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On Being Almost Persuaded to be a Christian

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Text.--Acts 26:28: "Agrippa said unto Paul -- almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

Discussing the subject presented here, I shall,

I. Notice the fact that men are made Christians by persuasion.

II. Show what are not reasons why they are not altogether persuaded.

III. What are the reasons why they are only almost and not altogether persuaded.

I. Men are made Christians by persuasion.

- 1. You recollect the connection, which gives us the occasion and the circumstances of this remark. Paul had been arrested and brought before Agrippa to defend himself against the Jews. In this defense he gives his early history, a sketch of his conversion to the faith of Christ, then, of his labors and persecutions subsequent to that event, and finally appeals to Agrippa himself, as if assured that one, familiar with Judaism as he was, must believe the ancient prophets, and hence could not reasonably reject Jesus of Nazareth. "King Agrippa, said he, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." "Agrippa answered, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." To which Paul nobly responds, "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."
- 2. Paul had so preached that Agrippa felt almost persuaded to become a Christian. Of course under Paul's preaching, men naturally inferred that the change from being a sinner to being a Christian is wrought by persuasion. Assuming that Paul preached not only the true gospel, but in the truest method and with the soundest philosophy, we infer that men become Christians by means of persuasion. Consequently, they do not become Christians by virtue of any physical change in the substance of either soul or body. It is not, strictly speaking, by any act of creation, an act which gives existence to either substance or qualities, not existent before. Persuasion

requires no new creation of faculties. It supposes a mind already in existence and in action, capable of appreciating truth as a motive. Men are persuaded by truth -- truth which addresses the intelligence and appeals to conscience or to some form of self-interest. Thus men are persuaded to become Christians.

- 3. Now here I do not by any means intend to say that this persuasion is merely human. Far otherwise. It is far more divine than human. There is such an interposition of divine agency as sets truth in order before the mind, and brings forth its strength. Thus to human persuasion is superadded the divine. Yet the influence is altogether of a moral nature.
- 4. We are compelled to the same conclusion by the nature of this change. If the change were in the substance of the soul, or in any of its original, created powers, we might then assume that the power by which the change is wrought is creative, not moral. But since the change consists entirely in the voluntary attitude of the mind towards God, we infer that it is caused by those agencies which are adapted to produce voluntary change in the mind's free action -- viz., truth and argument, assuming the form of motive. Hence, in every point of view, it is plain that men are made Christians by persuasion.

II. It is next pertinent to inquire what are not the reasons why men fail of being persuaded to become Christians.

Ordinarily, it is not for want of intellectual conviction that they ought to become Christians. For the most part, in Christian lands, the gospel has been preached so fully and so truly that the general intelligence is enlightened, and all men know that they ought to put away sinning and embrace the salvation provided for them in the gospel. They fail to do this, not for want of sufficient reasons to carry conviction that they ought to. Especially, we may say, that almost everyone has light enough before his mind to carry conviction of this duty, if he were honest and would weigh this question seriously and with candor.

The real and exact difficulty is, they do not make up their mind to obey the decisions of conscience and their better judgment. They are not so persuaded as to determine to act now. For the most part they hope to become Christians at some time. As Agrippa, so they, do not yield to their convictions. Selfish considerations overrule their better judgment.

Here I may safely appeal to your own consciences. Let me come very near to you, even as if I were alone with you and were to urge upon your honest hearts this plain question. Is it not a matter of fact that you are in reason and conscience convinced that you ought to become Christians, but yet you suffer some selfish reasons to prevail over you, and deter you from doing manifest duty? You know you ought to do it; you know the reasons why you do not are utterly unsound -- radically selfish!

III. Let us see what these reasons are -- the reasons why you are only almost persuaded to become a Christian.

- 1. Ambitious schemes. This is the case especially with the young, and particularly with students. Often the young become students for the sake merely of distinction. They cherish worldly aims. They are determined that, for themselves, they will become something. They are

to be prominent. Hence, when you come to such a young man with the gospel offers, his first thought is -- how will my reception of these offers affect my cherished plans of aggrandizement? Ah, how can I become a Christian at the sacrifice of the favorite object of my life and labors? You exhort him to yield his will to God's so that henceforth he shall have no schemes but such as please God. Alas, he says, but I have schemes of my own that are too dear to my heart to be relinquished yet. Is it not even so with you who are yet young, but not converted? Have you not some ambitious schemes which you seek to realize, and which you suppose are in conflict with the higher claims of the gospel?

This is for many reasons more often the case with young men than with young women, yet is sufficiently apt to occur with the latter, in some seductive form, and of such power as to overrule all the demands of conscience.

