

# The Testimony of Christian Experience

*President E. Y. Mullins, D.D., LL.D.*

**E. Y. Mullins** (1860-1928) was President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1899-1928, President of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921-1924, and President of the Baptist World Alliance from 1924-1928. His influence on Southern Baptists as a leader and scholar was enormous. This essay first appeared in *The Fundamentals*.

## **Introduction**

Human experience is the one datum of all philosophy, and all science. The experience of the individual and of the race is the grist which is poured into all the scientific and philosophic mills. Hence Christian experience as a distinct form of human experience ought to receive more attention than it has ever received before.

Professor Bowne has emphasized the fact that whatever your philosophy, your experience is the same. You may call things by any names you wish and it will not affect experience. Christian Science says that all is mind; that a cobble stone, for example, is simply an idea and not a real piece of matter. We will suppose that some one hurls it and it strikes your head and sends you off for relief. Then you have an experience in the realm of the ideal. You have an ideal stone, striking an ideal head, and raising an ideal bump and producing an ideal dizziness and pain, and requiring the application of an ideal liniment, which produces an ideal cure, and affords you an ideal satisfaction and peace of mind. But all this does not in the slightest degree alter the experience itself. And if you were going to rear a philosophic system on the principle deduced from sudden contact of cobble stones with human craniums, you would be compelled to take this concrete human experience to begin with.

## **John Jasper Philosophy**

Science and philosophy are beginning to recognize the evidential value of Chris-

tian experience though they are very slow about it and very reluctant about it even yet, apparently because it is not as obvious to the sense as the facts of the physical world. The world has laughed long at brother John Jasper who contends that the "Sun do move" around the earth because he sees it on one side of his house in the morning and on the other side at night. But we know there is a system and set of motions in the background more comprehensive and wonderful than the rising and setting sun alone can explain. Now to refuse to accept the testimony of Christian experience because it lies in a realm behind sense experience is to adopt the John Jasper attitude towards truth. Science and philosophy have both been guilty of this to a greater or lesser extent. They have been pursuing the Ptolemaic system of truth with brother Jasper instead of the Copernican with modern astronomy.

## **Religious Radium**

Nobody now doubts the existence of radium, and yet as one says, it has been "bombarding" the universe for aeons and under the very nose of science, and yet it was only discovered yesterday and already threatens to revolutionize science. Now religious experience is the radium of the spiritual universe, which needs only discovery to revolutionize any man's thought as to life and destiny.

## **Experience and Philosophy**

It is the supplemental link to complete philosophy. Philosophy is man reaching

up towards God. Christian experience is the effect of God reaching down to man.

Philosophy seems always on the point of discovering the secret of the universe, but it never succeeds in doing it. We thought awhile ago that idealism had come to the Kingdom to save us from materialistic science, and it did good service. But idealism has become so abstract and impersonal that it cannot be distinguished from Naturalism. These two philosophies are still debating and disputing, but their differences are chiefly imaginary. The dispute reminds one of the reply of the unlearned American who had traveled abroad. He was saying that he had visited the Matterhorn and the Jung Frau, and Lake Geneva and Lake Leman. "But," a friend interposed, "Lake Geneva and Lake Leman are synonymous." "Oh, I know that, but Lake Geneva is a great deal *more synonymous* than Lake Leman," he replied. Idealism in its abstract form is perhaps just a little more "synonymous" than Naturalism, that is all.

### *Secret of Philosophy's Failure*

Now why is it that philosophy seems to expend so much labor for naught. To me it is clear that the reason why it seems to labor so long without satisfactory results is that it refuses to consider all human experience, including the religious. It splits experience up into little bits and hunts among the bits for some single abstract principle which will explain all the rest. It is very much as if one were going to attempt to explain the ocean and all its contents, its variety and marvelous abundance of life, and instead of searching its depths should take a single fish and scale off from the fish a single scale, and on that scale as a foundation build up his theory of the ocean and its contents; how

accurate do you suppose his account would be? And yet this is analogous to what philosophers have done. Spinoza scaled off from the world of experience and being the idea of substance, and built a pantheistic system on that scale. Hegel scaled off the conception of reason or the idea and reared a vast idealistic system on that. Schopenhauer scaled off the conception of will and reared his pessimistic system of philosophy on that. Haeckel has scaled off the conception of matter and builds his materialistic system on that. Another rakes motion of energy and force, and so on, I had almost said *ad infinitum*.

The result of the process is that the philosophers get clear away from human life and experience. They fix their gaze on the photograph of a dim and far away image of reality and become absorbed in excessive star-gazing, metaphysical cliff-climbing and transcendental soap-bubbleblowing. They are like the Indian juggler who hung his ladder on thin air without touching the ground below, sprang upon it, climbed out of sight, pulled the ladder after him, and disappeared in the clouds.

