

March 7th, 2021

Acts 18:18-19:10

Outward Church: Almost Christian

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Amy and Mack are Christians. They grew up going to church with their parents, and they go on Easter, Christmas, and about once a month. They go every month because they want their two daughters to have good morals. They want them to have Christian values. It will give them their best chance of success in life, and isn't that what God wants anyway? They send their daughters to Vacation Bible School (VBS) every summer for good measure.

Amy's sister just baptized her daughter, and Amy stood right there with her to be her niece's godmother. Mack always makes sure that when they go to church, they write a check. He feels good about giving. He's done his part. Amy and Mack consider themselves to be good people. They give to charity, and they donate to the food pantry. When they fill out their medical forms at the doctor's office, they always mark "Christian" and write their church's name. They are always friendly with the pastor and joke about the football game with him. They're happy. It feels good to be Christian, at least, almost Christian. They don't know Jesus said:

Matthew 7:21-23 (ESV)

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

If Amy and Mack heard these words, that not everyone who calls Jesus Lord will get into heaven, it might give them pause to reassess their lives. What about you? When you hear those words, do you need to reassess? Are you really a Christian? Or just a cultural Christian? Do you just go through the motions? Are you calling out "Lord, Lord" but on that final day, Jesus will say, "Depart from me?"

But what if you are a Christian? How can you help those people around you like Amy and Mack? How can you reach out to the "almost Christians" in your life? These are the cultural Christians, the people who think they're going to heaven but don't have saving faith in Jesus Christ, and their lives don't show any fruit of knowing Christ. How should we reach them?

Like Paul, we should be mindful of *almost Christians*. (Acts 18:18-23)

Paul is drawing his second missionary journey to a close. He was just in Corinth for 18 months and is about to make his way back to Jerusalem and then up north to Antioch. Just before he leaves the region of Corinth, he goes through a religious ceremony. When you and I think of a religious ceremony, we probably think of lighting a candle or praying or burning incense. But Paul goes to the barbershop.

Acts 18:18 (ESV)

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.

Paul cuts his hair because he has taken a Nazirite vow. If you go back to numbers 6, you can read how men or women could take a Nazirite vow and separate themselves for the Lord (Num 6:1-2). They weren't supposed to drink wine or alcohol, eat grapes, touch a dead body, or cut their hair (Num 6:3-12). You may remember Samson was a Nazarene, just not a very obedient one (Num 13:5). He touched the carcass of a

dead lion and allowed his hair to be cut, which led to his death. When you finished this vow, you took your hair and burned it at the temple in Jerusalem. It was sacred, special, and meant a lot to the Jews in Jerusalem.

Even today, we can think of shaving the head as something special. My sister-in-law had ALL as a child, Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia. She often participates in St. Baldrick's Day. The charity raises funds by people shaving their heads to help kids with cancer. I did it one year. It was the worst haircut I ever had, but it meant a lot to her. I think that's kind of like what Paul is doing. He doesn't shave his head and fulfill the Nazarite vow because it saves him, but because it means a lot to the Jews. Paul famously said this:

1 Corinthians 9:22b (ESV)

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

Paul is mindful of the "almost Christians" around him. Remember my sermon on gatekeeping? How we're not supposed to erect anything that would keep someone from the gospel other than the gospel itself? This passage isn't just about not hindering others; it's about going out of our way to help others come to faith in Christ. What things can we do differently to help others believe in Jesus?

Think of your own life and things your non-Christian coworkers and neighbors appreciate or enjoy that you don't really like, but there's nothing immoral about it. How could you proactively go out of your way to care about the things they care about? Maybe you're not a big sports fan, but you watch a football game with your coworkers. Or, maybe you're not a big Oprah fan, but one of your neighbors is, so you watch an episode and talk about the spiritual things she says. Remember back when we used to go into the office and how sometimes coworkers would get drinks after works? Are you someone who would join them or go home? Maybe when we get back into the swing of things, you could join them, at least a couple of times a month. Maybe like Paul shaved his head, someone you know gets cancer, so you shave your head too. Let's not only not gatekeep but go out of our way to help others come to faith in Christ.

