

roots



Study Guide

Part 1

June 6 - Week 1

The Nature of Enthusiasm - Are We Crazy?

Acts 26:24-29 (this chapter captures Paul's testimony to the Governor Festus and King Herod Agrippa—which Festus calls crazy vs 24—and Agrippa admonishes him for trying to convert him in such a short time—vs 28)

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." 25 "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26 The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." 28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" 29 Paul replied, "Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." NIV

Just like Paul Christians are often seen as being out of their minds. People do not understand the hope one has when found in Christ, the joy they experience nor the enthusiasm they have for life itself. As Christians we have the opportunity to share with those we encounter the reason for our hope, the source of our joy and the zest or enthusiasm we hold when it comes to our faith and relationship with Jesus.

Did you know that the official sign in American Sign Language for Methodist is the same sign for the word "enthusiasm?" The sign is rubbing your palms together vigorously. Why this particular sign? Because Methodists were known for their enthusiasm! Now we need to understand that at first, it was not a compliment. The fact that Jesus had captured their hearts and totally reoriented their lives was just too much for the stayed, reserved and spiritually cold and distant Anglican Church that was the cradle of Methodism. Even the word, "Methodist" was anything but a compliment.

John Wesley once said, "A enthusiast is one who seeks desirable ends but ignores constituted means." A number of authors have suggested that the terms "enthusiasm" and "enthusiast," as used in John Wesley's time, meant something akin to fanatic and fan in our time, rather than the meaning of "enthusiasm" today. That being said John Wesley would not claim to be an enthusiast, because he makes the case that enthusiasts speak and practice Christianity (his term: "religion") without attending to the "ordinary" access points. Rather they rely on dreams, visions, or simply their own opinions without reference to what we often call the means of grace such as studying the scriptures, public and private prayer, fasting, worship, and all the rest. If we can learn anything from John Wesley, it was that his experience of faith was rooted firmly in practicing the means of grace which caused the life of Jesus to be formed in him.

It is doubtful that Wesley would object to 'fanatic,' as we use it, because he was "all in" to Christianity itself with "intense devotion." Wesley understood that when we encounter and follow Jesus He will make a difference in the way we live and people will notice. Are they noticing the change in you?

- What does enthusiasm mean to you?
- Is enthusiasm just a feeling or does it go deeper than that? Explain.
- How do you see it pertaining to one's faith? To their relationship with Jesus?
- When you think about your faith and your walk with Jesus would you use the word enthusiastic? Are there other words that come to mind?

When others look at you do they notice the change Jesus has made in your life?

Wesley said: "God can give the end without any means at all; but you have no reason to think He will. Therefore, constantly and carefully use all those means which He has appointed to be the ordinary channels of His grace." In other words, the deeper work of God in the human heart is usually not accomplished apart from practicing the habits of discipleship—worship—devotion—accountable discipleship—serving—giving—and witnessing.

- Why do you believe these practices are so important?
- What changes need to happen in order to go deeper in them?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning your enthusiasm or lack of for Him?
- What tends to steal your enthusiasm for God and your relationship with Him?
- What changes need to be made?
- How can the group help?

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Today we will look at and consider what an "Almost Christian" is while also learning that "almost" has no advantage until we become an "Altogether Christian."

So what is an "Almost Christian?" The Almost Christian has some sense of right and wrong, truth and justice, a set of common virtues. Wesley said, "even the heathens gave the things they could spare to those in need even without the full knowledge of God." They often look like Altogether Christians by practicing the fruits of the Spirit. Wesley words again, "the almost Christian does nothing that the gospel forbids. He or she does not make wrongful use of the name of God, but blesses others and refrains from judging them. They do not swear oaths, they speak with a simple yes or no. They do not desecrate the Lord's Day or even permit it to be defiled by their guests. The almost Christian avoids adultery, fornication, and unchaste behavior or even the slightest word or glance that tends toward these things."