### *The Remedy*

All this ought not to discredit philosophy but teach it a lesson. Men fail to find the secret of the world until God and God's dealing with men are considered. Dr. Ashmore tells of some men on a raft floating down the Mississippi River who stopped for supper one night, and their float went on, but returned awhile to the same place or a similar one. They did this several times until they discovered that they were caught in an eddy of vast dimensions and were being swept in a circle back again repeatedly to the starting point. So has philosophy moved in a

circle, with way stations along the route but never able to escape from the circular movement of human thought. There is one way for philosophy to escape from its situation and find the current on the bosom of the river of thought which will carry it on to its destination. That current is religious experience wherein man's upward soaring thought is met by God's descending revelation and love. When this current of thought is once reached, a new day will dawn for philosophy and ere long the philosophers will see the gleam on the gates of pearl and the sparkle of the jasper walls of the city of God, whither they would find the way.

### *The Clew to All Philosophies*

Christian experience takes all the abstractions of philosophy and recombines them and gives us the conception of the Fatherhood of God. The one substance of Monism comes back as the one person behind the world. The one idea of Hegel comes back as the thought and plan of eternal love. The one energy of those who glorify force and change comes back as the beneficent will of the Holy and loving Father. The plan and progress of nature and the moral ongoing of the world come back as the infinite and eternal design of the Holy and Loving. Thus when in our hearts we can say and know what we mean when we say it, the word "Abba" Father, we hold in our hands the clew to all the philosophies which remain in a state of unstable equilibrium until we find this key. All philosophy is thus summed up as in the words of Dr. Fairbairn: "God is the Father, everlasting in His love. Love was the end for which He made the world, for which He made every human soul. His glory is to diffuse happiness, to fill up the silent places of

the universe with voices that speak out of glad hearts. Because He made man for love He cannot bear man to be lost. Rather than see the loss, He will suffer sacrifice. In the place we call hell, love as really is as in the place we call heaven, though in the one place it is the complacency of pleasure in the holy and the happy which seems like the brightness of everlasting sunshine or the glad music of waves that break in perennial laughter, but in the other it is the compassion of pity for the bad and the miserable which seems like a face shaded with everlasting regret or the muffled weeping of a sorrow too deep to be heard. That grand thought of a God who is eternal Father, all the more regal and sovereign that He is absolutely Father, can never fail to touch the heart of the man who understands it, be he savage or sage." And we may add, cannot fail to become the one generalization large enough and broad enough to include all the data of life and history and of science and philosophy.

### **Unique Claims of Christianity**

In the second place, Christian experience sheds light on all the unique claims of Christianity.

Professor James, you know, and other scientific observers concede that religious experience is a witness to the supernatural; only he refuses to admit that Christ is the author of it, and does not concede the other unique Christian claims. The attempt is to find a common denominator, so to speak, between Christianity and other religions and show that all are essentially alike and that the distinctive Christian ideas are over-beliefs. But these men have not thought through the problem of Christian experience, in particular they are shy of facing the actual claim of Christ and His relation to it all.

Christ's place in Christian experience is the supreme matter. All other Christian claims go with this.

### *The Deity of Christ Proved*

Now the spiritually regenerated and morally transformed man proves the deity of Christ, proves His presence in religious experience for the following reasons:

a. First of all because no man has moral resources to transform himself. The Indian myth that the Creator first laid the world egg and then hatched himself out of it will scarcely supply an explanation of the regenerated life. The law of moral gravitation in a man's life no more reverses itself suddenly than the law of physical gravitation. When apples begin to fall towards the clouds and Niagara Falls becomes a Niagara leap upwards, then we may look for men to be suddenly changed from murderers into saints. You cannot juggle the immoral elements of a sinner's nature into the moral elements of a saint any more than you can combine the acid of an unripe lemon and an unripe apple and unripe grapefruit and get the taste of a caramel. You cannot combine moral shadows by any sort of manipulation and produce moral sunshine.

b. The morally transformed life proves the deity of Christ also because when the sinner turns to Christ he gets the response. Christ invites him and he responds. He calls and Christ answers. He calls to Mohammed and Mohammed does not come; he calls to Confucius and Confucius does not come; he calls to Buddha and Buddha does not come; he calls to Christ and Christ comes. The whole process is as simple as that. In his outward life also a new force begins to work a new design, a new labor working to an end. But espe-

cially within is there Another, one with whom there is fellowship, to whom he becomes passionately devoted, whose presence is happiness and whose absence is sorrow, who can sing with full meaning, "How tedious and tasteless the hours, when Jesus no longer I see," etc.

### *The Miracle of Experience*

Thus Christ acts upon the soul in experience as God and manifests all the power of God.