After this, Paul sails to Ephesus, then back to Jerusalem, then back to Antioch, the missionary outpost church. It's easy to miss. In Acts 18:23, he launches his third missionary journey going back to the region of Galatia and Phrygia. But then there's this brief interlude about a gifted man named Apollos, which I think the author Luke includes because of this theme of almost Christianity. *Like Paul, we should be mindful of almost Christians.*

Like Apollos, it's possible to know about Christ and be almost right. (Acts 18:24-28)

Apollos was an incredibly gifted public speaker, someone you'd download his podcast to listen to, who didn't quite know Jesus. He almost knew him. Apollos was almost right.

Acts 18:24-26 (ESV)

²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

While we don't know exactly Apollos's heart, we can make several observations. 1) He knew about the Messiah and Jesus, but he didn't know the full story. I see this in: "He had been instructed in the way of the Lord" and "he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus." I think it's fair to say he knew about the promised Messiah in the Old Testament (Isaiah 53; Daniel 7:13-14), and he even knows of the figure of Jesus, but he perhaps didn't know of the death and resurrection of Jesus or fully put his trust in him.

2) His knowledge was limited to what John the Baptist knew, which was only a partial story. It says, "he knew only the baptism of John." John preached about the coming Messiah. When John saw Jesus, he said:

John 1:29b (ESV)

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

But his ministry was mostly about preaching a baptism of repentance, of preparing people for Jesus.

Matthew 3:1-2 (ESV)

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

But even later in his ministry, before his death, John questioned if Jesus really was the Messiah (Matt 11:1-19). So, while Apollos might have had some understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, his belief wasn't enough. Something needed to change. He was almost right, but not quite right.

In the book, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christians with the Gospel* by Dean Inserra, he talks about "Generational Catholics." I don't agree with everything he says in this book. I believe you can be Catholic and Christian. But, he makes a good point that there are a bunch of Catholics who are going through the religious motions without knowing Christ or complete forgiveness. They don't know that Jesus suffered and died for them. A Generational Catholic, or nominal Catholic, is someone whose family really identifies as Catholic and wants to have their children and grandchildren baptized and confirmed, but it stops short of a relationship with Jesus Christ. There's a sense of all the things you have to do to be saved, have to be a good person, have to go to mass, but no real understanding of how Jesus paid for their every sin on the cross, past, present, and future.

Is that you? Do you suffer from Catholic guilt because you don't get Jesus died to pay for your sins and to pay them in full? Well, you're almost there. Understanding we're sinful is a huge part of becoming a Christian. But Christianity is also about understanding we can't save ourselves. No matter how good or how moral or how many masses we attend or communions we take, we'll never be good enough. Only Jesus can make us good enough. Let that burden of shame and guilt and wondering if you're good enough lift off of you. Jesus loves you and forgives you.

But how about if you have a family member, friend, or coworker who is a generational or nominal Catholic? How can you minister to them? Do two things: Continually crack open the Bible and continually point to the grace and forgiveness Jesus offers. Jesus does call us to a life of repentance and obedience, but as a response to his grace, not to earn it. Jesus loves us and forgives us, and the Holy Spirit transforms us. Pray for them. Pray they would come to saving faith in Jesus, whether they leave the Catholic church or not.

Thankfully, the story doesn't end there for Apollos. He has a teachable heart. He listens to Priscilla and Aquilla, this husband-wife couple. He hears the truth, and he changes his theology. He keeps using his gifts to build up the church. And lest we pass it by, Priscilla is a woman and is mentioned first. Here she is serving as an evangelist and a teacher to lead a famous teacher to Christ. I believe women are called to evangelism and teaching, even over men. But that's a different sermon. Let's keep going because there's one more story of almost Christians. *Like Apollos, it's possible to know about Christ and yet be almost right.*

Like the twelve, it's possible to almost have the Holy Spirit but not actually be transformed by Him. (Acts 19:1-10)

Paul continues on his third missionary journey and returns once more to Ephesus in the middle of Asia. He encounters twelve leaders of the early church who, like Apollos, have heard of John's baptism for repentance but are still lacking something, someone, the Holy Spirit.

