

TWO PROBLEMS IN TRUSTING EXPERIENCE OVER THE GOSPEL

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In concluding this study¹ on the issue of experience and the Gospel, I have saved for last what I believe is the greatest issue or problem. As I have tried to convey, there are many Christians who treat their experience as proof of the truth, or even the truth itself. This makes their experience as equal or nearly as equal in authority as Scripture itself. My great concern is that there is a danger in trusting our experience over the truth and promises of the Gospel. This danger can be a double-edged sword of error.

False Sense of Righteousness Through Our Experience

The first edge of the sword is that, by experience, *we may wrongly observe and conclude that we are right with God on a basis which Scripture does not allow.* Experience can work against the Gospel by telling us that we are not righteous through Christ alone but are right with God because we “feel” right. Our hearts may be warmed or flooded with pious emotions which we conclude to be signs of acceptance. It might be said that I know God will look on my heart and he will know that I love him. We can believe we are right with God based on that experience. Is this a proper basis for our assurance? The Mormons are assured of their faith in the Book of Mormon because they experience a “burning” in their hearts when they read it. The question to be asked is how can we tell the difference between the burning-heart and heart-burn? The honest answer is, we cannot, outside of the authority and truth of Scripture.

Our experience may tell us that we are blessed, that the miraculous is happening in our lives, that we are operating the gifts of the Spirit, that we have received a direct “word” from the Lord, or that we feel an elevated sense of self-worth and well-being. Recovered cult members have later expressed that at the time the group performed some bizarre act (such as suicide) that it felt right at the time. Examples of this can be

¹This article is part of a larger paper called *Truth and Experience*. Since this paper for my definitions of “experience” and “truth.”

multiplied, many on a less extreme scale. Remarkably these same things are experienced by the false prophets in the Scripture, a host of non-Christian religions, as well as the modern New Age gurus. If their experiences are the test of righteousness, then we must accept their claims to be righteous without Christ, or in some cases, without God. Obviously, this would be unbiblical and clash with the Christian faith.

Experience Can Misled us About Self-righteousness

We can be led by experience to think we are actually “doing it.” By this I mean that we are keeping all the godly principles of Scripture, or the rules of Christianity, or the house-rules of a particular denomination or local church. Since we determine by our experience, or the experience of those around us, that we are “doing” righteousness, we can be deceived to think we are righteous through rule or law keeping, when Scripture clearly states we cannot. Misled by our personal experience of “personal holiness” we can begin to trust in our performance as our righteousness. All this despite the fact that Romans states, “There is none righteous, not even one;” (Romans 3:11 NIV)

In Romans 3:23 Paul writes, “all have sinned and fall short.” Paul says “all have sinned,” (aorist, active, indicative) meaning something that has happened in the past. We have all sinned prior to salvation or justification. But, does this mean, because “sinned” is past tense that we now can be expected to live sinless lives *since* we are justified? No. Paul also says, “and come short of the glory of God.” This “come short” (present, passive, indicative) means something that is present and ongoing in the Christian life. We continue to “fall short,” that is, miss the mark – which is the very nature of sin.

There are Christians who believe in sinless perfection after conversion. I believe they ignore very plain passage of Scripture in teaching that. 1 John 2:1 states, “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:” (KJV) Even though we have received the Spirit by faith in Christ and given a new nature, we still have the remnants

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of fallenness in our very nature which have been passed down to us from our father Adam. Paul calls this fallenness the *sarx* or “flesh.” “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” (Romans 7:18 ESV)

Sinlessness in biblical terms means to love God and every human being in every conscious moment with out whole heart, mind, will and strength, *i.e.* complete identity of character with Jesus Christ. In these biblical terms, sinless perfection is obviously impossible; in fact, those who have conformed most clearly to Christ in their character exhibit a common sense of personal unworthiness and weakness (Is. 6:5f; Dn. 9:4-19; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15).²

I am not saying this to give license to Christian to live a sinful life. We are called to be sanctified or Christ-like. We must adorn the Gospel by the way we live. What I am saying is that the expectation that one will live a sinless Christian life is not what is taught in Scripture.³ This form of perfection is not promised to the believer until the Return of Christ. What is taught is the calling of believers to Christ-likeness borne out of faith in Christ alone. At their best, believers struggle against the remaining fallenness in their nature, as they live out the Christian life. This is exactly what Paul taught the Romans in chapter seven. Sadly, too many Christians do not understanding what Paul is saying in Romans seven. Therefore some, believing they are sinless, become self-righteous, or try to be perfect, and fail, even to the point of disillusionment. This is because they have misunderstood a fundamental teaching of Scripture as found in Romans 3:23 and Romans seven.