Overall, ALMOST CHRISTIANS do not participate in social interchange that is not useful or constructive, they abstain from wine, which leads to debauchery, and from carousing and gluttony. They avoid strife and altercations, seek to always live peaceable with everyone and do not willingly harm, hurt, or grieve anyone. In every situation almost Christians act and speak by the golden rule. ALMOST CHRISTIANS help friend and foe, assisting evil folk and good folk alike. Whenever they have the opportunity they work for the good of all. They correct evil people, instruct uninformed people, and comfort those in distress. They faithfully attend worship, giving attention to every part of worship, not asleep or in a comfortable posture, as though they assumed God were asleep. Almost Christians, by sincerity, feel an intense need to serve God, and also desire to do His will and are almost "Altogether Christians." On the face of it, it looks almost impossible to be even a decent "almost Christian" doesn't it? What greater standard then could there be for the ALTOGETHER CHRISTIAN?

Wesley laid out three characteristics of the Altogether Christian:

1– The ALTOGETHER CHRISTIAN has a love for God. Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength” This kind of love completely lays hold of the entire self. It claims affection, fills the entire capacity of the soul, and engages the full range of its abilities. The key word here is “ALL”. While the “almost Christian” lives a good life they do not necessarily possess a love for God with their entire being. When we abide in love, as laid out here in Jesus teaching, we find and experience God’s love abiding in us. The “altogether Christian” has a deep seeded love for God.

- Why do you think Jesus stressed the need to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength?
- What are some of the obstacle that keeps you from doing this?
- What changes need to take place in order for you to possess a complete love for God?
- What steps might you take in order to go deeper in your love for God?
- How might the group help you with this?

2– The ALTOGETHER CHRISTIAN has a love for others. Jesus also said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Wesley said, “If anyone should ask, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ we reply plainly. Your neighbor is every person in the world, every human being created by God, the maker of us all. In short, we are to live lives of love for others, just as Christ lived and loved for us.

- Why do you think Jesus stressed the importance of us loving others?
- What makes that easy? What makes it difficult?
- What changes need to take place in order for you to love others?
- How might you demonstrate love for others?
- How might the group help you with this?

3– The ALTOGETHER CHRISTIAN is grounded in faith. Scripture speaks an abundance of good things about this spiritual virtue. John said, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” “This is the victory that conquers the world – our faith” Jesus even said “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believe him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death into life.” Wesley said that Altogether Christians have a “steadfast faith and confidence in Christ to save us from everlasting condemnation. It is a certain faith and confidence that one places in God, trusting in the merits of Christ that one’s sins are forgiven and that reconciliation to God has occurred. From this faith proceeds a heart that loves him and obeys his commandments.” The “altogether Christian” possesses a “know so” kind of faith, grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ, as opposed to the “almost Christian” who possesses a “hope so” kind of faith knowing all about God but lacking the complete faith and trust in Him.

An example can be found in Matthew 19:16-22, in the story of the rich young ruler.

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” 17 “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” 18 “Which ones?” the man inquired. Jesus replied, ““Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.” 20 “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” 21 Jesus

answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. NIV

- What is the key problem with the faith of the rich young ruler?
- Can you in any respects identify with him?
- What changes need to take place for your faith to go even deeper?
- How might the group help you with this?

Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23 says:

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' NIV

The call is for us to be intentional about becoming "Altogether Christians" who love God with our entire being, who love others even as God loves us and to possess a faith that is built on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior!

June 20 - Week 3

Catholic Spirit - Can't We All Just Get Along?



