

A Discourse on the Experimental Knowledge of Christ

Thomas Boston

c. 1712-1715

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Outline

Intro	4
I. What an Experimental Knowledge of Christ Is	6
1. Christ is the way to the Father.	
2. Christ's blood purges the conscience to serve the living God.	
3. Christ is fully satisfying to the soul.	
4. Christ helps his people to bear afflictions and He lifts up their heads.	
5. Christ is made unto us wisdom.	
6. Christ is made unto us sanctification.	
II. Experimental Knowledge of Christ is the Sum of Practical Religion	9
1. Scripture testimonies	
2. All true religion is conformity to God, by virtue of divine influences.	
3. What religion a man seems to have, is not of the right sort.	
(1) Faith closing with Christ believes as He is held out in the gospel.	
(2) Faith closes with Christ that the soul may so know Him.	
(3) Faith unites the soul to Christ, resulting in this knowledge.	
III. Application	11
Reasons to Labor to be Experimental Christians	11
1. Religion is not mere speculation, but a matter of practice.	
2. Religion's sweetness lies in the experience of it.	
3. All religion's profit to ourselves lies in the experience of it.	
4. The experimental Christian will alone go to Heaven.	
5. It is absolutely necessary to hold right in an evil time.	
(1) The experimental Christian is fitted to suffer for Christ, having testimony within himself.	
(2) When wickedness prospers, experimental religion keeps from being led	

away.

(3) Amidst church-contentions, the righteous shall hold his way.

Experimental Religion is Rare in our Day

13

1. Little relish is had of the Word.
2. There is little knowledge of the Word by experience.
3. There is little precise walking.
4. Little advantage is had by professors' conferences.
5. General security prevails among all ranks.

Causes of the Scarcity of Experimental Religion

15

1. The Lord has a controversy with our mother Church.
2. People are dulled with the luscious sweets of the present world.
3. Religion is not made people's business.
4. People not holding any attainment they make in religion.
5. People's formality in religion and outward worship.

How to Become an Experimental Christian

16

1. Labor to be Christians indeed and sincerely close with Christ.
2. Receive the Word's truths by faith.
3. Be diligent observers of your own heart and life.
4. Be careful observers of providence.
5. Conclude that religion lies inwardly.

Reasons to Stir Up Experimental Religion

18

1. Experimental religion is a sort of Heaven on earth.
2. None capable of that enjoyment on earth first taste it in Heaven.
3. The Bible's counterpart is in the experimental Christian's breast, though imperfect.

4. The experimental Christian is fit to sail to Heaven whatever wind be blowing:
 - (1) When proud contemners of God seem most happy.
 - (2) When error's night overtakes a church.
 - (3) When divisions enter a church.
 - (4) When great men are falling.
 - (5) When personal persecution comes.

How to Attain Experimental Religion

21

1. Fix your eyes on the particular evils of your heart and life.
2. Continue at the work, for victory is not got but by degrees.
3. Take notice what progress you are making.
4. Look after the profit of duties.
5. Converse with experimental Christians about experimental religion.
6. Be very direct as to the point of sin and duty.
7. Acknowledge God more in your temporal concerns.
8. Have a precise respect to all God's commands.

A Discourse on the Experimental Knowledge of Christ¹

“That I may know Him.”

Phil. 3:10

A mere speculative knowledge of Christ and of the great doctrines of the gospel,² however laboriously acquired and extensive it may be, is of small importance in itself, and quite vain and ineffectual if it be not sanctified and issue in experimental knowledge of Christ, and a real feeling of the beauty and excellency and efficacy of divine truth on the heart. A man may have a competent, nay, a very extensive acquaintance with the whole doctrines of the Christian religion, as laid down in the Scriptures, and of which we have an excellent compend in the [Westminster] Shorter Catechism, which I have been endeavoring to explain to you for a series of years;³ yet if you have not the experimental

¹ [Thomas Boston](#) (1676–1732) was a minister in the Church of Scotland, known for his work, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. This sermon may be found in *The Whole Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Mr. Thomas Boston, Minister of the Gospel at Etterick*, vol. 2, ed. Samuel M’Millan (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1848), 645–59. It may have been preached while Boston was in Ettrick between 1711 and 1713, though this is not entirely clear (see the footnote three also): “For my ordinary [preaching], I dwelt on the solemn call to faith, and Gospel obedience, Mt. 11:28–30, from January 14, this year, till August 26. And then to commend Christ to the souls of the people, I did, on September 2, enter upon Phil. 3 and went through the first twelve verses thereof in order, which continued, I think, till May, 1713.” *Memoirs of the Life, Times, and Writings of Thomas Boston*, new ed. (Glasgow: M’Neilage, 1899), 241. This sermon has been made easier to read with updated English, punctuating, formatting and minimal stylistic changes. Text in [brackets] and all footnotes are the editor’s.

² Mt. 7:21–23, 26–27; 13:20–21; 25:11–12; Mk. 12:32–34; Lk. 12:25–27; Jn. 2:23–25; Jm. 2:19

³ This sermon was the conclusion of Boston’s series of sermons through the Shorter Catechism, published as *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, which makes up the first two volumes of his *Works*. Boston apparently preached the sermons of this work between 1709 and 1715, though not in continuous succession. *Memoirs*, 217, 261. A biographer writes: “His earliest posthumous work... was his Exposition of the well-known Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly of divines... It was edited by Mr. Boston’s eldest son, who was minister of Oxnam, and afterwards of Jedburgh; and the editorial work was done with rare delight and filial devotedness and reverence. It was a large and solid book of two volumes. It consisted of a series of sermons, in which usually a separate exposition was given to each

knowledge of Christ, all your knowledge is in vain as to the salvation of your souls. I therefore come, as a conclusion of the whole, to press this experimental knowledge upon you, as [that is] what alone will be available for any saving purposes.