Yet, while we continue to “fall short” we are at the same time “justified freely by his grace.” We are justified while we are yet weak, frail and failing as to complete

²Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 197.

³cp. H. A. Ironside, *Holiness: the False and the True*, (New York, N.Y.: Loizeaux Brothers. Link to: <http://www.inchistalone.org/IronsideHoliness.htm>

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personal righteousness relative to God's demands under the Old Covenant. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6 NIV) We are justified while we are powerless to keep the law. This powerless is the result of our remaining fallenness.

The Gospel tells us that God's love supersedes our powerlessness. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 NIV) As Michael Horton exclaims: "That's amazing grace!"⁴ It is the Good News of Jesus to know that we are right with God through Christ even though we struggle against our personal fallenness.

Here is the main problem of trusting in your experience to tell you that you are righteous: The Bible says we aren't. If there is anything our experience should teach us, it is that we are hopelessly lost without God's mercy. But, human experience can be deceiving, convincing us of things the Bible does not say. We can only know we are righteous by faith in Christ and his blood shed for us. Romans 3:28 states: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law." (NAS) The King James Version has "without the deeds of the law." The Greek word behind "apart" or "without" is *choris* (χωρίς) which can be translated,⁵ "without, apart from, without relation to." Paul doesn't say we are justified by faith *with* the law, or *after* we have kept all the law we can. Paul separates our works from our salvation. Therefore, to look to our personal works or holiness, and trust our experience that we are "doing it" or performing "what it takes," is a serious mistake. The Bible states that we cannot fully keep the law because of the reality of our fallen nature. That is why we need to trust in Christ in order for God to justify us:

⁴Michael Horton, "Good News for Law-Breakers," 1996, audio tape, The Law & Gospel series, CURE conference.

⁵When used with the genitive (as in this verse).

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For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3,4 NAS)

The Gospel Does Not Make Sense to Our Experience

The second major reason we cannot place our experience over or equal to the Gospel is this. Experience can fly in the face of the meaning of the Gospel. I mean, *the real meaning of the Gospel does not make sense to our personal experience*. The truth of the Gospel consists of God justifying the wicked. He does this through Christ who: 1) takes on himself the judgement of God intended for our sins; 2) counts Christ's righteousness to us through the same work of the Cross. Yet, our personal experience tells us we are not righteous. We find through experience that we still covet, we still hate, we still have immoral desires, and most of all we still love ourselves more than others and God. Paul wrestled with this in Romans chapter seven. His experience told him he was a sinner:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:15-17 ESV)

He concluded that this spiritual tension made him a "wretched man." But, his faith in Christ told him he was rescued from the "body of death". "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." (Romans 7:25 ESV) Some would interpret this passage as referring to Paul's experience while a Jew, before his justification. God's promise to us is that while we are yet sinners, Christ died for us.

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In this way, experience is against the Gospel, because while the Gospel tells us we are right with God through the imputed righteousness of Jesus which comes by faith in him, our experiences tell us we must do more or have more in order to be truly righteous in ourselves. This is in direct opposition to what Paul teaches. “However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” When Paul says, “who does not work,” he means, does not observe or keep the law. As opposed to the one who keeps the law, and is “paid” for it out of obligation, the one who trusts in God is justified, that is, “his faith is credited (“counted - KJV; “reckoned NAS, NRS) as righteousness.”

God Justifies the Wicked

Who does God justify? He justifies the wicked who trust in Him. Paul does not say that God justifies the *good*, or those who *try hard*, or those who *mean well*, or who set out to *obey as best they could*, or even those who are *improving*.⁶ God justifies the wicked! This is the message of all of Scripture. Let me point out a few.

The throngs of Israel sang, “Saul, Saul, has slain his thousands, but David, David, his tens of thousands.” He was the sweet singer of Israel, the giant slayer, and the greatest leader his people had known. Nevertheless, it was not this David whom God justified. It was the David, who, after committing adultery and killing Uriah, prayed, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to great compassion blot out my transgressions.” As Romans 4:6-8, it was this David “to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. . .” God justifies the wicked!

Justification was not for the Pharisee who prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” Rather, Jesus taught that it was for the Publican, a tax collector, who prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This is the one

⁶Horton, Ibid.

