of the world shall come

again to judge both the quick and dead. These articles of our faith the devils believe, and so they believe all that is written in the Old and New Testament. And yet, for all this faith they are but devils. They remain still in their damnable estate, lacking the very true Christian faith."

5. "The right and true Christian faith is," to go on in the words of our own church, "not only to believe, that holy Scripture, and the articles of our faith, are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ. It is a sure trust and confidence which a man has in God, that by the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favor of God; whereof does follow, a loving heart, to obey his commandments."

6. Now, whoever has this faith, which purifies the heart, (by the power of God, who dwells therein,) from pride, anger, desire, from all unrighteousness, from "all filthiness of flesh and spirit;" which fills it with love stronger than death, both to God and to all mankind; love that does the works of God, glorying to spend and to be spent for all men, and that endures with joy, not only the reproach of Christ, the being mocked, despised, and hated of all men, but whatever the wisdom of God permits the malice of men or devils to inflict; whoever has this faith, thus working by love, is not *almost* only, but *altogether*, a Christian....

Charles Wesley "Arise My Soul Arise"

Arise, my soul, arise; shake off your guilty fears; The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears: Before the throne my surety stands, Before the throne my surety stands, My name is written on His hands.

He ever lives above, for me to intercede; His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead: His blood atoned for all our race, His blood atoned for all our race, And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds He bears; received on Calvary; They pour effectual prayers; they strongly plead for me: "Forgive him, O forgive," they cry, "Forgive him, O forgive," they cry, "Nor let that ransomed sinner die!"

The Father hears Him pray, His dear anointed One; He cannot turn away, the presence of His Son; His Spirit answers to the blood, His Spirit answers to the blood, And tells me I am born of God.

My God is reconciled; His pardoning voice I hear; He owns me for His child; I can no longer fear: With confidence I now draw nigh, With confidence I now draw nigh, And "Father, Abba, Father," cry.

Discussion Starters

Summarize the theme of Charles Wesley's hymn "And Can it Be." On what basis do we have peace and triumph?

List some of the things that John Wesley says he, as an *almost* Christian, did. Do you know even many Christians who come up to this mark?

What one word describes what the *almost* Christian is in reality?

Name three things Wesley describes as essential to real Christianity. Has he left out anything?

According to Charles Wesley's hymn "Arise My Soul, Arise" what is the ground for our confidence? On what is your own confidence based?

Why do you think the Wesley brothers were so successful in transforming England?

Bible Verses

Deuteronomy 6:5

Ecclesiastes 9:10

Mark 12:30ff

Luke 18:10

1 Corinthians 13

2 Corinthians 7:1,4

2 Corinthians 12:13
Ephesians 5:4
1 Timothy 6:12