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THE  
ALMOST CHRISTIAN.

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PHILADELPHIA.

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It is probable that the person who takes up this Tract, will be at once reminded by its title of some one or more in the circle of his friends, to whom the designation *Almost Christian* will apply: and there are few evangelical pastors who could not readily refer to many examples in illustration of this subject. We speak not now of that large, undefined, and varying class of which king Agrippa may be considered a fit representative—men who, having grown up in infidelity and vice, uniformly regardless of their obligations to God, and deaf to the invitations of the Gospel, are at length, in some favored hour, suddenly aroused from their stupidity, and constrained, under a partial view of their ruined condition, to exclaim, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” We speak rather of those whom we think of when we read the affecting narrative of our Saviour’s interview with the amiable young ruler, and those who were, imperfectly indeed, represented by the scribe to whom the assurance was given, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.” Such persons are not unfrequently met with; and they seldom cross our path without exciting a peculiar interest in their spiritual welfare. We “look upon them and love them,” as our blessed Saviour did in one of the instances just cited; and when we find them reluctant to exchange the paltry riches or honors of this world for the friendship

of Christ and a crown of unfading glory, we feel something of that commiseration which he felt when the young man "went away grieved" at his call of infinite love.

There are, of course, minor diversities of character amongst the individuals to whom the name Almost Christian may in this sense be applied; but they possess certain prominent traits in common. The following outline exhibits some of these characteristic features; it is drawn from real life; and though it will doubtless require to be varied, in order to suit particular cases, it is perhaps sufficiently definite to enable each one who reads it to determine whether he belongs to the class of Almost Christians.

1. They are more frequently to be found in the middle and higher walks of life, than among those whose pecuniary circumstances have precluded them from enjoying many intellectual and religious privileges.

2. They are usually the offspring of pious parents, or at least members of families in which religion is sincerely respected, and its leading doctrines inculcated upon the minds of the young. This remark, however, admits of considerable modification, inasmuch as many persons who have failed of receiving this instruction in childhood, have subsequently been brought to possess the character which we are endeavoring to delineate.

3. They are for the most part persons of intelligence—many of them of highly cultivated minds, stored with the fruits and embellished with the accomplishments of a liberal education.

4. They are almost uniformly characterized by much amiableness of temper; and their kind and affectionate demeanor so wins upon the heart, that we cannot know them without according to them the tribute of our sincere esteem. Especially is this the case when we observe that this kindness of heart prompts them to many acts of benevolence; and that they appear to derive much of their own enjoyment

from promoting, by little offices of attention and love, the happiness of those around them.

5. The class we speak of profess the fullest belief in the Holy Scriptures, and approve of most of the doctrines there revealed. They are regular attendants at the sanctuary, and some of them are not ashamed to be seen at social prayer-meetings. Many are Sabbath-school teachers or members of Bible-classes. A few of them go so far as to study the Bible with considerable diligence, and even to offer up an occasional prayer in secret. They are not averse to the society of Christians. Their deportment is generally correct; and they sometimes exhibit a degree of conscientiousness which might well reprove some who are within the pale of the church. They profess to rejoice in the increase of revivals and in the conversion of their friends. They freely admit that personal religion is indispensable to the true enjoyment of this world, and that it furnishes the only adequate preparation for eternity. They acknowledge, however, that they have never availed themselves of the gracious offers of the Gospel, and have no personal interest in the great Redeemer.

Such are some of the distinguishing marks of the Almost Christian. The sketch is indeed very imperfect. The reader may perhaps feel that a part of the description is applicable to his own case, while the remainder is not. His character may be less fair and his deportment less exemplary than that here delineated: while cherishing a sincere respect for religion, he may neglect many even of its external duties; and while vaguely wishing that he were a Christian, he may have no precise views of the nature of that obedience which the holy law of God requires. But whatever peculiarities of this kind may mark your case, allow one who would if possible benefit your soul, affectionately to solicit your serious attention to the remarks which will now be offered with reference to the preceding statement.