- 2. Many are kept back from a full persuasion by some subtle form of self-righteousness. He cannot quite affirm to himself or to others that he has no sin; and yet he does allow himself to think he has never done anything so very wrong, but has always done about right. He has not been a liar, nor an adulterer. He can almost say with Saul of Tarsus, "I have lived in all good conscience before God." He thinks, and perhaps truly, that he has had many good feelings; kindly, humane impulses, and these he is sure are good. Really he has no heart to renounce all his self-righteousness as filthy rags that cannot profit. He might consent in a very general sense to be indebted to Christ for his salvation, but to renounce all self-righteousness and do all that is implied in being a Christian, he cannot.
- 3. Some have too much self-will. Often and for a long time, have they been urged and have resisted, until habitually ascendancy of the will has given it giant strength, and it can easily overrule every appeal which conscience or God can make.
- 4. Some even indulge resentment against God, or against His servants. Supposing themselves to have been abused because something has been done by somebody, they fancy they do well to be angry. Thus they harbor a spirit directly opposed to the spirit of the gospel, and this suffices to overrule all the arguments which are presented to induce them to become Christians.
- 5. Those who have advanced in age to middle life, have their schemes of ambition, or their plans of business, so that when you make your appeal to them, they have interests that repel it. To you who occupy this period of life, I appeal, if it be not even so. When the gospel has come to you, demanding your attention, and even the warmest reception you can give it, has not some scheme of business or ambition stood in your way and held you back? The political aspirant has too many hopes excited, and has committed himself too fully to his political friends; how can he turn away to be religious? Some years ago, I knew a young man of fine talents and extraordinary powers of persuasion, who, from a course of preparation for the ministry, was drawn into public life; studied law -- lost his piety -- claimed at first that benevolence called him into that department of labor, but soon he showed that he was ambitious as Caesar, and that really he had no conscience, but that of saleable politicians. Such men are in political bondage. Like Agrippa, they owe their place to some higher functionaries, and are intensely sensitive to their own position and standing as before that higher influence. Agrippa held his place under Rome; so did Pilate; therefore neither of them had independence of soul enough, in a position of so

much dependence, to be a whole man. Many now, like them, are in political bondage to Caesar. Mark how Pharisees and rulers of synagogues bore themselves towards Jesus and His cause, and you see, as in a mirror, true to nature, how most political men are in such bondage that they will not break away enough to comply with their sense of duty. I have in mind the case of a gentleman who became greatly disturbed in respect to his salvation. I saw him often and urged him to give himself to the service of God. That, he replied, is a step I can by no means take, without the consent of my political friends. I have long been in the habit of consulting them in all matters which might affect my standing before the community. Furthermore, all my religious friends think differently from you. And my worldly friends, I am quite sure, would be opposed to my becoming a Christian in this revival. How, said he, can I look my friends in the face if I were to become a Christian? I answered, "how can you look God in the face, if you do not?" He said. "I am always in the habit of consulting my friends in matters so important; I will do so in the present case, and then will see you again." I told him I already knew how such a course would result, and had no hopes that could be disappointed. And so it proved. I mention the case only as an illustration of the political bondage into which many fall.

- 6. Some men have a pride of personal character which prevents their becoming Christians. One says, "My wife has become converted, and I shall be deemed weak as a woman if I change now." I have heard men taunt one another, asking, "Will you be persuaded to be religious by such and such a preacher? Will you be one of his disciples?" So it might have been said to Agrippa, "Are you almost persuaded by the prisoner, Paul? By a man who stands before you in chains, and you the honorable judge upon the bench? Will you change your religion and go over to one whom all Jews hold to be a heretic?"
- 7. In some cases, the hindering cause is sheer infatuation. They know the truth on all important points; they will say, "I know it all." Why, then, don't you yield? "I can't tell why." Then, the reason is, simple infatuation in sin.
- 8. Another reason is a spirit of deep contempt for God.

Those who feel this may not be fully conscious of it; but such is the fact. God's rights do not weigh, in their minds, as a straw. You may talk to them of God's right to govern them; you make no sort of impression. What is the reason of this? It is not that they regard God's claims as a dream of somebody's imagination, and deny the fact; but it is because they have a deep and overpowering contempt for God, and therefore no appeal on that ground reaches their sensibility -- nothing arouses them to action. So deep and so utter is their want of moral honesty, every appeal based on God's rights falls powerless. In their esteem, moral obligation is equivalent to no obligation at all. There is in their minds a total lack of all honorable sentiments, feelings and principles of action, as towards God. Not one sentiment of honor toward the great God! Does honor bind the child to revere his parent? What would you say of one who had been dependent on you for everything, and yet should totally disregard all his obligations to you? Suppose the obligation to be the greatest possible from man to man; and the disregard to be as utter as the sinner manifests towards God, how would you feel? Horrified! You would have such feelings of indignation, you could scarcely think of the offender with calmness. And yet what are the utmost obligations of man to man, compared with those of all men towards God?