In the preceding verse, the apostle speaks of the gain he received in Christianity in point of justification, flowing from the soul's closing with Christ and renouncing all other[s]; and here he speaks of that gain in point of sanctification. And first, more generally, "That I may know Him." Might not the Philippians hereupon have said, "And do not you know Christ, who have preached Him so long?" There are two ways of knowing: one by hearing of a thing, another by sight and feeling;⁴ one by the relation of another, another by experience: as one knows honey and all the virtues of it by report, which he believes; another testing it himself.⁵ The apostle knew Christ by faith when he first believed in Him; and here he would have the spiritual feeling and experience of Him, finding by experience Him to be what he has heard and believed Him to be. He had something of this, but he would still have more.

The doctrine arising from the text is, "The experimental knowledge of Christ is the sum of practical religion," (1 Cor. 2:2) "flowing from faith, to be studied by all." In handling this point, I shall, I. Show what this experimental knowledge is, II. confirm the point, III. make application.

question and answer, thus ranging over the whole field of popular theology... It is not too much to say that the thoughtful reading of Mr. Boston's Exposition would be sufficient of itself to make a man a good theologian." Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston of Ettrick: His Life and Times* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson and Sons, 1895), 255–56.

⁴ 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 2:4

⁵ Ps. 34:8; Prov. 24:13

What an Experimental Knowledge of Christ Is

I. I am to show what this experimental knowledge of Christ is. It is an inward and spiritual feeling of what we hear and believe concerning Christ and his truths, whereby answerable impressions are made on our souls (Ps. 34:8),⁶ like that of the Samaritans when they said unto the woman, “Now, we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” (Jn. 4:42) There is a savory⁷ report of Christ spread in the gospel: faith believes it and embraces Him for what the Word gives Him out to be, and then the believing soul does come and see. There is a glorious scheme of the lovely perfections of Christ drawn in the Bible, and faith believes that He really is what He is said to be; and then that scheme begins to be drawn over again in the Christian’s experience, and this is always drawing more and more till he come to glory. It is just as if some eminent physician should give a friend remedies for all diseases he may be liable to; and when he leaves them with him, he lets him know that such a remedy is good for that distemper and another is good for such another, etc. Now, he knows them all, but he falls sick and he takes the remedy fit for his disease, and it proves effectual. Now the man knows the remedy by experience which he knew before by report only.⁸ Even so Christ is given as all in all to a believer, and he makes use of Christ for his case and that is the experimental knowledge of Him. I will illustrate these by some instances:

1. The Scripture says of Christ, He is the way to the Father (Jn. 14:6). Now, the man that has tried many ways of attaining access to God and communion with Him, and

⁶ This is akin to how the later, early and influential presbyterian minister and professor in America, [Archibald Alexander](#) (1772–1851), would define true religious experience: “There are two kinds of religious knowledge, which, though intimately connected as cause and effect, may nevertheless be distinguished. These are [1] the knowledge of the truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and [2] the impression which that truth makes on the human mind when rightly apprehended. The first may be compared to the inscription or image on a seal; the other to the impression made by the seal on the wax. When that impression is clearly and distinctly made, we can understand, by contemplating it, the true inscription on the seal more satisfactorily, than by a direct view of the seal itself. Thus it is found that nothing tends more to confirm and elucidate the truths contained in the word, than an inward experience of their efficacy on the heart... If genuine religious experience is nothing but the impression of divine truth on the mind, by the energy of the Holy Spirit, then it is evident that a knowledge of the truth is essential to genuine piety...” Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 5, 8.

⁷ 2 Cor. 2:14–17

⁸ 2 Kings 5:3–4, 10–15

is denied access and can find no way to come to God, at length comes by Jesus Christ, renouncing all things else, leans only on his merit and intercession and he finds an open door of access to God and communion with Him. The flaming sword he finds removed and Him who was still before a consuming fire, he finds now a warming sun to his soul. Here is experimental knowledge of Christ. Hence the apostle says, Rom. 5:1-2, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

2. Christ's blood "purgeth the conscience from dead works to serve the living God," (Heb. 9:14). Now, the experimental Christian knows from experience that unremoved and unrepented of guilt defiles the conscience, leaves a sting in it and unfits him to serve the Lord as much as a man in filthy rags is unfit to stand before a king. It breeds in the heart an unwillingness to come before God and mars his confidence; he tries to repent, overlooking the blood of Christ, but it will not do. He looks to an absolute God, and his heart is indeed terrified, but nothing softened. At length he looks to God in Christ, throws the burden of his guilt and dips his soul in the sea of Christ's blood; and then the heart melts for sin, the sting is taken out of the conscience, the soul is willing to converse with God and is enabled to serve Him, as a son does a father.