I. *The qualities which have been ascribed to the Almost Christian may, and in fact do, coëxist in his heart with determined enmity against God.* It is very important for you to remember, that the term Almost Christian is one devised by man, and not by God; and that the ground of its application to you is not that of internal purity, but of outward decency. In that discriminating classification of mankind which the Bible makes, only two descriptions of persons are recognized, saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers, the holy and the unholy. It is the peculiar trait of the former that they love God; and, in this case, the absence of love is aversion or hatred. "He that is not with me," said our Saviour, "is *against* me;" and "he that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me." But you do not even pretend to love God; and as love to God is the first and great commandment, and "the fulfilling of the law," it follows not only that your heart *may* be, but *must* be full of enmity towards your Maker. If it be true that the law of God is spiritual, reaching even to the thoughts and intents of the heart, then no external obedience can be acceptable to him which is not founded on a just apprehension of his authority and a sincere reverence for it. Those acts of courtesy and kindness, therefore, that sweetness of manner, that respect for religion, and that rigid observance of many of its public and perhaps some of its private duties, however commendable in themselves, are perfectly compatible with a state of wilful and perverse rebellion against the infinite Jehovah.

It is exceedingly difficult to convince many persons of the truth of this assertion. They will admit, in words at least, that the eye of Omniscience is fixed upon the heart, and that every act must necessarily be offensive to him which he perceives is not prompted by an internal principle of obedience to his righteous law. Still they are ready to ask, whether so much decency of behavior, so many deeds

of charity, and a uniform course of life so widely different from that pursued by the great mass of the world, are at last to come into condemnation and fail of an eternal reward. It is obvious that a point is virtually denied in this inquiry, which the objector a moment before conceded ; for no plausibility of statement and no ingenuity of reasoning can invalidate the conclusion, that if God approves only of such acts as spring from sincere love to his character and law, no acts to which this essential quality does not belong can be acceptable to him. Let the case then be ever so strong—let one be found who can exclaim with all the mistaken ardor of the young ruler, and with reference to the whole decalogue, “all these have I kept from my youth up,” yet without love to God as the foundation of his obedience, his religion will be “as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”

It is obvious, then, that if you are but an “Almost Christian,” you are still in the bonds of iniquity. Notwithstanding all your amiableness, your hatred to God is yet unsubdued. And rest assured, that where this feeling prevails, there is no true virtue. There may be the semblance of it, but there cannot be the reality. That single mark evinces that the whole heart is dreadfully corrupt. Nothing which is good can grow in such a soil : as well might we expect the ground which is shaded by the deadly Upas to produce nutritious fruit for the sustenance of man.

II. *The Almost Christian is peculiarly liable to self-deception.* His situation is one which not only indisposes a person to self-examination, but absolutely unfits him for performing this essential duty with any tolerable degree of fidelity. He furnishes perhaps the most striking illustration of the unmeasurable deceitfulness of the human heart, which is to be found in a Christian community. There are indeed exceptions to this remark, amongst the large class who are designated by the term Almost Christian ; but, as a general thing, it is believed they are miserably mistaken

in regard to their true character. Not by any means that they firmly believe themselves to be real Christians, and much less that they express that opinion: they universally acknowledge, when asked the question, that they have never experienced the saving efficacy of the blood of Christ upon their hearts. Still, it may be doubted whether they are not self-deluded in the very act of making these confessions—whether they are so utterly destitute of hope as they profess to be. The heart which has not been humbled and sanctified by grace is seldom disposed to bring its excellence to the severe tests exhibited in the Scriptures, or to view its own deformity in the mirror of the Gospel. And it is plain that the man who takes no pains to learn what his true character is, will be strongly inclined to form too favorable an estimate of himself. Especially will this be the case if he is conscious of possessing those amiable qualities which secure for him general esteem, and if his life is stained with few violations of those rules of honesty and sobriety which, however improperly, are by common consent, in all civilized countries, invested with the authority of a code of morals.