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who God justified: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God." (Luke 18:11-14 NIV) This story flies in the face of our personal experience. *Still, God justifies the wicked!*

In the house of Simon the Pharisees gathered to have dinner with Jesus. Disrupting the religious confab, a harlot burst in and fell on Jesus feet. She wet his feet with her tears and then wiped them away with her hair. Then she poured expensive perfume on him. The Pharisees were embarrassed. They questioned Jesus' discernment and holiness: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner." They said she was wicked. Oh, but Jesus knew much more than they gave him credit. There was something they did not know. He came to justify the wicked. He said,

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." "A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. "When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." And turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. "You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. "You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." And those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:40-50 NAS)

Jesus had something to say to *both* Simon and the harlot. First, he challenged their rejection of the woman as a sinner by using a story. Through the story, he told

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Simon that he was a sinner or “debtor” just like the woman. However, she came to Jesus with love, faith and worship. On the other hand Simon and the others were scandalized by his mercy. They did not see themselves as sinners *like her*. Because of that, they did not know the great debt from which *Jesus could deliver them*. Their expression of love was limited by their ignorance of both.

She trusted Jesus, they did not. Therefore, Jesus announced, “Your sins have been forgiven.” This is justification. Some would make a difference between forgiveness and justification. But there is none. One cannot be forgiven and not at the same time be justified. Forgiveness has become a weakened word among Christians today. Too many think of it as God forgetting and letting “bye gones be bye gones.” But it is much more expensive than that. All forgiveness that God gives cost Jesus all His precious blood. All who are forgiven receive remission through the shed blood of Christ alone, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. (Hebrews 9:22, 1 John 2:2) We cannot do a thing to remit sin. Jesus did that by his death on the Cross. We can only receive it graciously by trusting in what Jesus has done. Those who come to Christ, and trust in Him are forgiven.

Sadly, the religious leaders in Simon’s house were not justified. Instead, they rejected the truth that God justifies the wicked. To them it was immoral, irrational, and unfair. They said among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” According to the law, only God could forgive or remit sin, and that was according to a rigorous application of the sacrificial system. But Jesus looked to that wicked and broken woman and said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” The message of Good News that Jesus gave to them did not fit their experience. *Nevertheless, God justifies the wicked!*

I believe that Ruth Graham Bell said it well in these words taken from her journal entitled *It’s My Turn*:

I am a weak, lazy, indifferent character; casual when I should be concerned, concerned when I should be carefree; self-indulgent,

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hypocritical, begging God to help me when I am hardly willing to lift a finger for myself; quarrelsome where I should be silent, silent where I should be outspoken; vacillating, easily distracted and sidetracked.

“Thou knowest how soon my mind
from Heavenly things to earthly
is drawn aside.

How oft I fail and fall.”

I have found tremendous comfort in this old hymn:

“Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded,
Sick and sore;

Jesus, waiting, stands to help you,
Full of mercy, love and power

Let not conscience bid you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;

All the fitness he requireth

Is to feel your need of Him.” (Joseph Hart)

“What would I do,” wrote Chalmers, “if God did not justify the ungodly?”
And “What would I do,” said Thomas Boston of Scotland, “but for the imputed righteousness?” There it is. All that I am not, He is; all that I am and should not be, He forgives and covers (pp. 104-105).⁷

Justification is the Wisdom of God

Michael Horton asks a question that was probably in the minds of Simon’s friends: “But isn’t that *immoral*.” In other words, isn’t it unrighteous for God to consider the wicked believer righteous when she is not actually righteous in herself? The great truth that many Jews missed is that God’s highest righteousness is revealed by his grace for the sinner. That is what Paul means when he says, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.” (Romans 1:17 NAS). And again in Romans 3:21 “But now apart from

⁷Excerpted from Ray Pritchard, “Sola Fide: By Faith Alone,” Series: The Four “Solas,” © 1997, Delivered on July 13, 1997 to Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, Illinois. Online: available at <http://www.cmcop.org/sermons/071397.HTM>. Accessed: July 18, 2002.

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the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, (Romans 3:21 NAS). God considers it ethical and more to rescue hopeless souls who are trapped in evil and wickedness and deliver them through the mercy and righteousness of Jesus. It may seem unethical to our experience, yet *God justifies the wicked*.

But isn't God's justifying of the wicked *irrational*? This is the very attack on the Gospel that the Jews and Greeks in Corinth were making on Paul's gospel:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:21-25 NAS)

The truth that God justifies the wicked because they trust in what Christ did for them on the Cross, is considered foolish to the human mind. "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness' and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.'" (1 Cor. 3:19-20 NIV) But the fact that God justifies the wicked is actually the wisdom of God. Paul told the Corinthians that he determined to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified. This preaching of the Cross, was called foolishness by some who heard it. But, to his critics Paul exclaimed, "We are fools for Christ's sake." (1 Cor. 4:10 NAS) It may seem foolish to our experience, but *God still justifies the wicked*.