3. Christ is fully satisfying to the soul (Ps. 73:25; Hab. 3:17-18). We all know this by report, but the Christian experimentally knows it by a spiritual sensation in the innermost parts of his soul. Sometimes, when all his enjoyments have been standing entire about him, he has looked with a holy contempt on them all, saying in his heart, "These are not my portion." His heart has been loosed from them and he has been made willing to part with them all for Christ, in whom his soul rejoiced and in whom alone he was satisfied. Sometimes, again, all outward things have been going wrong with him, yet he could comfort, encourage and satisfy himself in Christ, as David did in a great strait (1 Sam. 30:6). He has gone away to his God and his Christ, and with Hannah returned with "a countenance no more sad," (1 Sam. 1:18).

4. Christ helps his people to bear afflictions and keeps them from sinking under them; and He lifts up their heads when they go through these waters (Isa. 43:2). Now, the Christian meets with affliction and he takes a good lift of his own burden, for it is the thing he thinks he may well bear. But his burden is too heavy for him. He wrestles with

it, but the more he wrestles, it grows the heavier and he sinks the more. At length he goes to Christ, saying, "Lord, I thought to have borne this burden, but I am not able; I will sink under it if I get not help." "Master, save us, for we perish." [Mt. 8:25] And so he lays it over on the great Burden-bearer and he is helped (Ps. 28:7). Now, the man, when he thought he could do all, could do nothing; and when he thinks he can do nothing, he can do all (2 Cor. 8:9-10).

5. Christ is made unto us 'wisdom,' (1 Cor. 1:30). The experimental Christian finds that when he leans to his own understanding,⁹ he mistakes his way at mid-day; and all that he reaps of it is that in the end he has himself to call 'beast' and 'fool' for his error. But when he comes into difficulties that he sees he knows not how to extricate himself out of, and is wary and lays out his case before the Lord, and gives himself up as a blind man to be led by the Lord, he finds he is conducted in the way he knew not; and the result is to bless the Lord who has given him counsel.¹⁰

6. Lastly, Christ is made unto us 'sanctification,' (1 Cor. 1:30). Now, the Christian falls secure, does not make use of Christ, and then ere ever he is aware, he is like Samson without his hair.¹¹ When he awakens, he sees his case is all gone to wrack [rubbish], the course of sanctifying influences is stopped and graces are lying in the dead thraw [throe] and lusts are strong and rampant. He falls a grappling with them, but is worsted still, until he come to himself and acknowledge his utter weakness to stand in this battle and renew the actings of faith in Christ; and then "out of weakness, he is made strong, waxes valiant in fight and turns to flight the armies of the aliens," (Heb. 11:34). He flings down the confidence in himself like the broken reed that has pierced his hand; and though the promise lie before him, like the rod turned into a serpent, which unbelief tells him he would be too bold to meddle with, he ventures and takes the serpent by the tail and it becomes the rod of God in his hand.¹² Let these suffice for examples of experimental religion.

⁹ Prov. 3:5

¹⁰ Ps. 16:7; 119:24

¹¹ Judges 16:9

¹² Ex. 4:2-4

The Experimental Knowledge of Christ is the Sum of Practical Religion

II. I proceed to confirm the point or to show that the experimental knowledge of Christ is the sum of practical religion. Consider: 1. The Scripture testimonies concerning this. To learn religion in the power of it and in all the parts of sanctification, is to learn Christ. Hence the apostle says, Eph. 4:20-24,

“But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off, concerning the former conversation, the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”

There needs no more to be known, for that comprehends all: 1 Cor. 2:2, “I determined not to know anything among you,” says Paul, “save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” It is ‘eternal life,’ (Jn. 17:3). It is a pledge of eternal life; it is eternal life begun. Yea, Christ is the sum and substance of a believer's life: Phil. 1:21, “To me to live is Christ.”

2. All true religion is the creature's conformity or likeness to God, made by virtue of divine influences, transforming the soul into the divine image.¹³ Now, there can be no conformity to God but through Jesus Christ; for He is the only channel of the conveyance of the divine influences, and God can have no communication with sinners but through Him. He alone makes us partakers of the divine nature (2 Cor. 4:6).¹⁴

3. Whatever religion or holiness a man seem[s] to have, and is maintained this way, that does not come, and is not of the right sort. It is but nature varnished over, for “he that honoureth not the Son, honoureth not the Father.” [Jn. 5:23] The soul's closing with Christ by faith opens the way to this experimental knowledge of Him; so that whosoever would know Christ thus, must in the first place so close with Him:

¹³ Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:24

¹⁴ 2 Pet. 1:4

(1) Faith closing with Christ believes He is such an one as He is held out in the gospel, gives credit to the report; and it is the want [lack] of this that mars this knowledge (Isa. 53:1).

(2) Faith closes with Christ to that very end, that the soul may so know Him. The soul stands in need of Christ in all that wherein He is held out as useful to a sinner, and faith takes Him for that.

(3) Faith unites the soul to Christ and so makes way for this knowledge, which is the happy result of this union.

III. Application

Reasons to Labor to be Experimental Christians

I come now to a word of improvement, which I shall discuss in an use [application] of exhortation. O Sirs! labor to be experimental Christians,¹⁵ to have the inward feeling of what you hear and say you believe concerning Christ. Why will ye stand in the outer court all your days? Come forward and dip into the heart of religion. Come in where the world's ungracious feet could never carry them. And be not satisfied with less of religion than what the beloved disciple, in the name of believers, says he felt, "Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ," (1 Jn. 1:3). This is a weighty and seasonable point. To enforce this exhortation, I offer the following motives:

1. Religion is not a matter of mere speculation to satisfy men's curiosity, but a matter of practice. Men's eternal state lies at the stake, which can never be brought to a comfortable issue by a speculative knowledge more than a man can be cured by the knowledge of a remedy without application of it. An unexperimental professor is like a foolish sick man, who entertains those about him with fine discourses of the nature of medicines, but in the meantime he is dying himself for want of application of them.