It is hardly possible that one so situated should scrutinize his own heart with that impartiality which is demanded alike by a regard to his personal safety and by the requisitions of eternal justice. To imagine that he can look without a sinful self-complacency on all his acts of kindness and charity, and that he will be disposed impartially to examine these actions and the general tenor of his life by the pure light of revealed truth, is to suppose that he has already been taught those lessons concerning the depravity of the heart which are only to be learned by sitting at the feet of Jesus Christ. Considering what human nature is, is it surprising that he should be flattered, by the caresses of friends and the concurrent approbation of all around him, into a secret and firm, though perhaps unacknowledged belief,

that even God himself looks down upon him with a feeling of complacency? Such an impression is so favorable to peace of mind, that we may presume there is a predisposition to receive it; and it would be cherished and confirmed by that frequent, though only half-designed comparison, which the Almost Christian is so prone to institute between himself and his less exemplary neighbors and associates.

Perhaps the reader has, in some honest moment, detected himself in this specious kind of self-gratulation; and if he will but candidly examine this single act, it will open to him the ground of that delusion which is threatening to destroy his soul. *He appeals to some other standard than the word of God in order to determine the true character of his actions.* But of what account is it, with reference to the retributions of eternity, how blameless your life may be in the judgment of men, provided your heart is not right in the sight of God? It obviously concerns you to know how your conduct appears in the eyes of him who is to deal with you according to your works, and fix your everlasting destiny at the great day of account. Every other inquiry is totally irrelevant until this be settled. If God has solemnly decreed that "without *holiness* no man shall see the Lord," you are running a fearful hazard by building your hopes of heaven on the favorable estimate which men, frail and sinful like yourself, may form of your character. You deny, indeed, that you are trusting to any such foundation. You assert that nothing is further from your belief than the opinion that your good works will wholly or partially avail to save you. But beware of yourself. Search deeply into your heart, and see if you do not discover, beneath all your apparent humility and self-renunciation, an *under-current* of pride and selfishness, which is silently but rapidly bearing you towards the "lake which burneth with fire and brimstone."

Nor is the Almost Christian less erroneously deceived

in regard to his prospects of becoming pious. If he is not actually indulging a secret hope in the mercy of God, he flatters himself that he is approaching that point at which sovereign grace will surely interpose for his deliverance. He practically believes that the course he is pursuing, though not precisely coincident with the "strait and narrow way," is gradually converging towards it, and will in due season conduct him into it; or else that the two paths are so near together that, in case of any sudden calamity, as an attack of sickness or the like, he can step, at a moment's warning, from his own into the other. He perceives that there is reason enough why the vicious and profane, the sensualist and the drunkard, should be promptly arrested in their downward career; but why should *he* be alarmed who "has been growing better and better for years?" It is well to go and try to collect together the Israelites who are scattered all over the desert, and in danger of being cut off by their foes; but why disturb the peace of one who is living on the very bank of Jordan, and can at any time cross over to the land of promise and repose? Strange, strange infatuation—to think that sin can tend to holiness; that a life of rebellion against God is qualifying a creature for heaven; that a heart which is daily abusing offered mercy, and crucifying anew the Saviour, is softening rather than hardening in its iniquity! O throw off this delusion. Tear away the veil from your eyes. Look at yourself as you are. *Believe* that "he who is not with Christ, is against him;" that he who is not "laying up treasure in heaven," is "treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath;" and that every hour you persist in impenitence, is strengthening the fearful probability that you will at last fail of eternal life.

