



The Almost Christian

For the past couple of years the Ethics Center has sponsored a “journal club.” It’s really not as stuffy and academic as the name sounds. Honest. Once a month 12 or 15 of us get together for breakfast and talk about ethics. Something we’ve all read gets the discussion started. Generally the readings are recent and the topics contemporary, but this month Cornelius, my associate, had us read John Wesley’s sermon “The Almost Christian.”

In the sermon Wesley contrasts the “almost Christian” with the “altogether Christian.” Waldy, a Mennonite lawyer who belongs to our journal club, sensed a streak of judgmentalism. Was Wesley doing what many preachers do, namely, drawing a small circle in which he can place himself in order to condemn the vast crowd standing outside it? I had to acknowledge that I had seen some of that growing up in the Army, so maybe that *is* what Wesley was up to. But Diane, an Anglican minister in our group who has taken Wesley as a hero, came to his defense. Remember, she said, that Wesley is the one who took the gospel outside the confining and cliquish Anglican church of his day, and preached to the ordinary workers who didn’t feel welcome inside. Her point was that we had to be making a mistake if we thought Wesley’s sermon meant to create an elite. On re-reading it, I think Diane’s right.

Wesley’s “almost Christians” act honestly, and justly. They “feed the hungry if they have food to spare.” They have the “outside” of real Christians: they pray, they reverence

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the Lord's Day and the things of the church; they don't gossip or backbite; they aren't violent; they live peaceably with everybody; when they are wronged, they turn the other cheek. "Almost Christians" work hard, and try hard to be helpful to their neighbors any way they can be.

To top it off, says Wesley, they are sincere! "Almost Christians" aren't hypocrites. When they say nice things, they mean it. When they resist sexual temptations, it's because they really care about their wedding vows and want to be faithful. When they pray it's because they really believe in God. And so on.

What more could an ethicist want? I find myself asking. Here are genuinely good people. So why don't they count as "altogether Christians"?

John Wesley's answer is that they lack the love of God and neighbor, and they lack the kind of trust that lets go.

"But what do you mean?" I want to ask Wesley. "How can it be that people whom you yourself admit really care about their neighbors lack love?"

That's when I noticed how Wesley described the love he was talking about. It's a love that's full of joy, delight, desire, rejoicing, and happiness. His "altogether Christian" is someone who gets a kick out of helping others. Someone who *enjoys* the give-and-take of the home, the promise-making and promise-keeping of the workplace. The "altogether Christian" may not be as dutiful as the "almost Christian," Wesley says, but the "altogether Christian" *delights* in God and other people.

What's the old song this brings to mind? "Joy, joy, joy. There is joy in the Salvation Army." Or Charles Wesley's "Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven, to earth come down."

We use different language in the twenty-first century than John Wesley used in the eighteenth century, but the point he's making is still important.

Contemporary ethical theory is sometimes divided into "rights-based" and "duty-based" theories. Rights-based theories emphasize the kind of treatment and regard one is entitled to. I believe rights are very important commodities, but an ethics *based* on rights tends to be strident, shrill, and self-centered. Duty-based theories emphasize one's responsibilities. Now, duties are important commodities too. There is something very noble in the person who is able to do what she should, not because she wants to, but because it's her duty. An ethics *based* on duties, however, feels oppressive and spirit-deadening.

Wesley points me to a third possibility—what I'd call a "grace-based" ethics. Beginning with the conviction that we live and move and have our being in God, grace-based ethics doesn't put rights and entitlements in first place. Beginning with the conviction that God has *gifted* us with life and each other, it doesn't put duty in first place either. "Grace" is another word for "gifts," and gifts are occasions for thanks and celebration. Gifts make us happy. Hopefully gifts delight us so much we become givers ourselves.

One of my favorite Salvation Army history stories concerns a woman missionary to India's "untouchables." In traditional Hindu society, the "untouchables" were below the

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lowest caste, so it was surprising enough that a woman from Europe should come to nurse them in their illnesses. But what really won them to the gospel, according to the story, is that she kissed their feet. That her lips should dare to touch an untouchable's feet—the most sacred part put to the most profane—was an act beyond comprehension. It was the sort of gift that danced to the tune of grace, and it came from the kind of love John Wesley would have called “altogether Christian.”

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