

Text: Acts 26.27-29 ... Read Passage First

Today we come to a passage containing one of the most famous phrases in the book of Acts, especially as the King James Version translates it:

Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

The phrase is memorialized in one of the hymns of our hymnbook, *Almost Persuaded* (#322).

The most poignant of the three verses we have in our hymnal is the last, which goes this way:

“Almost persuaded,” harvest is past!
“Almost persuaded,” doom comes at last;
“Almost” cannot avail;
“Almost” is but to fail!
Sad, sad that bitter wail—
“Almost—but lost!”

Looking more closely at the words, we will find that “almost” isn’t quite the right translation. We are also left to wonder at Agrippa’s tone as he responded to Paul.

Was he sad? Ironic? Sarcastic? Wistful? Embarrassed? Dismissive?
Sneering? Earnest?

What we do know is he was unbelieving.

Today we are going to examine the king’s response and contemplate these two questions which form our title:

How Many Words? How Much Time?

For most of us, the question of faith in Christ is already decided. The direct application of the message will miss us.

Yet I wonder about some of our cherished opinions, rooted in authorities other than the Bible. When the Bible touches on these opinions, how ready are you to dismiss your opinions and embrace God’s revelation in the Bible?

- How many words will it take to persuade you?
- How much time will it take to absorb God’s truth and accept it as your own?

The questions uncover the pride of unbelief that exalts our own views over God's holy word. This is true of all men: believer and unbeliever alike.

Today, however, my focus is more on the unbeliever than the believer. If you are not a believer, why not? What holds you back?

If you can identify the "hold back," you might overcome the unbelief.

Proposition: The "almost" believer has some reason for holding himself aloof from Christ.

I. The pressing question (27)

A. A reminder: Acts 26 is a summary, not a manuscript

1. Festus referred to Paul's great learning
2. The speech as we have it contains
 - a. Introductory remarks (1-8)
 - b. Paul's testimony of conversion (9-18)
 - c. Paul's version of his arrest (19-23)
3. In these remarks, Paul referred to "the prophets and Moses" (22) and "the promise made by God to our fathers" (6)
 - a. Our record of the speech includes no direct references to the Scriptures
 - b. Yet Festus speaks of Paul's "great learning" (24)
 - c. And Paul appeals to "the Prophets" (27)

On v. 24, Constable notes: "Paul's knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures impressed Festus, added confirmation that Paul probably said more than Luke chose to record here."¹

- d. No doubt, Paul rehearsed several proofs from the prophets in his message

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ac 26.24.

B. The pressing question: “Do you believe the prophets?”

1. Any question that gets to the heart of an issue creates strong psychological pressure
 - a. Definition: “A **pressing** problem, need, or issue has to be dealt with immediately.”²
 - b. The environmentalist movement raises “climate change” as perhaps its most pressing question
 - c. First part of the 19th c. in America: “What to do about slavery?” (they fought a war over it with between 650,000 to 850,000 dead³)
2. Biblical attempts at pressing questions
 - a. Should we pay taxes to Caesar? (Mt 22.17, et al)
 - b. After Jesus cleansed the temple, “By what authority do you do these things?” (Mt 21.23, et al)
 - c. Jesus responded, “was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” (Mt 21.25, et al)
3. Why was Paul’s question pressing? Do you believe the prophets?
 - a. Paul showed how the prophets spoke of a resurrected Christ (we assume, see our message on “Christ and the Prophets”)
 - b. Herod was knowledgeable of the prophets himself
 - c. A positive response here would force Herod into a public profession of Christianity
 - 1) He would have to side with the Christians over the ruling Jews
 - 2) He would have to agree that the charges holding Paul were frivolous (perhaps putting him at political risk)

² “Pressing Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary,” accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/pressing>.

³ Bob Zeller, “How Many Died in the American Civil War?,” HISTORY, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.history.com/news/american-civil-war-deaths>.

- 3) He would lose esteem amongst his noble companions at the hearing
- 4) His whole life would have to change

This is the crux of the issue when so many hear the gospel message: saying “Yes” to Jesus means saying “No” to the way I like to live.

II. The side-stepping response (28)

A. Herod’s response is a non-answer

1. He doesn’t say yes, and he doesn’t say no
2. KJV translates, “almost” as noted earlier
3. Literal rendering: “In a little thou dost persuade me to become a Christian!” YLT
 - a. “In a little” what?
 - b. Some suggest, as NAU does, “in a short time”
 - c. Alternative, “with a few words”
4. The pressure is on!

“Agrippa was brought in to hear Paul’s defense, and now ends up defending himself. The questioner is now being questioned.”⁴

5. Herod’s tone: “The reply falls somewhere between earnestness and irony, rather than being sarcastic. Agrippa recognizes what Paul is trying to do (Weiser 1985: 655).”⁵

B. Herod’s question raises the question:

How Many Words? How Much Time?

1. Someone may have an interest in Christianity, sit in Bible study after Bible study, sermon after sermon

⁴ *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Foundation, 2004), www.netbible.org in loc.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 723.

How Many Words? How Much Time?

2. Some will linger long over the questions: not wanting to commit, not wanting to deny

ILLUSTRATION: People of Northern kingdom, following Baal, but pressed by Elijah:

¹ Ki 18.21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long *will* you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

- They saw the evidence for God that Elijah presented (fire from heaven)
- They feared the king, they feared the priests of Baal, they liked the Baal worship (sensual elements)

They hesitated...

3. I am convinced that the reason some hesitate is that the gospel will demand they give something up that is dear to them
- a. Sometimes they are wrong, their perception is wrong
 - b. Much more often they are right, and they love their sin more than they love the Saviour
 - 1) They don't see they are in bondage to the sin
 - 2) They don't see the freedom Christ will give
 - c. Or they may feel that they have no power to give up that thing in their life: "I just can't do it"

The thing is, they must just trust the Lord, not trust their ability to "give up that one thing"

4. If you are not a believer in Jesus

What is the issue with you? Do you really need more time?
Do you really need more words?

III. The earnest wish (29)

A. Paul expressed the desire that all who heard him would “become such as I am”

1. Paul makes this a prayer to heaven “I would wish to God”
2. Paul doesn’t take Agrippa’s response as a refusal

“Paul failed to be daunted for a minute by the king’s reply. He left the invitation open. Playing on Agrippa’s words, he indicated that the timing of the decision made little difference to him, whether long or short. His real prayer was that not just Agrippa but everyone in the audience room would become a Christian believer.”⁶

B. Christians are burdened for the souls of other men

1. We risk their displeasure to tell them of Jesus
2. We pray for them, labor with them, encourage them to look into the gospel
3. We would wish to God they would believe

For Herod Agrippa, the die was cast — look at v. 30

Ac 26.30 ¶ The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them,

That was his final answer. He stood up. The interview was over.

He lived, history tells us, into his 90s. We have no record of his conversion.

Conclusion:

How Many Words? How Much Time?

What about you? How many sermons do you need to hear before you will believe?

⁶ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 509.

Remember the proposition:

Proposition: The “almost” believer has some reason for holding himself aloof from Christ.

Are you holding something back?