

## Superficial Faith and Self-Deception

Joseph K. Pak

Martin Luther explains the relationship between faith, works and justification in James and Paul as follows:

When James and Paul say that a man is justified by works, they argue against the false opinion of those who think that (*for justification*) a faith suffices that is without works. Paul does not say that true faith exists without its proper works, for without these there is no true faith. But what he says is that it is faith alone that justifies, regardless of works. Justification therefore does not presuppose the works of the Law, but rather a living faith, which performs its proper works, as we read in Galatians 5:6.<sup>1</sup>

Justification by faith is a precious truth to Christians. But not all who profess faith are genuine believers. It is a well-known fact that from the time of Constantine the Great who stopped the persecution of the church in AD 313 with the Edict of Milan and gave many benefits to Christians, many people became Christians not because they had genuine faith in Jesus Christ but because it was fashionable to do so. However, the fact that the believing community would be a mixed community of both genuine and false believers was predicted from the very outset by the Lord Jesus himself in his teachings.

My goal is to propose two reasons for the existence of faith that does not justify those who possess it. One is faith in a deficient Christ and the other is self-deception on the part of the false believers. These two reasons are not unrelated but rather two different ways to look at the nature of faith that does not bring about justification. That is, false believers do not believe in the real Christ but rather in a deficient Christ, and they are self-deceived

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. J. Theodore Mueller; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954), 75.

since they convince themselves that their faith is genuine. But first, let us briefly examine Jesus' teaching about the existence of false believers in the believing community.

## **I. False Believers in the Believing Community**

### Parable of the Wedding Feast

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. <sup>4</sup>Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ <sup>5</sup>But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. <sup>6</sup>The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. <sup>7</sup>The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. <sup>8</sup>Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. <sup>9</sup>So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ <sup>10</sup>So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. <sup>11</sup>But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup>He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless. <sup>13</sup>Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ <sup>14</sup>For many are invited, but few

are chosen” (Matt 22:1-14).<sup>2</sup>

This parable teaches that those who respond to the invitation of the gospel are composed of both genuine believers and false believers.<sup>3</sup> Those who are originally invited to the wedding refuse to come (vv. 1-9). So the invitation goes out to all in the streets—both the evil and the good (v. 10). One such evil guest is singled out in vv. 11-13 as someone who is not wearing a wedding garment. The king’s question “how did you get in here without a wedding garment?” presupposes that the wedding garment is an essential requirement to be at the wedding feast (v. 12). Then the king orders that this guest should be bound and cast into the outer darkness (v. 13). The biblical imagery of darkness, the evidence from Jewish literature, and Matthew’s own use of *outer darkness* along with *weeping and gnashing of teeth* all strongly indicate that for Matthew outer darkness was a symbolic expression of the place of judgment for the unbelievers outside the kingdom.

Therefore, the man without a wedding garment seems to represent a false believer mixed in among genuine believers.<sup>4</sup> The statement that “many are called but few are chosen (ἐκλεκτοί)” in 22:14 indicates that he was one of the many who were called but not chosen. The word *chosen* (ἐκλεκτοί) is the same word that is translated as *elect* in all

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are in ESV.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 43. Gundry points out that Matthew is warning against false discipleship in vv. 11-14.

<sup>4</sup> Just as in the parable of the wheat and tares where the servants bind the tares and throw them into the fiery furnace (13:30, 42), so also here the servants are told to bind the man without a wedding garment and throw him into the outer darkness (Gundry, *Matthew*, 440).

of its other appearances in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>5</sup> Thus the parable teaches that within the believing community—the community of those who have accepted the gospel invitation—will be found both the elect and the non-elect.<sup>6</sup> Separation of the elect from non-elect awaits the eschatological judgment (Matt 13:24-30, 47-50), which means that the believing community will continue as a mixed community of both the elect (genuine believers) and the non-elect (false believers) until the eschatological judgment.

#### Parable of the Sower

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup> And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup>“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup> And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”<sup>9</sup> And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:1-9).

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<sup>5</sup> In the Synoptic Gospels, the word *elect* (ἐκλεκτοί) is used 8 times outside of Matt 22:14. Except once when it is used in singular to refer to Christ being the Chosen One (Luke 23:35), it is always used in plural form and specifically designates the elect people of God (Matt 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7). On the other hand, the word; *called ones* (κλητοί) is only found in this text in the entire Synoptic Gospels and thus the soteriological significance that Paul attaches to this word in his epistles (Rom 1:1, 6, 7; 8:28; 1 Cor 1:1, 2, 24; also see Jude 1; Rev 17:14) should not be imposed on it. Rather, the context should be allowed to determine its meaning. In Matt 22:14 it seems to simply refer to those who have been called to the wedding feast—both the elect and the non-elect. The very statement “many are called, but few are chosen” requires that the called includes both the chosen and the not-chosen.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the seeming inconsistency between only one guest being thrown out and the statement “many are called but few are chosen,” Gundry comments that “Matthew could hardly have emptied the wedding hall of most of the king’s guests without ruining the festivities. His turning the proportions upside down only shows the pervasiveness of false profession in the church and the strength of his concern with the problem” (*Matthew*, 440).