2 Kings 10:15 (this verse come toward the end of the story where Ahab (the worst king of the northern kingdom of Israel) and his family have been killed—and Jehu—a reformer—is building consensus to lead)

After he left there, he came upon Jehonadab son of Recab, who was on his way to meet him. Jehu greeted him and said, “Are you in accord with me, as I am with you?” “I am,” Jehonadab answered. “If so,” said Jehu, “give me your hand.” So he did, and Jehu helped him up into the chariot. NIV

John Wesley’s sermon “Catholic Spirit” uses for its text 2 Kings 10:15: **“After he left there, he came upon Jehonadab son of Rekab, who was on his way to meet him. Jehu greeted him and said, ‘Are you in accord with me, as I am with you?’ ‘I am,’ Jehonadab answered. ‘If so,’ said Jehu, ‘give me your hand.’ So he did, and Jehu helped him up into the chariot.”**

This sermon is often quoted in the present UM conversation saying that John Wesley would say that we can all remain together in the same church with very different beliefs—“Can’t we all just get along?”—but that would be a shallow and incomplete reading of this sermon.

John Wesley’s sermon “Catholic Spirit” has been rightly seen as a landmark statement in support of Christian unity. What has sometimes been missed is how in this sermon Wesley transcends either/or thinking. His central argument is that a difference in “opinions” or “modes of worship” should not prevent Christians from being united in love for one another. By “opinions” he means commitment to specific teachings on which Christians are divided, such as predestination, Christian perfection, or the nature of the sacraments. By “modes of worship” he means practices such as infant or believers’ baptism, written or extemporaneous prayer, or celebrating the seasons of the church year. Disagreement over matters such as these should not keep persons from recognizing others as fellow Christians.

Instead, Wesley cites the words of 2 Kings 10:15 “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart,” then, “give me thine hand.” If “we cannot think alike,” Wesley asks, “May we not love alike?” (“Catholic Spirit,” ¶ 4) This emphasis on “heart” over “opinions” has sometimes led to the mistaken conclusion that Wesley is emphasizing experience over doctrine. It is true he rejects a dead orthodoxy which defines being a Christian as merely assent to a creed or the regular exercise of certain religious practices. But he also rejects any form of “enthusiasm” that privileges experience or seeks to derive doctrine from experience. Doctrine is properly grounded in scripture which is the authoritative record and interpretation of God’s revelation in creation, Israel and preeminently in Jesus Christ. Christian experience is our coming to know (encounter) the God revealed in Scripture in the present.

This is abundantly clear in “Catholic Spirit.” For two hearts to be similarly “right” involves doctrinal beliefs interwoven with experience. This includes knowing by faith God as both creator and governor; Jesus Christ as crucified and risen, indwelling one’s heart; love for God and seeking to do God’s will; and loving one’s neighbor and showing that love by works (¶ I. 12-18). The doctrinal beliefs noted here are not the “opinions” that divide Christians but

essentials that unite them. Wesley does not choose between doctrine or experience, for both are inextricably interrelated in the Christian life.

But there is another common dichotomy Wesley rejects as well. This is to assume that if a doctrine or practice really matters, then it warrants the kind of passionate defense that divides those who advocate that truth from those who reject it. We have seen that for Wesley, while there is unity in essentials, division over opinions should not go so far as to prevent Christian unity in love. But this should not lead to the equally false assumption that opinions or modes of worship do not really matter.

Wesley emphatically denies that a catholic spirit implies either a “speculative” or “an indifference to all opinions” or modes of worship. He calls such an “unsettledness of thought” “the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven” (¶ III. 1-3, pp. 92-94). A Christian should believe and practice those opinions and modes of worship he or she believes to be most faithful to Christ, and belong to a congregation that affirms those beliefs and practices.

What we believe about predestination, Christian perfection, infant baptism, and the like is of great importance, for it involves our being faithful to Christ in proclaiming, teaching, and living the faith. But it should not prevent us from honoring that same faithfulness in Christians who hold contrary opinions, yet who nonetheless remain our sisters and brothers in Christ.

