

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 26:1-32

Topic

The apostle Paul turns the tables on King Agrippa and urges him to make a decision to accept Jesus Christ

Title

“Get A Grippa”

Acts 26:1 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself:

Acts 26:2 "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews,

Acts 26:3 especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.

Acts 26:4 "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know.

Acts 26:5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Acts 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers.

Acts 26:7 To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving *God* night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews.

Acts 26:8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?

Acts 26:9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Acts 26:10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*.

Acts 26:11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities.

Acts 26:12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,

Acts 26:13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me.

Acts 26:14 And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*'

Acts 26:15 So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Acts 26:16 But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you.

Acts 26:17 I will deliver you from the *Jewish* people, as well as *from the Gentiles*, to whom I now send you,

Acts 26:18 to open their eyes, *in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.*'

Acts 26:19 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,

Acts 26:20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

Acts 26:21 For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

Acts 26:22 Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—

Acts 26:23 that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

Acts 26:24 Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"

Acts 26:25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.

Acts 26:26 For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.

Acts 26:27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

Acts 26:28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

Acts 26:29 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

Acts 26:30 When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them;

Acts 26:31 and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains."

Acts 26:32 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Introduction

"Almost is only good in horseshoes and hand grenades," or so the saying goes.

The apostle Paul was trying to get Agrippa to make a decision about Jesus. Agrippa blurted out, **You almost persuade me to become a Christian** (v28).

Agrippa's words can be translated in several different ways:

1. NASB says, **In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.**
2. Weymouth New Testament, **You are doing your best to persuade me to become a Christian.**
3. The Amplified Bible says, **You think it a small task to make a Christian of me?**

We can't really be sure whether Agrippa was near to being persuaded, was neutral, or was mocking Paul.

- being changed to bring change -

I would suggest that the language is ambiguous for a reason. When the Gospel is presented you'll get at least those three reactions. If a person doesn't accept the Lord he or she could easily say, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian," and fall into one of three categories – **near, neutral, or nasty!**

Agrippa's unusual remark led eighteenth-century evangelists George Whitfield and John Wesley to preach sermons titled *The Almost Christian*.

Whitfield said this:

Amongst those who gladly receive the word, and confess that we speak the words of truth and soberness, there are so few, who arrive at any higher degree of piety than that of Agrippa, or are any farther persuaded than to be **almost**

Christians, that I cannot but think it highly necessary to warn my dear hearers of the danger of such a state.

Wesley said,

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**... it avails nothing before God to go only thus far...

It got me thinking. If these two great men of God looked at people that way maybe **we** should start thinking of nonbelievers as “almost Christians?”

I'll organize my thoughts around two points. #1 Be Blessed When You Address “Almost Christians,” and #2 Be Bold When You Address “Almost Christians.”

#1 Be Blessed When You Address “Almost Christians” (v1-23)

The apostle Paul had been held in protective custody for over two years. The new governor, Festus, inherited the case. Paul appealed to Rome. He had to be sent to the higher court. Festus had nothing to charge him with. He was hoping Agrippa might be able to make a suggestion. An elaborate event was held during which Agrippa was to hear from Paul.

Hear from him he did! Paul seized it as an opportunity to witness to Agrippa.

Paul said of this opportunity, in verse two, **I think myself happy**. The word for **happy** is the word *blessed*. As Paul stood there in chains being mistreated and having his rights violated he said “I am a blessed man.” No matter his circumstances he was blessed to be able to share the Lord.

We are blessed men and women. We have the treasure of the Gospel to share with almost Christians.

Since we are taking this chapter as a whole we're going to move fast. What we're looking for in this first section is to see how having this

perspective that we are **blessed** affects our appreciation for sharing Jesus with almost Christians.

Acts 26:1 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself:

Acts 26:2 "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, **Acts 26:3** especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.

This was not a hearing or a trial. It was not a legal proceeding at all. Once Paul had appealed to Rome all such preliminary hearings and trials ended. He was before Agrippa voluntarily.

Because he was blessed Paul could concentrate on Agrippa and not on his own circumstances. Too often we look to our circumstances to determine whether or not we are being blessed. *Get over it!* We're blessed whether we are abounding or whether we are abased.

Paul knew quite a bit about Agrippa and tailored his comments appropriately. It encourages us to think about the people we encounter. What kind of almost Christians are they? How much or how little do they know about God, the Bible, and Jesus Christ? How can we meet them right where they are at?

Notice, too, the courtesy with which Paul addressed Agrippa. Believers are too often identified with hate and anger. Our God loves sinners and is seeking them to save them.

Paul began his testimony:

Acts 26:4 "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know.

Acts 26:5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Acts 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers.

Acts 26:7 To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving *God* night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews.

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Acts 26:9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Acts 26:10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*.

Acts 26:11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities.

All through his testimony Paul mentions the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Keep that in mind; we'll return to it in a moment.