2. The sweet of religion lies in the experience of it: hence the Psalmist says, "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness," (Ps. 63:5). No man can have the idea of the sweetness of honey like him that tastes it, nor of religion like him that feels the power of it.¹⁶ One reads the Word, and it is tasteless to him; to another it is sweeter than the honey comb; why? because he feels the power of it on his spirit (Ps. 19:11). Religion would not be such a burden to us as it is, if we could by experience carry it beyond dry sapless notions: it would be a reward to itself,¹⁷ and so chain the heart to it.¹⁸

3. All the profit of religion to ourselves lies in the experience of it.¹⁹ What avails all the religion men have in their heads, while it never sinks into the heart (Mt. 7:22)?

¹⁵ Jn. 6:27

¹⁶ Rev. 3:20

¹⁷ Gen. 15:1; Prov. 11:18; 13:13

¹⁸ Song 8:6; Hos. 11:4; So the Greek word in Jn. 6:44 is 'drag'.

¹⁹ Ps. 16:6, 9; Prov. 3:17

Knowledge without experience will no more sanctify a man²⁰ than painted fire will burn, or the bare sight of water will wash. Ah! what avails that knowledge to a man, by which he is never a whit more holy, nor less a slave to his lusts? True, it may do good to others, as the profit of the carpenter's gift came to Noah while they themselves perished in the deluge. Light without heat serves only to show the way to hell where there is scorching heat without light. Gifts without grace²¹ are like a ship without ballast in a boisterous sea, that cannot miss to sink. And when such an one is sinking into Hell, his gifts will be like a bag of gold on a drowning man, precious in itself, but will only help to sink him the faster.

4. The experimental Christian is the only Christian whose religion will bring him to Heaven.²² Heaven in effect is but a perfect experimental knowledge of Christ, where the saints will forever feed upon that sweetness they have heard to be in Him.²³ And there is no attaining of Heaven unless men first begin on earth to know Christ thus.²⁴

5. Lastly, it is absolutely necessary to qualify a man to go on and hold right in an evil time. And surely, if ever there was need for it, there is need now:

(1) The experimental Christian is fitted thereby to suffer for Christ, because he has the testimony within himself that the way which the world persecutes is the way of God. No arguments give such a certainty of the truth of religion as experience does.²⁵

(2) When wickedness prospers and piety is oppressed, experimental religion keeps a man from being led away with the error of the wicked (Mal. 3:16).

(3) When many stumbling-blocks are laid in the way, especially in divisions and church-contentions, which make many wicked men think there is no reality in religion at all, yet the righteous in such a time shall hold on his way.²⁶

This is a very weighty point, and to illustrate it a little further I will: 1. Give evidence that experimental religion is very rare; 2. Point out some causes of it; 3. Show

²⁰ Josh. 24:19–20

²¹ Lk. 10:20

²² Heb. 12:14

²³ Rev. 21:23; 22:1–2

²⁴ Note the present tense in Jn. 5:24.

²⁵ Jn. 14:21; 2 Pet. 1:5–10

²⁶ Jn. 6:52, 60–61, 66–68

how it may be obtained; 4. Press you to seek after it by some considerations. First, I am to give evidences that experimental religion is very rare in our day:

Experimental Religion is Rare in our Day

1. The little relish that men have of the Word, either preached or read. Experience makes the Word savory;²⁷ hence David says, 'I rejoice at thy Word, as one that findeth great spoil,' Ps. 119:162. How many are there to whom the Word is tasteless as the white of an egg?²⁸ Their fancy may be tickled by the discovery of something which they knew not before;²⁹ but, alas! They have no inward sensation of the thing wrapped up in the words of truth.

2. The little knowledge of the Word by experience. The best commentary on the ills of the heart is the Word; and the best commentary on the Word is experience. These reflect light one upon another. The experimental Christian reads his heart in the Word; he gets it opened and anatomized there (Heb. 4:12-13). It is the looking-glass wherein he sees it. And he understands the Word by experience (Jn. 2:17 and 7:17). The doctrine of truth is according to godliness, and godliness, in the practice of it, makes truth shine the more into the soul.

3. The little precise and nice [with difficulty] walking there is among professors (Eph. 5:14). Christians should 'walk circumspectly,' and that is the native effect of experimental religion (Isa. 38:15). And the reason is plain: The experimental Christian finds how a wrong step will provoke the Spirit to depart,³⁰ and how communion with God cannot be kept up in a loose and irregular way (Ps. 66:18). He sees how small a thing exposes to the dint of the threatening; and that the way of getting the promise told out to him is the way of tender walking, which counts no sin little. But, alas! For that miserable

²⁷ Ps. 119:67-68

²⁸ Num. 11:6

²⁹ Acts 17:21

³⁰ 1 Sam. 15:2,9; 16:14

latitude that prevails in the walk of the generation, who take such a woeful liberty in their words and actions, as we may say with the prophet, Mic. 7:1-2,

“Woe is me, for I am as when they have gathered the summer-fruits, as the grape-gleanings of the vintage: there is no cluster to eat: my soul desired the first-ripe fruit. The good man is perished out of the earth and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood: they hunt every man his brother with a net.”