- What are the core tenants of your faith - those beliefs that are the foundation for your relationship with God?
- Wesley said: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”
- What do you think he meant by that? What does it mean to you?
- What would you say is essential? What would you say is no-essential?
- Is it possible for us to be in a relationship with others we do not always agree with?
- What is the danger in removing our deeply held convictions from our most important and intimate relationships - marriage? - family? - church?
- What are those things or situations that tend to lead you away from your core convictions and beliefs?
- What do you hear God saying to you?

Romans 8:15

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." NIV

This week we come to look at and consider the call for us to move from a spirit of fear and slavery to a spirit of adoption under grace and reclaim the Wesleyan Doctrine of ASSURANCE. Wesley was fascinated by what he saw as a process of salvation. On the one hand, God saved people once and for all through the work of Christ on the cross. On the other hand, Christians didn't all seem to live that out the same way. Some followed Christ's path closely while others could make an onlooker wonder if Jesus made any difference in their lives. That "split personality" might also change over time, Wesley noticed.

The situation interested him because he saw the pastoral need of helping people move forward in their faith, and because it also matched his own experience. His long years of doing every good work he could think of hadn't eased his spirit the way God had when Wesley had his Aldersgate experience where he professed that his heart was "strangely warmed" as the Spirit truly opened his heart and touched his spirit in a way that he would never be the same again.

When Wesley looked at his own life and listened to others talk about their own spiritual journeys, he saw that people seemed to live in three different places on those journeys.

1) The first, he called the "NATURAL" state, or being asleep spiritually. People who lived a life in the natural state weren't really aware of God or of their need for him. Even if they had heard about God and about Christ, they weren't really interested or moved to find out more. They had other goals - like the satisfaction of their own desires and wants. Today, these people might have a bumper sticker that says, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Or they might be good and compassionate people. The key is their indifference to God and an unawareness of any need for God.

- What does it mean to you to be spiritually asleep?
- What tends to keep us stuck or spiritually asleep?
- Can you recall a time when you were in this "natural state" - spiritually asleep?
- What was that like?

2) The second, he calls the "LEGAL" state. Sooner or later, the alarm sounds and awakens the one asleep. Wesley might have called the alarm "life." Eventually, even the most unconcerned people wonder a little about the purpose of their lives. Wondering why we're here is something that human beings do and other animals don't. Such people might become aware of their sin and start fighting to overcome it. In a very real sense they wake up to the reality that their relationship with God is somehow broken and not what it is supposed to be. So they try to *repair it*. They try to *bridge the gap and try to live like God would want them to*. But it can't be done. It can be like quicksand - the harder we attempt

to free ourselves the more it drags us down. Paul says it this way: "The good I want to do, I don't do. And the bad that I don't want to do, that's what I do." Wesley calls this the "legal" state, and said it's characterized by a spirit of bondage to sin.

When one is in the natural state they really aren't aware of sin, even though they are deeply stuck in it. But one in the legal state becomes awakened to their lost state, becoming aware of their sin, its consequences and problems, but can't get free from it. Wesley said this was his own story, referring to all of the different things he did to try to work his way to salvation.

- Can you recall a time when you found yourself in the "legal state" trying to work to break free in your own strength?
- What was that like?
- Can you relate to Paul who said: "The good I want to do, I don't do. And the bad that I don't want to do, that's what I do."? What does it mean to you? How do you seek to overcome those times/situations?

But God's goal is that we know the spirit of adoption, to live as believers which brings us to the third:

3) He called this the "EVANGELICAL" state. God doesn't want us living as slaves to sin, but as his adopted daughters and sons, heirs with Christ. While we may still sin we know that we are not slaves to it and we are given strength by God to conquer and overcome it. Paul tells us in Romans 6:20-23: **"When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."** And in our text for today Paul says: **"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."**

- What does it mean to you to be in the "evangelical state" - being set free from sin through Christ?
- What does it mean to you to be an adopted son or daughter of God?
- What do you hear God saying to you about the bondage of sin and freedom in Him?
- What do you hear God saying to you about assurance in Him through His Son Jesus Christ?