III. *The state of the Almost Christian is one of aggravated and increasing guilt.* It has already been shown, that with all his apparent amiableness he still cherishes bitter enmity against God, and we shall now endeavor to prove

that his sin is of no ordinary stamp. This will be manifest, if we examine his conduct in the light of that simple and equitable principle of the divine administration—a principle which we recognize in all our dealings with one another—that “unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required.” Now, according to the view which we have taken, the Almost Christian is one to whom this maxim will apply in all the plenitude of its meaning. He has not only enjoyed the common bounties of Providence and the means of grace, but he has been mercifully restrained from flagrant sins, educated in the fear of the Lord, and taught to cherish a sincere respect for the ordinances and interests of religion. While thousands around him have grown up like heathens in a Christian land, his mind has been stored with sacred truth, he has been instructed in lessons of virtue, and pious friends have been constantly near to impart their counsel and to direct him in the path of duty. More than this, he has been led by divine grace to reflect much and seriously on eternal things; he has been convinced of the reasonable claims of God upon his heart; he has been brought to acknowledge that his course of life is irrational, sinful, and dangerous; he knows that there is salvation for him only through the atoning sacrifice and righteousness of Christ, and that unless he repent and believe in him he must inevitably perish.

All this has been done for him—all this he knows—and yet does he still persevere in resisting all the calls and motives to repentance. He looks upon Sinai: he sees its lightnings, he hears its thunders: the law is proclaimed, and he confesses that it is “holy, and just, and good;” but he refuses to render to it any other than a cold and formal obedience. He looks upon Calvary: he beholds a scene which filled all heaven with wonder—which made the rocks to rend, the graves to open, and the dead to come forth; but no tear of penitence starts from his eye, no pang of godly sor-

row thrills his heart. Though confessing that Jesus was the Son of God, yet he will not obey him—that he is altogether lovely, yet he will not love him—that he died to save sinners, yet he will not be saved by him. He hears the proffer of rest to the weary and heavy-laden, but he refuses to appropriate it to himself. He knows that there is a “fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness,” but he will not repair to it. He believes in the assurance that those who need, can have “wine and milk without money and without price;” but, while acknowledging his need, he is too proud to accept the boon.

And what more *could* he do to aggravate his guilt? What more could be done to bring him to Christ? From Sabbath to Sabbath, from year to year—perhaps all the while flattering himself that he is drawing nearer and nearer to the kingdom of heaven—he lives unmoved alike by judgments and mercies. He perhaps sits side by side in the sanctuary with some avowed, and, it may be, profligate opposers of religion; and while their hearts melt under the power of the truth, his own, as though encased in iron, but too fatally wards off every shaft. The same afflictive providence which is the means of arresting and awakening many of his companions, leaves no permanent impression on his mind. He is ready, indeed, to sympathize with the bereaved, and to alleviate their sorrows by all the kind offices of friendship; but he forgets that the stroke which has clad them, and perhaps himself also, in mourning, was mercifully designed to direct his wandering heart to the Saviour.

The writer is well aware that the opposite effects here spoken of are, in an important sense, referable to the divine sovereignty; nor would he pen a single sentence which might seem to be in the slightest degree inconsistent with that great, and, to the Christian, most precious doctrine. But, however that doctrine may be explained, all the guilt which has been charged upon the Almost Christian lies

most justly at his door. And for proof of this, let the appeal be made to his own consciousness. If such an one is now perusing this Tract, let me ask whether a single unrighteous allegation has been advanced against you in these remarks? Does not the Bible, by direct assertion or obvious implication, confirm, in your own judgment, all that has been said respecting the true character of your depraved heart? And do you not acknowledge that the preceding enumeration of your sins is in no other way incorrect, than as it fails in representing fully their number and their heinousness? If this be so, then, truly,

IV. *The condition of the Almost Christian is one of awful danger.* It is so, because of the hardening effect of his sins upon his heart. By his own confession, he sins against much more light than other men, and therefore he must make a more wilful resistance to the truth. The Gospel is a savor of life unto life, or of death unto death, to all who hear it. The man who rejects one solemn and pungent appeal on the subject of his soul's salvation, is thereby fortified, in a measure, against a second; and he who rejects a second, will be better able to resist a third; and in this gradual manner do multitudes so completely arm themselves against the messages of God as to make their own destruction sure.