4. The little advantage religion has by the conferences of professors. People may go into many companies ere they get one from whence they may come forth with a heart more inflamed with love to God and Christ, and the practice of godliness, because they can meet with few like him who said, “Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He has done for my soul.” (Ps. 66:16). Alas! There is little of Heaven in the converse³¹ of Christians at this day; which says there is but little of it in their hearts. We have sat down on time’s things; and as for the matters of another world, we have little relish of them.³² A philosopher bade one speak that he might see him (Col. 3:16).³³

5. Lastly, the general security that prevails among all ranks, though we never saw the day wherein it was more unseasonable. Bid experimental religion prevail, we would be waiting on the Lord in the way of his judgments, as the church did (Isa. 26:8,20). God help us! Scotland’s stroke seems to be walking in the dark with feet of wool, that we will never hear the sound of till we feel its iron hands. It is very like some fearful surprise is abiding us. The dispensations of our day are in their own nature rousing dispensations; but we are not at all awakened by them more than we were when there was not a pin in our tabernacle loosed. There are different opinions and practices in these matters, but whose heads soever are right, we think the hearts of all parties are wrong. And among all our unhappy differences, we have a more unhappy agreement in a spirit of slumber that has seized all together. And what shall be the end of these things?

³¹ James 3:17

³² Col. 3:1-3

³³ The philosopher told the person to speak to reveal what is in him. So a Christian’s speaking ought to reveal Christ living in the Christian as Col. 3:16 speaks of the Word of Christ dwelling in us richly, and that especially as it comes forth in our speech.

Causes of the Scarcity of Experimental Religion

Secondly, I shall point out some of the causes of the scarcity of experimental religion: 1. The Lord has a controversy with our mother,³⁴ and therefore has withdrawn; and it fares the worse with the children. She was sometime Hephzibah [delightful, Isa. 64:2], and her land Beulah [married]; but now her gold is become dross and her wine mixed with water. She has forgotten her husband and has been gadding after other lovers. She has cast herself into a loathsome disease; her kindly heat and warmth is gone; anything of it that is left has struck out to the outward parts, leaving a key-cold heart within. And, by all appearance she will not be cured, till blood be let of her.

2. People's spiritual senses are dulled with the luscious sweets of a present world. Farms and merchandise take away people's appetites for the marriage-supper (Mt. 22:4-5). The devil makes birdlime³⁵ of the things of the world to catch professors, that they find, when they would get upward, their feet stick in the mire. Many of us, I trow [think], when our worldly incomes were less, our spiritual incomes were more. Or, if the world go against people, their spirits are so embittered that they find no sweetness at all in religion.

3. Religion is not made people's business, but just a by-hand work. Men are like the mole, whose abode is in the earth; and though sometimes it come above ground, it hastes in again to its hole, to be in its element.³⁶ They will say their prayers indeed, evening and morning, but for walking with God in the interval of duties, they know nothing about it. Their religion is over when duties are over. They are like a man that takes physic [medicine] indeed, but he just vomits it up again when he has got it, giving it no time to work (gen. 6:9). Religion's chance-customers will never grow rich by it.

4. People's not holding hand to any attainment they make in religion, like "the slothful man, not roasting that which he took in hunting," (Prov. 12:27). They are, it may be, at some pains to earn something in religion, but they put it in a bag with holes.³⁷ Sometimes they are in a fair way to gain experience of religion: they get some taste of it,

³⁴ Hos. 2:2

³⁵ A sticky substance spread on twigs to trap small birds.

³⁶ Isa. 2:19-21

³⁷ Jer. 2:13

but then they do not follow on (Hos. 6:3). The spark is kindled, but they let it go out:³⁸ they do not feed it and presently they have a cold coal to blow again.

5. Lastly, formality in religion, when people content themselves with outward worship,³⁹ doing the work but make it not their business to worship God in the spirit, by faith in Him, love, dependence, fear, hope, patience, etc. It is these and the like graces that bring in the experimental knowledge of Christ and religion into the soul. These are they that get forward to God, even to his throne. And duties without them are useless and vain, like liquor that has lost all the spirits.

How to Become an Experimental Christian

Thirdly, I come to show how we may become experimental Christians: 1. Let us labor to be Christians indeed⁴⁰ and lay the foundation well in a serious and sincere closing⁴¹ with Jesus Christ. That is to say, let us, under a conviction of the reality and necessity of religion give away and consecrate ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us forsake the world for Him and look on ourselves as men bound to another world under the conduct of the Captain of the Lord's hosts.⁴² And while we go through it with Him, let us resolve to go lightly along and not dip [sit down] (Cant. 4:8). Let us forsake sin for Him and leave these husks⁴³ to feed upon Himself, for the manna will not fall till the Egyptian provision be done. And men need not think that the dainties of Heaven will be brought to the table where the soul is biting at dust, which is the serpent's meat [food].⁴⁴ Labor to know them no more, not to seek your satisfaction from them, and you shall know Christ.

³⁸ Mt. 25:8

³⁹ Rom. 2:20; 2 Tim. 3:5

⁴⁰ Mt. 11:12

⁴¹ Making good in accepting the offer and closing the deal.

⁴² Heb. 2:10

⁴³ Lk. 15:16

⁴⁴ Gen. 3:14, that is, as the snake eats things in the dust on the ground, such as insects, rodents, etc.