Acts 19:1-6 (ESV)

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. ² And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³ And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Many think this passage means that you have to experience a second baptism of the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues to be a true Christian. Just because we find something described in Acts doesn't mean it's prescribed for all believers. For example, if we go back to Acts 8:17, the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit but don't speak in tongues. I think it's helpful to remember how Jesus described the Holy Spirit when Nicodemus came to see him at night.

John 3:8 (ESV)

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

What Jesus is telling us about the Holy Spirit is two things. 1) You can't control the Holy Spirit. He does what he wants. 2) You need the Holy Spirit to be born again. It seems like the 12 disciples at Ephesus almost had the Holy Spirit. They theoretically believed in Jesus, but they weren't transformed by the Holy Spirit. Here's the thing, even the demons believe in Jesus.

James 3:19 (ESV)

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

But demons aren't saved, are they? They have all the right beliefs. They call Jesus "Lord, Lord," they know who he is, but they're still going to hell. How about you? We can call Jesus Lord, but if the Holy Spirit hasn't gotten ahold of our lives and is transforming us, our future is uncertain.

Two years ago, I read a biography about George Whitefield. He was like America's first celebrity preacher. He once preached to 20,000 people on the Boston Common when he was just 25-years old. By the end of his career, about 8 of every ten people had heard George Whitefield preach in the American colonies. He often asked, "Are you born again? Have you really got the Holy Spirit? Has the Spirit really transformed you?" He used the illustration of a piece of ore. You take gold ore, melt it down, purify it, polish it, and it transforms into something beautiful, a bright and shiny piece of gold. Or you find a dirty piece of glass, you wash it off, and it becomes clear and beautiful. That's what the Holy Spirit does to us. He takes us in all our sin and depravity and melts us down, refines us, polishes us up, makes us new.

It is possible to have all the right doctrine in the world, to theoretically believe that Jesus is God, but do not have the Holy Spirit. Christianity is not simply a set of correct beliefs. Rather, Christianity's set of beliefs serve as a foundation for having a right relationship with God through the Spirit. We want to know who God is, so we want to believe the right things. We never simply want to believe the right things, so we have it all figured out. Instead, we really want to know God. We know him through his Word and Spirit and church.

So, if you have all the right beliefs, but your life looks just like everyone else who doesn't know Jesus. If your affections, your love hasn't changed. If your desires look like your non-Christian neighbor's desires, you might need to reassess yourself. Jesus tells us how to do this.

Matthew 7:18-20 (ESV)

¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does

not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

The guys who paired up for men's discipleship got together yesterday morning to drink coffee, eat donuts, and sit around a fire in the snow. It was really nice. One of the things we discussed was how instead of focusing too much on the fruit, we should focus on our roots. We should focus on sinking deep in our relationship with God and ask him to bear fruit in our lives. We can't control if we have these things, but we can ask the Holy Spirit to give us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. (Galatians 5:22-23). We pray, trust, and walk in obedience the best we can, trusting God will work it out in us (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Like Paul, we should be mindful of almost Christians. Like Apollos, it's possible to know about Christ and be almost right. Like the twelve, it's possible to almost have the Holy Spirit but not actually be transformed by Him. Here's my closing thought.

The Holy Spirit can transform almost Christians into genuine believers.

Are you an Amy? Or are you a Mack? Are you an almost Christian? A nominal Christian? An Unsaved Christian, as that book would say? Today can be the day of your salvation. Today can be the day you repent, believe, receive grace, and begin to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. It begins by believing in Jesus' death and resurrection and asking the Holy Spirit to transform you from the inside out.

Close service by singing the doxology.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to be an almost Christian?
2. What does Jesus say to almost Christians?
3. How can believers be more mindful of almost Christians?
4. What's the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about him?
5. Do you struggle with religious guilt? Why is that, and what does the gospel offer?
6. What are some signs or fruit of having a saving relationship with Christ Jesus?
7. What sorts of things does the Holy Spirit do to transform a person?
8. What would you like prayer for? Please feel free to [contact us](#) for prayer.

Sources

[Acts 18:22-19:10 Sermon Transcript & Audio](#) – Emmanuel Baptist Church | New Caney, TX

[George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father](#) by Thomas S. Kidd.

[The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christians with the Gospel](#) by Dean Inserra