In the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13; Mark 4; Luke 8), Calvin saw in the rocky soil a middle position between faith and mere pretense: “temporary faith of the sort described in Mark 4 as rocky soil, though not regenerated, acknowledge the truth of what is right, and think that they do believe.”<sup>7</sup> Hooker’s comparison of the four soils is insightful. She compares the first soil to the hardened hearts of the religious leaders, the second soil to the shallow hearts of the large crowd who mobbed around Jesus gladly hearing what he taught and yet the majority of whom have fallen away, and the third soil to the weedy hearts of those whose worldly thoughts crowd out the kingdom concerns.<sup>8</sup> These comparisons help clarify the focus of the parable: that it is the fruit-bearing good soil that represents the kingdom people and they are contrasted not only with those who willfully reject the gospel but also with those who desire and intend to accept the gospel but end up rejecting it.<sup>9</sup>

So Paul warns his readers against self-deception and commands them to examine themselves to see if they are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). Now let’s look at the first of the

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1—13*, (ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald; Calvin's Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 233. Calvin’s statement that they “think that they do believe” indicates that he considers the people represented by the rocky places as self-deceived since what they think about their faith is contrary to reality.

<sup>8</sup> Morna D Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (ed. Henry Chadwick; Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: A & C Black, 1991), 132.

<sup>9</sup> Chrysostom comments: “Now pay particular attention. There is not only one single way of destruction. Rather there are various ways that differ from one another significantly. Some, like the seed along the roadside, are the coarse-minded, indifferent, and careless. Others, those on the rock, are like people who fail from weakness only” (Thomas C. Oden & Christopher A. Hall, ed., *Mark* [ed. Thomas C. Oden; New Testament II; Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1998], 52).

two reasons why the faith of the false believers does not justify them before God: faith in a deficient christ.

## II. Faith in a Deficient Christ

John 2:23-25

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.<sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people<sup>25</sup> and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

This passage describes a kind of faith that is not total unbelief but neither is it genuine faith that brings eternal life. It seems to portray the faith of the people who are drawn to Jesus and thus are on a path toward saving faith without yet having come to believe him as who he really is. Nicodemus, who is introduced in the immediately following passage (John 3:1-7) is a good representative of this group of people.<sup>10</sup> Nicodemus believes that Jesus came from God, but he was still in need of regeneration (3:3).

An objection may be raised: if genuine believers are not represented in 2:23-25, why did John say that they believed in his name? The reason John states that they believed in his name seems to be that they did indeed believe him as the Messiah, but as a sort of the Messiah that fit their expectations. False believers may make profession of faith in Jesus and even accept the gospel truth, but what they actually accept is their own perception of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> They had a false view of Christ and that is why Jesus was unwilling to commit himself to them whereas he laid open the truth to the ones who sought it.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Pak, *False Believers in the New Testament* (Deer Park, N.Y.: Linus Publications, 2011), 89-92.

<sup>11</sup> Commenting on John 2:24, Ernst Haenchen suggests that the phrase αὐτὸς δὲ Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἐπίστευεν αὐτὸν αὐτοῖς (“Jesus did not entrust himself to them”) may mean “He did not

## John 8:30-59

<sup>30</sup> As he was saying these things, many believed in him. <sup>31</sup> So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” <sup>33</sup> They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. <sup>37</sup> I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. . . . <sup>43</sup> Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup> But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup> Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? <sup>47</sup> Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (John 8:30-47).

In John 8:30-32, Jesus says to those who are said to have believed in his name to abide in his word then they will truly be his disciples and they shall know the truth and the truth will set them free. Most commentators view 8:30-32 as referring to superficial faith.<sup>12</sup> For example, Carson sees John as trying to unmask superficial faith here and to delineate what genuine faith is like.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on 8:31, he argues that Jesus is teaching in this verse that perseverance “separates spurious faith from true faith, fickle disciples from genuine disciples.”<sup>14</sup> After pointing out that the text reveals that these “believers” proved their false faith, Carson even suggests that the reason John includes this account is to

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make himself known to them” (*A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1—6* [eds. Helmut Koester et al.; trans. Robert W. Funk; Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 192).