2. Receive the truths of the Word by faith. If you would be experimental Christians, let the Word dwell in you richly⁴⁵ in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. Hear it and read it attentively,⁴⁶ and with application; meditate on it.⁴⁷ Let it be your constant companion and bosom-oracle to which you may always resort for direction, caution and encouragement.⁴⁸ And you will soon find that the commandment is a light and that by it you are warned,⁴⁹ and that the promises have a sweet accomplishment in the way of duty in the experience of the Christian. Labor to get the divine faith of the Word. O sirs! it is not easy to believe Scripture-truths (Lk. 24:25). Admit the conviction; look to the Lord for grace to believe and keep up the struggle with unbelief.

3. Be diligent observers of your own way, the way of your heart and life.⁵⁰ A man that lets his heart run at random and does not review what passes there, can never be an experimental Christian.⁵¹ But every serious review of the heart would give you a new experimental confirmation of Scripture-truths. There are two great depths that the experimental Christian wades much in, viz. the depths of wickedness in the heart,⁵² and the depth of perfection and fullness in Christ.⁵³ Be much in self-examination.⁵⁴

4. Be careful observers of providence: the providence of God towards the Church and towards yourselves in particular (Ps. 107 at the end). Providence is a river that brings down the rich ore of experiences, which are to be gathered by Christian observation.⁵⁵ The Bible is the Word that God preaches to the world and providence is the application of the doctrine. In the Bible, the Word is brought to our ears, and in providence it is set before our eyes, though most of us are blind as moles and see it not;⁵⁶ but the experimental Christian does see.

⁴⁵ Col. 3:16

⁴⁶ Ps. 78:1

⁴⁷ Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2

⁴⁸ Ps. 119:24, 50, 81, 104

⁴⁹ Ps. 19:8, 11

⁵⁰ Ps. 39:1; 119:4-6, 59

⁵¹ Prov. 4:23

⁵² Job 9:21; Jer. 17:9

⁵³ Eph. 3:18-19

⁵⁴ Ps. 26:2; Acts 24:16; 1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5

⁵⁵ Gen. 48:15; Ps. 90; Prov. 2:17; 3:6; Jer. 3:4; Hos. 11:3-4

⁵⁶ Isa. 42:19

5. Lay it down for a conclusion that religion is a thing that lies inwardly⁵⁷ and that it is quite another thing than a parcel of external performances; that it is a conforming of the soul to the image of Christ⁵⁸ by a close application to Him and a real participation of his Spirit and virtue of his blood. And therefore seek that, and seek it on till you find his truth comes not into your heart in Word only, but in power,⁵⁹ gradually killing sin and self and conforming you more to his image. And go not to duties as one that is only to hear or speak, but to feel or taste.⁶⁰ And when your hand is once in, that you begin to taste how gracious the Lord is, hold [your] hand to it, and you shall find his going forth prepared as the morning.⁶¹

Reasons to Stir Up Experimental Religion

Fourthly, I conclude with some considerations to stir you up to this exercise: 1. Experimental religion is a sort of Heaven on earth. Heaven is the eternal feeling of that goodness which is in God, the chief good. It is his eternal pouring out of his goodness into the souls of his people, making them drink of those rivers which they heard were at his right hand.⁶² Now, you may begin it here with tasting the Word of life.⁶³ That will make great delight, as the full enjoyment makes perfect joy there.

2. There are none who being capable of that enjoyment on earth, that get the first taste of it in Heaven. No, they all begin it here (Jn. 17:3). For God first gives men a taste of Christian experience and then they desire the full enjoyment of it,⁶⁴ and they get it in Heaven. And this is the reasonable way with the rational creature. Whosoever taste not here shall not drink above.

⁵⁷ Mt. 22:37; Jn. 18:36; Rom. 14:17

⁵⁸ Rom. 8:29

⁵⁹ 1 Thess. 1:5

⁶⁰ Ps. 34:8; 119:103; Isa. 25:6; 55:1–2; Song 1:1–2; 2:3; Lk. 14:24

⁶¹ Hos. 6:3

⁶² Ps. 16:11

⁶³ Phil. 2:16; 1 Jn. 1:1

⁶⁴ Ps. 119:33, 35, 40–41, 73, 76–77, 131

3. The experimental Christian has the counterpart of the Bible in his breast,⁶⁵ though imperfect. He has things old and new to bring out of his treasure⁶⁶ that answer to scripture doctrines and promises, as the copy to the original. The experimental Christian is a walking Bible. He has a body of divinity formed of experiences,⁶⁷ which is an excellent sort of learning, a thousand times preferable to all the raw unfelt notions of noisy professors that are like the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.⁶⁸

4. The experimental Christian is fit to sail to Heaven whatever wind be blowing, for he has both sail and ballast. He has experienced of the goodness and faithfulness of God and of the sanctifying power of truth; that is sail that will carry him through in all storms. And he has experience of the corruption of his own nature, the deceit of his own heart and of his pitiful weakness; and that will be ballast to him. For want [lack] of these in time of trial, few get through:

(1) It is very hard, without experience of religion, to stand in a time when the proud contemners of God seem to be most happy: when the sun shines bright on the way of wickedness and apostasy from God, and nothing but clouds and darkness appear in the way of holiness (Mal. 3:15-16). It is strange if those who never felt more sweetness in religion than in the world, do not at such a time turn their back on it altogether; but the experimental Christian will not do so, for “the righteous shall hold on his way, and he that has clean hands shall be stronger and stronger.” (Job 17:9)

(2) When the night of error overtakes a church, and errors like locusts swarm abroad, how hard is it then to stand without experience! (2 Thess. 2:10) Where truth sinks not into the heart, but floats in the head, it makes itching ears, to which novelties have easy access.⁶⁹ They to whom old truths are unsavory, lie a pray to new notions. And hence it has come to pass that many noted professors⁷⁰ have been carried away in such a time. But he that has tasted of the power of truth will say from his experience, “The old is better,” (Lk. 5 at the end).