Justification is the Righteousness of God

But isn't God's justifying of the wicked *unjust* or *unfair*? Ironically, Paul tells us that God's justification of the wicked or ungodly is the epitome of justice. "He did it to

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demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:26 NIV). How can God declare righteous those who are unrighteous and are in fact “wicked”? “This seems like a contradiction to the human mind. How can God say something about us that us untrue?”⁸ Paul’s response to human questioning of God’s mercy in justification is: “Let God be true, and every man a liar.” (Romans 3:4 NIV). If God determines to declare the believer just on the basis of Christ’s Cross, then who are we to question God? “Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” (Romans 9:14 NIV)

*The problem with trusting our experience over the Gospel is that, “Your experience tells you that justification cannot possibly be true.”⁹ The greatest criticism against Paul’s teaching on justification is made by the Roman Catholic Church and a number of Protestants infected with perfectionism. They reject the truth that God can credit the righteousness of Christ to the believer. They do not accept that a person can be *counted* righteous by God because of Jesus imputed righteousness. To them it is a farce, unless the person is literally righteous in themselves. In their definition justification is the same thing as moral transformation. They say that unless we are changed, or made righteous inside, we are not justified. What they refer to is the doctrine of sanctification. But these churches confuse sanctification with justification, and thereby teach people to look at themselves, using their experience, to find assurance of their justification.*

Such people have always insisted that God cannot declare us righteous until we actually become righteous. He cannot say something about us that isn’t true in actual practice.¹⁰

⁸Horton, Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

We Live by Faith, Not by Experience

But are we right with God, are we saved, by what actually happens within us? Or are we saved by what happened outside of us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior? The Bible teaches it is the later. Tragically, too many Christians are taught to look inward, inside themselves for their assurance of salvation: How much of God's Spirit is in me?, How holy am I am?, or How great is my Christian "testimony"? The problem then becomes a struggle between trusting our experience or trusting in God's Word. Our experience may tell us one thing, but God's Word may tell us another. Paul concludes: "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." (Romans 9:16 NIV) The answer to the dilemma is this, we don't trust in our experience. We trust in God's promise. The Christian is called to a life of faith. We are called to live by God's promise, and not by our sight or experience – "for we walk by faith, not by sight—" 2 Corinthians 5:7 NAS).

Recently, while teaching a personal Bible study, a person asked, "Have you read anything by the guy who claims he saw Jesus several times?" I asked him for this preacher's name. When he told me, I recognized him as a prominent "word of faith" preacher. I told my friend that:

Jesus therefore said, "For a little while longer I am with you, then I go to Him who sent Me. "You shall seek Me, and shall not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come." (John :33-34 NAS)

While some say that this only refers to Jesus' resurrection, many scholars hold that the "little while" sayings of Jesus point to both the resurrection and his Second Coming. Jesus would go away, dying on the Cross, and return. But then, he would go away again in his Ascension and his disciples would not see him again until he returns the second time. Jesus said, "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2-3 NAS) Therefore, those who are preoccupied with "seeing" Jesus now do not understand the counsel Jesus gave. We live in the time when

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Jesus is “gone away” and we cannot go to him or even see him. But, the time will come when, “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.” (1 John 3:2 NAS) Until then we live and walk by faith (Heb 12:1) in Jesus and his Word, and not by sight.

The Apostle Paul and later the Reformers placed such a strong emphasis on faith alone because they saw the mistake of trying to find assurance in anything but the finished work of Jesus Christ. That is why the writer of Hebrews states, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” (Hebrews 12:1). It is by faith alone in the promises of God in Jesus that we know God is our Savior.

For what does the Scripture say? "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, faith is reckoned as righteousness, (Romans 4:3-5 NAS)

God knows about the problem or struggle between trusting our experience and trusting His Word. That is why He saves us through faith alone. “For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, . . . (Romans 4:16 NAS) This way we cannot trust in anything other than Jesus. Our own inner spirituality and holiness, our personal righteousness, our feelings of spiritual well-being, et. al., are all inadequate and unnecessary for our assurance. By faith in God’s Word we can be assured that Jesus did all that was and is necessary to make us right with God, and lead us into eternal life.

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24, 25 KJV)