Again, the Almost Christian is in great danger, because, by persisting so wilfully in impenitence, he may grieve the Holy Spirit until he depart from him. That men are sometimes thus given over to the workings of a reprobate mind, is a doctrine dreadful indeed to contemplate, but too plainly taught in the Scriptures to be overlooked. It is God who speaks in such language as the following: "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at naught all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calam-

ity; I will mock when your fear cometh." Prov. 1. "If thou hadst known," said our blessed Saviour to Jerusalem, even while he wept over it—"if thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes." And again, "Thou knewest not the time of thy visitation." Luke 19. Who, then, are so likely to be thus forsaken of God, as those with whom his Spirit has been long striving; who have been faithfully instructed, admonished, warned, entreated to repent and believe in Christ; and who, notwithstanding the flood of light which has been shed upon their path, and the unnumbered mercies of God, are still abusing his goodness, and trampling on the blood of his Son? Beware, lest you provoke his wrath, and he swear that you shall not enter into his rest.

There is still another circumstance which adds to the danger of the Almost Christian, resulting from the gross deception which, as we have seen, he is constantly practising upon himself. He has so long reflected on the solemn truths of the Gospel, that he listens to them without *expecting* them to make any deep impression on his mind. He is not surprised to see others affected even to tears under the faithful preaching of the word, but he would look upon *himself* with astonishment, should the same exhibition of the truth excite in his own bosom any strong emotion. His respect for religion remains undiminished, his external conduct is still blameless, his attendance on public worship regular, and his conscience, perhaps, tender; but there is a sameness, a *uniformity* in his feelings, throughout successive months and years, which may well excite painful forebodings as to the end of his course. He often wishes that he were a Christian; but he has no wish strong enough to carry him beyond the unvarying circuit of his daily life. He is frequently serious; but his seriousness never rises to genuine conviction and abhorrence of sin. He often feels

solicitous about his soul ; but he is never sufficiently alarmed to make the trembling inquiry, "What must I do to be saved?" How little prospect, then, humanly speaking, is there that he will *ever* awake, in this life, to the realities of his condition. Nor is it to be forgotten that his state is becoming more alarming every day. It is only in appearance that he is stationary. He is every hour, as we have already seen, becoming more hardened in sin, and more confirmed in impenitence.

We appeal, therefore, to the Almost Christian, whether he is not encompassed with dangers. It is a small matter, that in the estimation of your own flattering heart, or of partial friends, you may have no cause for anxiety about your soul. Are you not still under the curse of the law? Is not the sword of God's justice impending over you, and his wrath ready to burst upon your head? Is not your soul in dreadful peril? You are walking blindfold upon the verge of a tremendous precipice. Death hastens on; the judgment-bar of your offended Saviour is just before you; time is bearing you rapidly along to the retributions of eternity, and the only preparation you are making, is a preparation for endless exclusion from the presence of God and the joys of heaven. Are you ready for this doom? Can you meet it with composure? Or does the thought of it inspire you rather with a desire to avoid it? Are you disposed now to seek reconciliation with God on the terms which he has prescribed in his holy word? If you are, I will endeavor briefly to point out your duty.

You need not be told that there is but one way of salvation. "Except ye repent," said our Saviour, "ye shall all likewise perish." "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." Repentance and faith are as requisite for you as they were for a Mary Magdalene or a Saul of Tarsus; or as they are now for the vilest wretch who bears the form of man. You are aware that repent-

ance includes godly sorrow for sin, a forsaking of every sinful habit, and a firm determination to walk with God, in the ways of new obedience; and that faith includes a receiving and resting on Christ alone for pardon and salvation. It is your duty at once to renounce every other dependence, to give up all reliance on your amiableness of temper and exemplary conduct, as recommending you to the favor of God, and to come humble and contrite for your sins to Jesus Christ. Cast yourself on his mercy; receive him as your Saviour; and commit your soul and all its concerns to him, for time and for eternity. Do this *now*. You have trifled with religion too long already. The Bible has no promise for you beyond the present moment. It requires *immediate* repentance and the immediate exercise of faith.