- 9. Add to this a total destitution of true self-respect. What? shall I shame my own face by refusing to do my duty? Can a man have true self-respect, who, knowing his obligation, refuses to become a Christian? Certainly if he respected himself, he never could disobey, refuse, and dishonor his God! What! shall I be such a wretch as to abuse my God? No! I would as soon leap into hell as dishonor Christ and pour contempt on my infinite Father! The very thought of so outraging His feelings is horrible. Sooner would I suffer anything in the world than the self-abhorrence and self-condemnation which must result from such contempt of God!
- 10. Add to this a total destitution of all benevolence, which must of course be the case with all those who will not become Christians.
- 11. Next, a total recklessness in regard to the evils of a course of impenitence. Said one man, as his eyes began to be opened to see himself, "The thought that I was giving my whole influence against Christ and against the salvation of souls, came home upon my conscience as an awful sin! I was appalled at myself!" Suppose a man could sit in his window, open towards the street, and there load and fire his rifle into the thronging masses, just for amusement. How horrible must his state of mind be! You, sinner, may not be firing leaden balls into quivering flesh, but you are sending forth streams of influence that damn souls to eternal death! You reply, "I do not tell them not to become Christians." Aye, not with your lips, perhaps, but with your life! -- a thing far worse, more surely fatal and more widely and terrible destructive! Not those who say most, or sin most openly, do most hurt; but your most moral sinners, who are quite intelligent, and know best their duty, yet are far -- O how far from doing it! A fair moral man, of high standing -- what can he not do for mischief? Look at that young man, accomplished, popular and moral; he has such control over the minds of the young people in his village, that you can do nothing to turn them from sin to God. Is it said -- then pray for him? You cannot. It will do no good. Preach a sermon to meet his case; he will pick it all to pieces. You cannot talk to him, he knows so much and frames his objections so skillfully. What makes all this mischief? That young man happens to possess the very attributes that give him the power to do great mischief. He can do more harm than all the rowdies in town.

So of a young woman who is accomplished and moral, yet withholds her heart from God. She is altogether in the way of saving souls, and all the more because she has so much morality. I saw a young lady of this description enter a sick room where lay one of her young associates, just passing away to the realities of another world. Calling forward this moral sinner, she reached forth her pale hand, saying, "I am not a Christian because I leaned on you. You were so moral and so happy in sin, you had the greatest influence over me, and I easily put off the claims of my God and Savior." That young lady trembled and begged to be excused that she might retire from such a scene, but the dying girl said, "No, no; you must hear me now, my last words. How could you let me go on in my sins! Oh, my soul is lost!"

The great difficulty with sinners is that they take a selfish view of the whole subject. Having fully committed themselves to their own interests, all considerations are viewed in a selfish light. They regard nothing, save as it addresses either their hopes or their fears. If this striking fact were properly considered, it would show the need and the character of the divine Spirit's influences.

Sinners, taking only a selfish view of God's claims, are not at all prepared to take a disinterested view of the subject. They are not prepared to become Christians, although they are quite prepared to look around and see if they cannot become more happy.

- 12. Once more, many are not fully persuaded now because they expect in some way to have another call and a better opportunity. Full of hope as to this, they consequently deceive themselves. Often conscious that they egregiously trifle with their own souls, they yet are so reluctant to meet God's claims today that they let it slide over. They say, "I am not yet persuaded to become a Christian, but when God's resistless power comes down upon me, then I shall yield."

- 13. In fact, when you get at the bottom of the case, you find they are desperately depraved. Their depravity is so deep, so radical, it bids defiance to all your motives for persuasion. Sometimes the sense of being greatly obliged, breaks down a really hard heart. But even this consideration many sinners can resist. The sense of being loved and pitied of God, makes some impression on their hearts, but often fails to move them much. So dead are they to the attractions of the morally beautiful and true, that much of the most glorious truth concerning God, seems to fall powerless upon their hearts. They seem incapable of being moved by anything save it be some hope of greater selfish good. For the honor of God they care not. If they could get anything from Him to promote their own selfish good, they would be ready to grasp it. For God, they care not. They would not care if He were dead. If their course were to bring mischief on Him, they would not care. They know they act meanly, cruelly, wickedly towards God; yet they are not persuaded to desist from this course and forsake their sins. Specify some particular form of sin; bring it before their mind; convince them they had better forsake it, yet they will not. In fact, a besotted will not is the only reason why they do not.