⁶⁵ Ps. 119:11

⁶⁶ Song 7:13; Mt. 13:52

⁶⁷ As Job’s speeches evidence.

⁶⁸ 1 Cor. 13:1

⁶⁹ 2 Tim. 4:3-4

⁷⁰ Persons professing faith

(3) When divisions enter into a church, it is hard to keep right without experimental religion. Division is a great plague from the Lord,⁷¹ a stain on the beauty of the church and a dreadful snare to men. When church-builders are like Babel-builders, how can the work thrive? It turns some quite off from all religion: while they see one going one way and another another way, they know not whom to follow and they cast off all together. Others, whose religion was never so deep as the bottom of their hearts, exhaust the whole of their vigor on the controverted points, and so they become dead in the vitals of godliness.⁷² So that, unless people be experimental Christians and exercised to godliness⁷³ too in the time, having the ballast I spoke of before, they will run into terrible excess of selfishness, judging not only practices, but hearts: a very unchristian employment!⁷⁴

(4) When great men and good men are falling, how hard is it to stand unless men have a witness to the truth from within?⁷⁵ God in his holy providence, for the further trial of men permits the fall of men of name for gifts and piety; and when these fall, readily they fall not alone but as mighty oaks break down others about them,⁷⁶ unless they be well rooted and grounded. And therefore they will never bring their religion to a good account whose religion is only to do as others do.

(5) Lastly, when it comes to hard and sharp personal persecution, especially to resisting unto blood.⁷⁷ When extreme hardships, even death itself, are laid in the balance with an unfelt religion, it is hard to think how one should stand who has had no experience of the power of it. Should God give us up into the hands of a bloody anti-Christian enemy, would it not be hard for them that have not been sealed by the Spirit⁷⁸ to refuse the mark of the beast?

⁷¹ Gen. 11:7-9; 49:7

⁷² Mt. 23:23

⁷³ 1 Tim. 4:7

⁷⁴ 1 Cor. 13:7

⁷⁵ Dan. 11:35

⁷⁶ Jer. 46:12

⁷⁷ Heb. 12:4

⁷⁸ Eph. 1:13

How to Attain Experimental Religion

But I shall give more particular directions towards attaining experimental religion:

1. Fix your eyes on the particular evils of your heart and life, and ply closely the reformation of them by the Spirit. Alas! what are we doing in the way of mortification of sin?⁷⁹ Experimental religion is a dying to sin by virtue of our union with Christ. What use have we for Christ, if not to “save us from our sins”? (Mt. 1:21) But the use many make of Christ is to save them and their sins. They will drink, swear, lie, cheat and do unjustly still, and they will call these infirmities, or very little things that need not disturb a man; and they will lick themselves whole with their believing, and on a new temptation, go just back again to them. Sirs, this is to make Christ the minister of sin⁸⁰ and to sin because grace abounds.⁸¹ The running the round between swearing and confessing will make men fall down at length into the pit whence they will never rise again (Prov. 29:1). If Christ cure you not of your disease, you will never get life by Him.

Therefore, I say, ply reformation of heart and life closely. It will not be wishing that will do it: you must put your hand to the work. It will cost mourning groans under the weight of sin, believing looks and vigorous endeavors against it. Is there a thing that is your weak-side? Pray, remember your soul is at stake. If it overcome you, your soul is gone; and if ever you see Heaven, you must get above it (Mt. 5:29; Rev. 3:21). O mind that passage, Mk. 10:21, “One thing thou lackest,” etc. Look to thy spots in the glass of the Law⁸² and quickly set about purging them.⁸³ You have, maybe, a carnal worldly heart:⁸⁴ fall on to get it spiritual and heavenly; an ill tongue, get it bridled,⁸⁵ or an offensive carriage, get it mended.⁸⁶

2. Continue at the work, for the victory is not got but by degrees.⁸⁷ The interruptions that take place in our plying the work of religion make it still the more

⁷⁹ Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5

⁸⁰ Gal. 2:17

⁸¹ Rom. 6:1

⁸² James 1:23–24

⁸³ 2 Chron. 34:3; Ps. 51:7; Prov. 16:6; 1 Cor. 5:7; 2 Tim. 2:21

⁸⁴ 1 Cor. 3:1–4

⁸⁵ James 3:2–3

⁸⁶ 1 Cor. 13:5

⁸⁷ Ex. 23:30; Deut. 7:22

difficult. The miserable halts we make⁸⁸ in the exercise of godliness do but weaken us and give the enemy more time to recruit. And they that cannot digest the making of religion their business are not fit for Heaven. Heaven is an eternal triumph;⁸⁹ how can they be capable of it then that make it not their business to fight, or that are always overcome instead of being overcomers?⁹⁰ It is a rest; therefore it presupposes a labor: not so much [the labor of] the toil of business in the world, for the most carnal have as much of that as professors, but a rest from labor against sin.