Such a life proves Christ's claim again because intellectual difficulties die in the light of this experience. The mysteries are not all solved. But the difficulties cease to be relevant.

Miracles do not trouble him now, because he has a sample of the miracle working power in his own soul. Hume's argument that miracles cannot be true because contrary to experience is exactly reversed and the Christian says miracles are true because they accord precisely with his experience.

He cannot explain ultimately why the morning glory opens under sunlight and closes under darkness any more than he could before. Nor can he explain life and spirit. He has what is better than explanation of life, life itself.

In particular he has moral re-inforcement. This is the final test of any religion, what can it do with a bad man? None of them can compete with Christ in this respect. Look at Peter and Saul of Tarsus, and Augustine, and John Bunyan, and George Müller, and S. H. Hadley and thousands of others. A sense of moral power comes with Christian experience. The moral heights lift themselves up to the very heavens, but they no longer seem impossible. The spirit of a strong runner enters a man, the spirit and sense of

conquest and the moral transformation follows. There is not a grace or virtue that Christ cannot and has not produced in human character, not all at the same time or in the same person, but all have been produced.

### ***Christ a Finality***

In this way Christ becomes final for the man, final for his reason, final for his conscience, final for his will, final for his intellect and most of all, final for his faith, his hope and his love, his aspiration. Nothing higher can be conceived.

He now understands why all the creeds of Christendom have Christ as their center. He becomes a judge and critic of other religious systems than the Christian discerning that their unworkableness is due to their lack of Christ. He understands the perennial and remarkable power of the Scriptures over the human heart as Christ's power. Ten thousand other witnesses and confessors around him and a long line of them running back to Christ confirm his experience and thus create a spiritual community the parts of which mutually support each other.

Of course, this experience is convincing to the man who has it and should be to the outside observer. To the latter is presented a new spiritual cosmos, a great system with laws and forces analogous to the physical cosmos. There are not here planets revolving around a sun, but there are redeemed souls by the million revolving around a Saviour. There is not a law of physical gravitation acting between bodies directly as the mass and inversely as the square of the distance, but there is a Kingdom of persons whose law of gravitation is love. There is not a physical law of the transformation of energy pervading the spiritual cosmos, but there is the

law of the transfiguration of character, according to which "we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord are transfigured into the same image from glory unto glory."

### ***Christ the Key***

Christ is the only key to this experience. Mr. James, seeking to discredit a certain kind of reasoning from design, says if you throw a handful of beans on a table you can, by manipulating the beans, make any sort of figure your own design may wish to produce, and so with arguments from design in nature, he says. But he fails to state that the reverse is true. You can manipulate the beans so as to destroy a figure or design already present. Christ is the figure seen in religious experience, in Christian history, in the creeds of Christendom, in the Bible. You cannot get rid of that figure except by manipulating the beans with a destructive purpose.

### **Christian Pragmatism**

In the third place Christian experience transfers the whole problem of Christian evidences to the sphere of practical life.

In this phase of it, Christianity has a point of contact with the new philosophy of Pragmatism. The pragmatic philosophy says the ultimate question for every man is, "What shall I do to be saved?" and that the ultimate task of philosophy is not to solve the insoluble riddle of the universe but to save men from pessimism. Now Pessimism, says the pragmatist, is just one of the two possible modes of reacting upon or interpreting the total experience of life. The optimist sees ground for hope, the pessimist does not. The boy who was asked while fishing how many fish he had caught, exemplifies the optimist. Unwilling to confess failure, he replied, "When I

catch this one I am after and two more, I'll have three." As an interpreter of experience he was an adept and would endure the most searching tests of the pragmatic philosophy; it was an instance of a purpose to "create reality."

Now the Christian method throughout is the practical method of answering the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Its answer is in Christian experience. It says to every man, You can test the reality and power of Christ practically. It says to every man, You have a "seeing spot" in your soul which God gives and which will recognize Christ, if you submit to Him, just as philosophy tells us we all have a blind spot and that if focused right we cannot see a black mark on a white card with our eyes open, and the card in front of us.

Christianity does not say renounce reason but only waive your speculative difficulties in the interest of your moral welfare.

The Gospel is practical in its methods. The man born blind did not have to accept any theory of Christ, God or the universe, neither Monism or Idealism, nor any special form of theism. One thing only was required. Says Christ, "Let me anoint your eyes with clay and you go wash in the pool of Siloam." This he did. His faith worked. It grew by exercise. They plied him with questions and he said, "A man named Jesus healed me." Later, "He was a good man." Later, "He is a prophet." And finally, "He worshipped him." He rose from faith to faith under the guidance and inspiration of Christ and this is the experience of all who put their trust in Him.