REMARKS.

1. Sin is the greatest mystery in this world. How can it be accounted for? I have often wondered at the case of men convinced of duty, who yet will persist in their sins, despite the utmost reason to forsake them. Sometimes they seem to be infatuated. In fact, they are. It is a spiritual infatuation!

2. How strange to hear sinners object to the mysteries of religion. Indeed! They assume that there is something vastly mysterious in religion, and therefore they cannot embrace it! There can be no greater mystery than sin! All the mysteries in religion are as nothing compared with the mystery of sinning! It is safe to say that if we had not facts to prove it, nobody could believe that men would persist in sin as they do, despite all conceivable reasons to the contrary course. What can be more strange? Sin is indeed a mystery so deep, who can tell what it is and why it is? Surely, no sinner can tell. See that sinner hold his soul, as it were, in his hand, play with it as with a top, and then in the face of Calvary, throw it into hell! Knowing full well that sin brings him no good, but only evil; assured, too, that all good is given by piety, he can yet throw his soul away, for nothing! Truly, this is one of the mysteries of the universe, to be resolved into the sovereignty of a free agent abusing his liberty of free action, having been created with power to abuse it at his own option.

3. The infatuation of the sinner is an obvious fact. People may abuse Adam and other agencies

tending to sin, as much as they please. Yet they cannot help knowing that this infatuation is a matter of their own, and that whatever relation it may bear to any other beings or agencies in the universe, themselves alone are to blame for their own sin. They inwardly know that they are the sole authors of their own sin, how much so ever other agencies may have been its occasions and temptations. The dreadful infatuation lives and reigns in their own souls. Suppose you were to see thousands of people rushing towards and over a precipice, and should also see all sorts of influences thrown in their way to stop them; fathers and mothers rushing in before them with imploring cries, beseeching them to stop -- pleading, rebuking, yet all in vain; on they go, and over, and down, down they plunge, with eyes wide open; how astonishing! Whole oceans of men, rushing down the steep of death -- an army of maniacs! No wonder that when Christians get their eyes open to this fearful scene, they almost die! They would if they were long subjected to this dreadful view without some sort of alleviation. You hear them saying, "Lord, I shall surely die unless Thou interpose to save these sinners, or in some way relieve me from this dreadful position of seeing souls perish before my very eyes!"

4. How shocking to hear sinners claim that they are doing about right, while yet they live in utter sin against God and the Lamb! They claim that they have none but honorable feelings and sentiments, and even talk of their moral honesty! What a burlesque upon the truth is all such talk as this! Especially, how strange is it that such sinners should set themselves up for reformers! There is something supremely ridiculous in these pretensions to be reformers. They, who have not the first particle of genuine benevolence -- who can rob God of everything they owe Him, yet profess to love the poor slave and the poor inebriate! How deep does this love go down? Is there any moral bones in it at all? If I am morally honest, can I rob and abuse my own mother? Having done just this and all this, can I then turn around and make pretensions to honor and propriety? Yet the sinner, having robbed God all his life-time, pretends to honor, and even to practice, righteousness!

5. When a man has all needful convictions of duty, he is then and thenceforth, without excuse. Every honest man's position is this: Show me what I ought to do, and I will do it. No other question need be asked than this one -- Ought I to do this? This question settled, nothing more is needed. To settle the question of oughtness, and then stop there without doing duty, is to tempt God. It is to provoke Him to consuming wrath! Such a sinner is utterly without excuse. "I know, says he, that I ought to do this." Then you must do it -- as you would be a man, and would acquit yourself of a man's responsibilities! Say -- "Anything that is my duty, I will do at all hazards; if it be my duty, I will begin now!" But to see intelligent and moral beings throw all these obligations and convictions to the winds -- how fearful!

6. For sinners to wait God's time to repent, is infinitely absurd. God's time is now; you wait, just to miss His time and provoke Him to deny you any more time at all. You are persuaded of your duty now. What more do you ask of God than this? What more can you in reason desire of God than that He should reveal to you your condition, your peril, your way of escape, and the reasons which urge you to flee for help to the Lamb of Calvary? All this He has done; and now, in tones of love and pity, calls on you to give heed to His call. Will you do it?

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.
5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.

8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.