3. Take often notice what progress ye are making.⁹¹ Consider with yourselves: Have I got any more victory over my passions, my lusts and my prevailing iniquity? Is there a cubit added to my spiritual stature?⁹² Am I going backward or forward? Sirs, people that are at pains with a farm, they count it their profit to see whether they be winners or losers: if anything has been mismanaged to their loss, they endeavour to mend it the next time; and if they find they are gainers, they are encouraged to redouble their pains. But, alas! what pains men are at about religion is bestowed on it as if they cared not whether they prospered or not; and therefore they have no experience.

4. Look after the profit of duties.⁹³ We should never hear a sermon but should inquire, when we have come from it, "Now, what have I made of this? Where did it touch me? What evil of my heart has it discovered? What influence has it had on me to fit me more for my journey and work?" Sermons are not easy to some of you that are far off from the place of public worship: you would think it a great deal to go one mile, or two, three, four or five miles in vain in other cases. Look after your prayers,⁹⁴ as the Psalmist did (Ps. 5:3). You would think it much if you were to ask a request of your neighbor and yet get no answer, or a refusal.⁹⁵ O why then do you not consider how your prayers are accepted by the prayer-hearing God?⁹⁶ I assure you, if you would fall upon this way, you would soon find the good of it.

⁸⁸ 1 Kings 18:21

⁸⁹ Rev. 15:2

⁹⁰ 2 Pet. 2:20; 1 Jn. 4:4; 5:4

⁹¹ Ps. 119:67; 92:12-14

⁹² Mk. 4:27; Eph. 4:15

⁹³ Mal. 3:10

⁹⁴ Hab. 2:1; Job 42:10

⁹⁵ Lk. 11:5-7

⁹⁶ Job 22:27; 33:26

5. Converse with experimental Christians about experimental religion.⁹⁷ There is a wonderful diffidence that professors have in one another at this day (Mt. 24:12). I verily believe this would be a good way to cure it, if those that have any experience of religion would modestly bring it forth to the edification of others.⁹⁸ There is nothing that more endears Christians one to another than this (Ps. 133). It is an unchristian-like thing in professors to despise converse about practical godliness and Christian experience. And there is more of the wisdom of the serpent than the harmlessness of the dove⁹⁹ in people's locking up in their own breasts all their sense of practical godliness when it might be brought forth to the glory of God and the good of others. I believe this way has been the cause of so much jealousy, suspicion and division among professors, and has run out all Christian conference into vain jangling about the controversies of the time.

6. Be very nice [direct] as to the point of sin and duty.¹⁰⁰ Sudden resolutions in matters which will allow deliberation are often to be suspected.¹⁰¹ Sometimes the matter of sin and duty is of that nature that there is no time to deliberate:¹⁰² all that can be done is to look to the Lord for immediate clearness and the Christian shall have it: Prov. 4:12, "When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble." Compare Mt. 10:19, "But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak, for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak." Sometimes the Christian may have time to deliberate, and then God's ordinary way is to clear men step by step: Prov. 4:12, "When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened." Say not: "The way is plain at first glance in this case," for the Spirit of God bids thee "Ponder the path of thy feet," (Prov. 4:26). If a way be such as our own heart at the very first inclines to, I say it ought the rather to be narrowly examined,¹⁰³ seeing in Scripture-language the way of our own heart is of no good name.¹⁰⁴ And suppose the inclination of the man's heart does really fall upon the right side in this case, yet this is no Christian resolution, but a stumbling on the right way, which God will never accept. Therefore men that would act as Christians in the point of sin and duty should lay aside prejudices, trample their inclinations under foot, lay the

⁹⁷ Ps. 66:16; Mal. 3:16-17

⁹⁸ Ps. 34:11; 126:3

⁹⁹ Mt. 10:16

¹⁰⁰ Ps. 119:4

¹⁰¹ Gen. 16:8; Mt. 8:19-20; 16:22-23; Jn. 13:37-8

¹⁰² Gen. 19:16; 1 Kings 18:21; Mt. 24:16-18

¹⁰³ Lam. 3:40

¹⁰⁴ Prov. 14:12

matter before the Lord and open themselves to conviction there as a piece of clean paper on which God may write what He sees meet, pondering all things with a holy jealousy over their own hearts, lest they be biased by their own inclinations and preconceived opinions. I am sure much of God is to be found in this way.¹⁰⁵

7. Acknowledge God more in your temporal concerns (Prov. 3:6). Are we Christians? Let us depend on God for all things in this life and the other. We are directed to pray about them:¹⁰⁶ the promises are about them¹⁰⁷ and therefore we should wait on God for them.¹⁰⁸ Many a sweet experience have the saints got in temporal things when they have been helped to lay them before the Lord and leave them there without anxiety,¹⁰⁹ in the use of the means.

Lastly, have a precise respect to all the commands of God¹¹⁰ and be truly strict in your lives; that is, deal with men as believing God's eye is upon you, and with God as if the eyes of men were upon you. Never look on the authority of the multitude as sufficient to make that no fault which will not abide strict examination by the Word of God. Let the command of God prevail with you, and whatsoever liberty you may take for ought that men can say or do to you, let that be a sufficient restraint. Thus may you attain experimental religion.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Chron. 28:9; 2 Chron. 15:2; Jer. 29:13-14

¹⁰⁶ 1 Pet. 5:7

¹⁰⁷ Mt. 6:31-33

¹⁰⁸ Isa. 33:2; Jer. 14:22

¹⁰⁹ Mt. 6:25-31

¹¹⁰ Dt. 26:14; 31:5; Josh. 22:1-3; Jer. 7:23