The gist of Paul's review was that he thought he was a very good person, and he was a very religious person, before he encountered Jesus. He discovered that being good was not enough to get you into Heaven. He discovered that religion cannot save you.

Everyone's testimony is different. Some of you have been Christians as long as you can remember. You don't have the gory stories to tell! Some of you got saved later in life and do have radical things to reveal. But all of us understand that no matter how "good" we were we were sinners; and no matter how "bad" we were God could save us by grace through faith in Jesus.

Yes, we want to get to know folks and meet them where they are at. But not so much we don't address their need. People from every nation, tribe, and tongue are in the same situation. They are all sinners in need of the grace of God. And they are all saved the same way – by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Acts 26:12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,

Acts 26:13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me.

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Acts 26:18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'

Focus on the fact that meeting Jesus Christ set Paul's life in an entirely new direction. It gave his life purpose and direction.

Things get a little more personal at this point. If I am going to share Jesus Christ with almost Christians I think they have a right to examine my life. What difference does Jesus really make? Does my life have a spiritual purpose and direction – or is it indistinguishable from that of the person I'm sharing with?

Acts 26:19 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,

Acts 26:20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

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Acts 26:23 that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

Having obtained help from God jumps out at me. The almost Christian needs to know that the Christian life is not a life of religious effort. It is a life of resting in the power of God to fulfill His promises. It is a life in which we have access to every spiritual blessing; where spiritual victory is assured; where failure can be forgiven again and again and again.

Let's return briefly to the theology underlying Paul's address. He stressed the resurrection of Jesus. He did so three times:

1. First, in verse eight, he said, **why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?**
2. Then, in verses fourteen through eighteen he declared that he had personally experienced the risen Lord.

3. Finally, in verses twenty-two and twenty-three he showed how the resurrection of Jesus was promised and prophesied in the Word of God.

Simplify what he said: The promises and prophecies of the Bible are proven by the historical fact of Jesus Christ's resurrection. Then they are proven by the power of His resurrection in the changed lives of those who believe in Him. To every almost Christian we are saying, **why should it be thought incredible that God raises the dead?** It is a historical fact and a practical reality.

Paul was being bold. No matter that Agrippa's great-grandfather was the Herod who tried to kill the infant Jesus by ordering the murder of the newborns. No matter that Agrippa's grandfather was the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. No matter that Agrippa's father was the Herod who had James beheaded. It encourages us,

#2 Be Bold When You Address "Almost Christians" (v24-32)

Paul was being led by the Holy Spirit to focus on Agrippa. At one point Festus, who understood very little of Jewish history or doctrine, rudely interrupted.

Acts 26:24 Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"

Acts 26:25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.

Acts 26:26 For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.

Have you ever been accused of being too involved in your relationship with Jesus? *You should be!* There is a proper fanaticism to the Christian life that all of us should be guilty of.

After all, **this thing was not done in a corner.** The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central event of human history. Everything before it leads up to it; everything after it depends upon it.

Acts 26:27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

Paul pressed for a decision. Agrippa was the kind of almost Christian who **believed the prophets**. He assented to the fact there were prophets whom God sent. But perhaps he was like the modern liberal scholars whose higher criticisms get in the way of saving faith.

If statistics are any indication then there are a lot of almost Christians in America. According to one study the percentage of people who identified themselves as Christians was 77% in 2001.¹ Evangelicals, however, number only 7% and that number did not change between 1994 and 2005.²

Acts 26:28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

Acts 26:29 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

Agrippa was either near, neutral, or just being nasty. No matter why he was **almost... Christian**; Paul's prayer and desire was that he and everyone else would be **altogether** Christian.

Acts 26:30 When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them;

Acts 26:31 and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains."

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Festus, Agrippa and Bernice (and presumably all the other dignitaries) immediately went back to their work. They were hiding behind their busyness, their importance, their earthly relationships.

They remained, each in their own way, **almost** Christian. Paul went on as the **altogether** Christian.

¹ "American Religious Identification Survey," by *The Graduate Center of the City University of New York*, at: http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf

² "Annual Barna Group Survey Describes Changes in America's Religious Beliefs and Practices," The Barna Group, 2005-APR-11, at: <http://www.barna.org/>

It's not hard to choose which spiritual adjective you want to be applied to your life!

If you have stopped short of receiving Jesus Christ as your Savior then you are “almost Christian.” The specific reasons don't matter. You 'believe' something about God, the Bible, and Jesus Christ. But you have never been born again.

If you are saved, then live **altogether** for the Lord. Nonbelievers and even some nominal believers should think you are a little too fanatic about Jesus.

When you first fall in love with someone it affects you on every level. You see less and less of your friends as you spend more and more time with your loved one. It's so common we joke about it, saying things like, “Another one bites the dust.”

Jesus is your heavenly Bridegroom and you are His bride. It should affect you on every level more and more each day. The more you realize it, the more blessed you'll be.



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- being changed to bring change -