To all this you will probably answer, "I have often endeavored to give myself up to Christ in the way here described, but I have never been able to get a clear view of my own sinfulness, nor have I *felt* sufficiently the burden of sin."

On this I would remark, first, this only evinces the dreadful depravity of your heart. Your sins are, on your own confession, of a highly aggravated nature, and yet you do not feel them. But again, the Almost Christian very frequently commits a mistake in regard to the character of his exercises. He invariably fixes upon a *high degree* of conviction of sin, as an indispensable prerequisite to his accepting the offers of mercy. And thence his plea, when urged to renounce the world for Christ, uniformly is, "I do not *feel* enough to take this step yet." Now, it is true, that without the conviction of your ruin by sin, there can be no evangelical repentance; yet, as this conviction is itself, when real, the work of the Holy Spirit, it is not for a worm of the dust to declare that he will persist in rebellion against his Maker, until he is favored with an overwhelming view of his own depravity. Again, he should remember

that many persons have more pungent convictions at various seasons after their conversion, than they had at the precise period of it. And again, it is well known that persons whose character and education correspond to the description given in the foregoing pages of the Almost Christian, if converted at all, are often brought into the fold of Christ without experiencing those highly wrought exercises which frequently attend the conviction and conversion of the abandoned and profligate. Still, it is evident that until you are led by the Holy Spirit to feel, in some measure, your need of a Saviour, you will not repair to him.

But why are you not sensible of your need *now*? To this question you have correctly replied, that you have no just view of your own character—no clear apprehension of the momentous truths of the holy Scriptures. Were those truths once brought home to your heart, you could no more remain unmoved than could Belshazzar when he beheld the mystical hand-writing on the wall of his palace. Should the Spirit of God apply them to your conscience with all the directness and force of a “*Thou art the man,*” you would instantly throw aside your pride, and formality, and unbelief, and cry out in agony of soul, “What must I do to be saved?”

But the question still remains, Why do you *not* realize the import of these solemn truths? why are you still blind to your own wickedness? why are you not now within the ark of refuge? Simply, under God, because *you have never been IN EARNEST to secure the salvation of your soul.* If you were obliged to cross a rugged mountain, you would not expect to pass it by making weak and irregular efforts, by alternate seasons of activity and idleness, of encouragement and despondency. And if you expect ever to reach heaven, no partial, unsteady, and inconstant exertions will avail. Millions perish because there is no period at which they are ready solemnly to vow before God, “NOW, *from THIS MO-*

MENT, *I will, in dependence on divine grace, seek supremely the honor of Christ in the salvation of my soul and the extension of his kingdom, and make every thing else subordinate to this great end.*"

Are you ready now to make this solemn consecration of yourself to God? If so, do it on your bended knees, in his immediate presence. And once done, let there be no shrinking back—no misgiving. "Remember Lot's wife." Having put your hand to the plough, one look behind may cost you a crown of glory. The world will tempt you—friends may ridicule you. Regard them not. Let all the energies of your mind be devoted to the great question at issue between your soul and your Maker. Separate yourself, as far as possible, from ensnaring company; let not the perplexities of business draw your heart away from God; banish every thing which might distract your attention. Reflect on the merciful providences which have marked your history, and let these excite your *gratitude*. Above all, *look to the bleeding Saviour*. Think of his agony in the garden—his bloody sweat—his crown of thorns—his piercing cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—his pouring out his soul an offering for sin, that "*whosoever* believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Implore the Holy Spirit to take of the things of Christ and show them unto you; to sanctify you; to strengthen you in duty. He will give you the victory over every spiritual adversary, preserve you to the end, and "present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy."