



Experientialism as an Apologetic

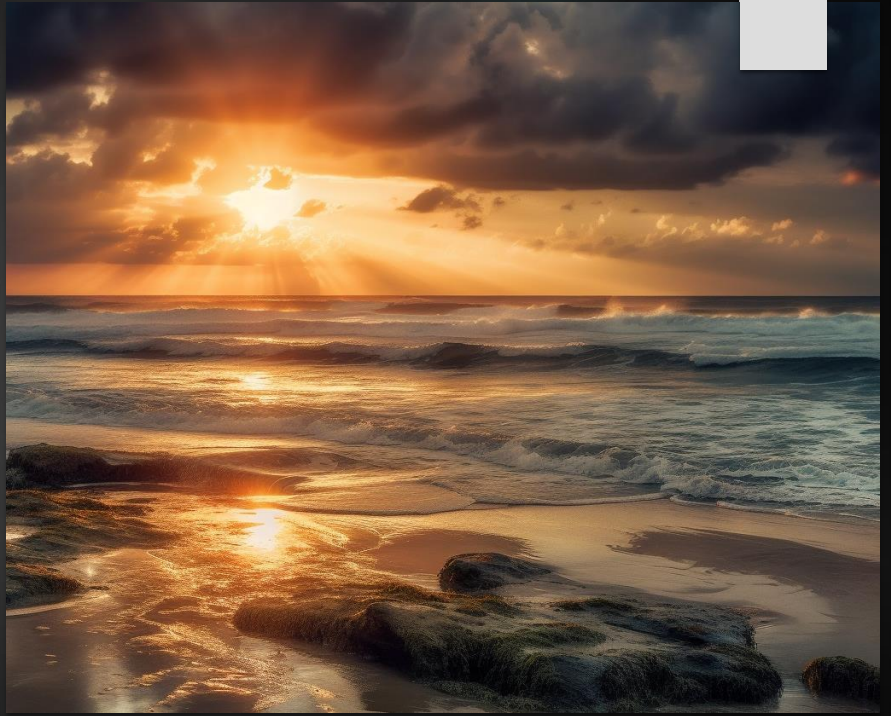
By Shawn Nelson

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Experientialism

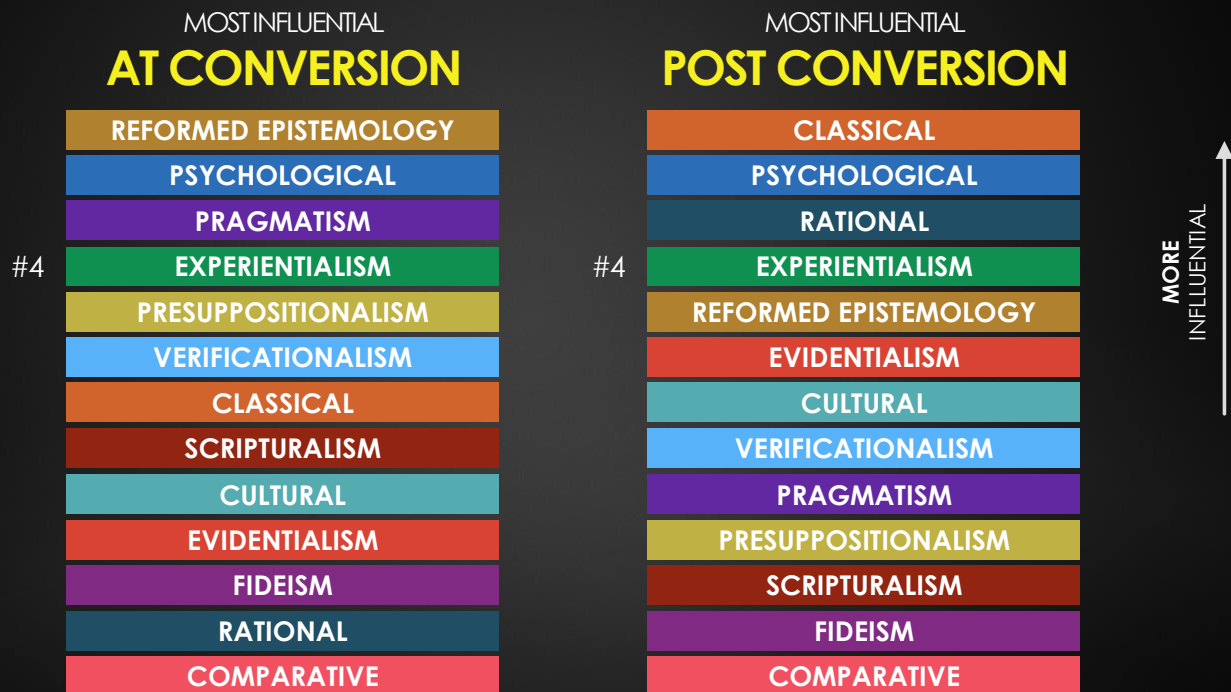
- ▶ We can affirm the existence of God and the truth of Christianity through **personal, experiential encounters** with God/Jesus.



Experientialism

- An apologetic method is a way people come to believe that Christianity is true.
- “We can affirm the existence of God and the truth of Christianity through personal, experiential encounters with God/Jesus.”
- People can come to initial belief in God when they encounter him.
- And their ongoing experience with God continue to affirm the truth of Christianity.
- Christianity is something that a person should experience.

Statistics



Experientialism Statistics

How many times did an apologetic appear in the 90th percentile (top 10%)?

Most Influential At Salvation:

1. ReformedEpist 63%
2. Psychological 49%
3. Pragmatism 35%
4. **Experientialism 27%**
(Experientialism appeared in top 10% of scores for a participant at conversion 273 out of 1023 times)
5. Presuppositional 15%
6. Verificationism 14%
7. Classical 13%
8. Scripturalism 13%
9. Cultural 9%
10. Evidentialism 2%

Most Influential Post Conversion:

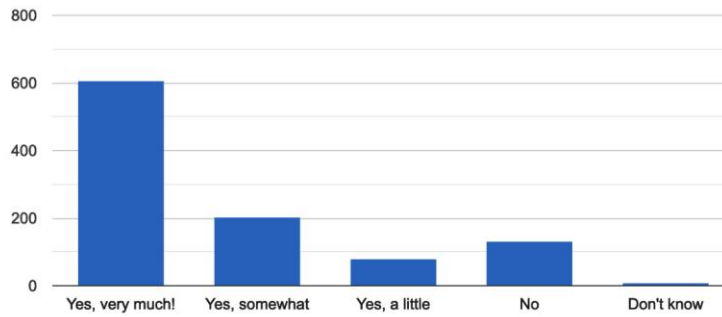
1. Classical 57%
2. Psychological 48%
3. Rational 28%
4. **Experientialism 22%**
(Experientialism appeared in top 10% of scores for a participant post conversion 221 out of 1023 times)
5. ReformedEpist 21%
6. Evidentialism 17%
7. Cultural 16%

8. Verificationalism 10%
9. Pragmatism 9%
10. Presuppositional 4%

A Note About Percentiles

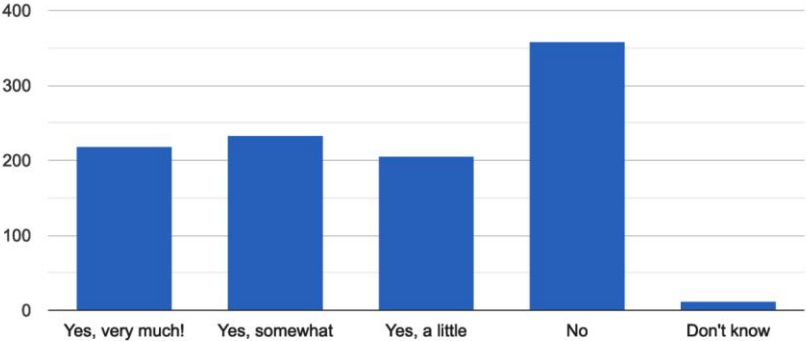
It is possible for a participant to have two or more apologetics with the same highest rank value and/or lowest rank value. For example, a candidate could have a top score of 11.0 for both Experientialism and Psychological Apologetics. I use percentiles to accommodate for this. The 100th percentile are the highest-ranking apologetics for a participant. The 90th percentile are those apologetics that were in the top ten percent. The 25th percentile are in the bottom twenty-five percent.

I came to believe Christianity was real because I experienced God in some way or I saw God at work in a friend's life.



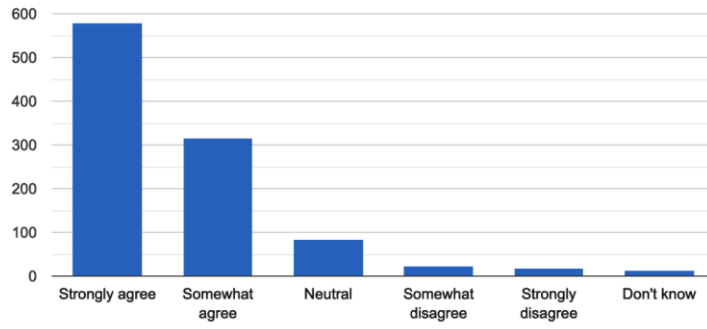
Yes, very much!	606
Yes, somewhat	203
Yes, a little	78
No	131
Don't know	7

I came to Christ because of a friend's godly example.



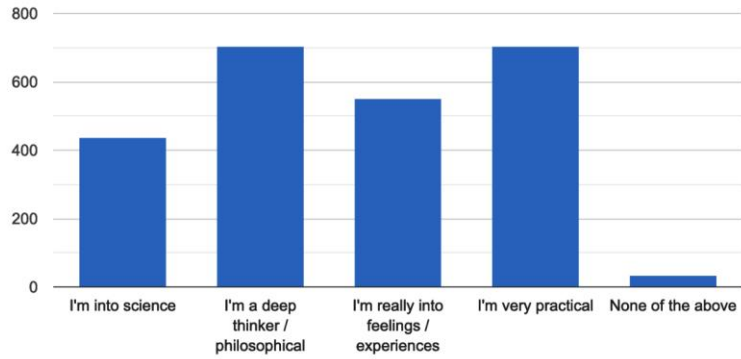
Yes, very much!	218
Yes, somewhat	233
Yes, a little	205
No	357
Don't know	12

I know God is real because I see Him at work in supernatural ways.



Strongly agree	579
Somewhat agree	314
Neutral	82
Somewhat disagree	23
Strongly disagree	16
Don't know	11

Select ALL that describe you...



I'm into science	436
I'm a deep thinker / philosophical	701
I'm really into feelings / experiences	551
I'm very practical	704
None of the above	34



Biblical Basis

- ▶ We see people coming to faith though experience in the Bible.
- ▶ In the Bible, God himself appeals to past experiences as basis for present belief.
- ▶ The Bible says experience can build our faith after conversion.

We See People Coming To Faith Though Experiences In The Bible

The Bible is filled with examples of experiential encounters with God that affirm His existence, and which deepen the faith of those who experience His presence. These are just some examples:

- **The Philippian Jailer's Conversion (Acts 16):** A jailer in Philippi experiences an earthquake and the miraculous release of his prisoners, Paul and Silas, leading him to believe in God and be baptized.
- **Elijah and the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18):** Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel results in a dramatic display of God's power, turning the hearts of the people back to God.
- **The Conversion of Saul (Acts 9):** Saul, a persecutor of Christians, encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, which leads to his dramatic conversion and subsequent work as the Apostle Paul.

God Himself Appeals to Past Experiences as Basis for Present Belief

God himself appealed to past experiences to convince the Israelites of his power, provision, and sovereignty—and that they should follow him alone.

- **God reminds Israel of the Red Sea crossing.** Joshua 24:6-7. God recounts the Israelites' ancestors crossing the Red Sea, using their experience of His power and protection to convince them to follow Him alone.
- **Twelve stones from the Jordan.** Joshua 4:1-7. God instructs Joshua to set up twelve stones from the Jordan River as a memorial, appealing to their ancestors' experiences of

divine intervention during the crossing to encourage faith in Him.

- **The Passover as a lasting ordinance.** Exodus 12:14. God commands the Israelites to observe the Passover annually, using their ancestors' experience of deliverance from Egypt to demonstrate His power and existence.

Bible Says Experience Can Build Our Faith After Conversion

The Christian faith isn't solely based on intellectual knowledge but also involves experiencing God's love, presence, and power in our lives. The experiential aspects of the Christian faith are crucial in strengthening our belief in God over time. Here are some different ways the Bible says we can experience God, and how our strength/faith can be strengthened by experiencing Him.

- **God's love is poured into our hearts.** Romans 5:5 (NIV): "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." This verse illustrates that God's love is a tangible experience within us, made possible through the Holy Spirit.
- **Assurance of our relationship with God.** Romans 8:16 (NIV): "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." This verse emphasizes the Holy Spirit's role in confirming our relationship with God, providing believers with an experiential assurance of their status as God's children.
- **Taste and see God's goodness.** Psalm 34:8 (NIV): "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." This verse encourages believers to experience God's goodness firsthand, as they rely on and find shelter in Him.
- **God's peace transcends understanding.** Philippians 4:7 (NIV): "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This verse highlights that God's peace is an experience that goes beyond intellectual understanding and can be felt in our hearts and minds.
- **Joy in the Lord's presence.** Psalm 16:11 (NIV): "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." This verse emphasizes the joy experienced in God's presence, a feeling that transcends earthly pleasures.
- **Jesus' presence in our lives brings rest.** Matthew 11:28 (NIV): "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." This verse highlights the comforting and restorative experience of Jesus' presence in our lives, particularly during times of struggle.
- **Experiencing God's comfort in trials.** 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV): "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles." This verse emphasizes that God provides comfort to believers, enabling them to experience His presence in difficult times.

Through these experiences, we can develop a deeper, more personal relationship with God, which reinforces our faith and helps us navigate life's challenges.



Let's Build Our Faith...

Let's do an exercise.

Think and reflect upon the following areas. How have you seen God at work in your life?

- **Answered prayers:** Many believers report instances where their prayers have been answered in specific and meaningful ways, which they believe demonstrates God's existence and involvement in their lives.
- **A time you experienced peace and comfort:** Some individuals experience a profound sense of peace and comfort in times of distress or hardship, which they believe comes from God's presence.
- **A providential coincidence:** Some people recount instances of seemingly coincidental events that align in a way they believe demonstrates God's hand at work in their lives.
- **When you asked for and received divine guidance:** People often recount moments when they felt a strong sense of divine guidance or intervention in their lives, leading them to make significant decisions or take specific actions.
- **A miraculous healing:** There are numerous accounts of individuals experiencing physical or emotional healing that they attribute to God's intervention.
- **When you or somebody you know experienced deliverance:** Individuals may share stories of being set free from addictions, negative thought patterns, or harmful situations, which they attribute to God's power and intervention.
- **A time when you sensed God's love:** Many believers describe moments when they felt overwhelmed by a sense of God's love for them, often in the context of worship or prayer.
- **Witnessing a transformation in character:** Believers may experience significant changes in their character or behavior, which they attribute to the work of God in their lives.
- **When you persevered during suffering:** Believers may experience strength and hope during times of suffering or hardship, which they attribute to God's presence and

sustaining power.

Does reflecting on this strengthen your faith in a any way? Or does it help those around you become more curious about the reality of God. It likely does! That's experientialism as an apologetic.

Advantages

- ▶ Easy to Share Personal Testimony
- ▶ Creates Emotional Connection
- ▶ It's Relatable
- ▶ A Holistic Approach
- ▶ Creates Common Ground
- ▶ Anybody Can Do It!



Advantages of Experientialism As An Apologetic

From an apologetic/evangelistic perspective, experientialism has many pros:

- **Easy to Share Personal Testimony:** Experientialism allows individuals to share their personal encounters with God, which can be a powerful and compelling form of evidence for others. When people today say to share your testimony of how God changed your life, this is usually experiential apologetics.
- **Create Emotional Connection:** Experientialism can create a strong emotional connection with others, as people often respond positively to authentic, heartfelt stories.
- **It's Relatable:** Personal experiences can be more relatable and accessible than philosophical or theological arguments, especially for those who are new to Christianity.
- **A Holistic Approach:** This approach addresses the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—rather than focusing solely on intellectual arguments.
- **Creates Common Ground:** Experientialism can help create common ground with people of other faith traditions, as many religions place a strong emphasis on personal spiritual experiences.
- **Anybody can do it!** This approach is accessible to people of all educational and intellectual backgrounds, as it does not require extensive knowledge of theology or philosophy.



Challenges

- ▶ Subjective In Nature
- ▶ Overemphasis At Expense of Doctrine
- ▶ Should Combine With Other Approaches

Challenges with Experientialism

Experientialism can be a valuable component of Christian apologetics, but it should be used in conjunction with other approaches to provide a well-rounded defense of the faith. Here are a few challenges with it.

- **Subjectivity:** Personal experiences are subjective and can be difficult to verify or evaluate objectively, making them less convincing to skeptics.
- **Overemphasis:** Relying too heavily on experientialism can lead to an overemphasis on personal experience at the expense of other important aspects of the Christian faith, such as sound doctrine and biblical teaching.
- **Incompleteness:** Personal experiences alone do not provide a comprehensive understanding of God or Christian doctrine, requiring further exploration through other apologetic approaches.