<sup>12</sup> Schnackenburg, Morris, Michaels, Haenchen, and Godet are some examples.

<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 346-48.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

prevent false believers from flooding the believing community.<sup>15</sup>

Westcott also sees an “imperfect faith” on the part of those who John says had believed in him. Though they acknowledged his claims to messiahship as true and were convinced by what he said, they “still interpreted His promise and words by their own prepossessions.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, their belief is not the belief in real Jesus enabled by God (John 1:13; 6:44, 65) but their own interpretation of who Jesus is.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus says in 8:43 that the Jews who believed in him could not understand his speech because they could not hear his word. Why not? Because of their own distorted view of the Messiah which prevented them from understanding who Jesus really was. As Morris says, they are “so wrapped up in their preconceptions that they cannot perceive its truth. It repels them.”<sup>18</sup> They cannot hear Jesus’ words because they do not belong to God who

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 348. “[T]he Evangelist includes all of this material not because he is trying to nurture the faith of fledgling believers, but because he is trying to evangelize Jews and proselytes who must carefully understand what faith in Jesus Christ entails. They, too, must count the cost, and John, like Jesus, must present the gospel in such a way that spurious professions of faith are soon unmasked before they flood the ranks of the messianic community with people who have never been born again.”

<sup>16</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (ed. A. Westcott; 2 vols.; London: J. Murray, 1894; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:13.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond E. Brown argues that John is referring to the Jewish Christians whose faith was deficient. Although they are proud to be Abraham’s children (8:39), they firmly reject that before Abraham even came into existence, Jesus is (8:58-59). “John would then be seeing a double-defect in the faith-commitment of the Jewish Christians. Although they could accept Jesus as a wonder-worker, they refused to identify him as the divine ‘I AM’” (“Other Sheep Not of This Fold’: The Johannine Perspective on Christian Diversity in the Late First Century,” *JBL* 97 [March 1978]:14). Belief in a deficient christ was also the problem of the apostates in 1 John 2:18-19 (See Pak, *False Believers in the New Testament*, 83-84).

<sup>18</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (ed. Gordon D. Fee; rev. ed.; New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 410. “The Jews take no notice of what Jesus says because they have no notion of what He stands for. . . . If there is a lack of sympathy and comprehension of the basic position, then all manner of details will inevitably be misunderstood.” Morris adds that Jesus is here speaking of spiritual incomprehension not intellectual one.



is the truth (v. 47) but to the devil who is a liar (v. 44).

Jesus says, “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Godet also views that the faith of the Jews in 8:30-59 did not involve the work of God.<sup>19</sup> It is a human act of believing in Jesus according to their own understanding of who the Messiah is supposed to be. Pink puts it this way: “It is one thing to really *think* we believe a thing, it is quite another to *actually* do so. So fickle is the human heart that, even in natural things men know not their own minds.”<sup>20</sup>

So, in at least two places (2:23-25; 8:30-59) John seems to address the problem of those who have “believed in” Jesus but he sees their belief as superficial. From the time of Jesus there were those who were attracted to him and can even be said to have believed in him but their faith was not genuine because they believed in a Jesus of their own perception.<sup>21</sup> That is why Jesus can say to them that they really do not believe him (8:45). Sadly, there will be many who will not find out until the day of judgment that the Jesus they have believed in is not real Jesus (Matt 7:21-23; 25:1-12). They are self-deceived since they consider themselves genuine believers. This self-deception is the second reason why their faith does not result in their justification.

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Lewis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (trans. Timothy Dwight; Bible Student's Library; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 372.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Studies on Saving Faith* (Swengel, Pa.: Reiner, 1974), 56.

<sup>21</sup> Robert N. Wilkin, executive director at Grace Evangelical Society, defines “false professors” in a similar way: “those who think they believe the Gospel and yet are actually believing a counterfeit Gospel” (“We Believe In: Sanctification—Part 4: Man's Role in Present Sanctification,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 7 [autumn 1994]: 21). Though Wilkin’s idea of “believing a counterfeit Gospel” may not be the same as having one’s own perception of Jesus, Wilkin’s view that false professors are the ones who think they believe but are not true believers is in agreement with me.

### III. Self-Deception of the False Believers

Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

In this passage, a warning is issued to those who are self-deceived about their faith in

Jesus. Via’s comment on self-deception in Matt 7 and other places is insightful:

The hypocrites really believe that they are in the right: Have we not confessed Jesus as Lord and worked miracles (7:21-22)? When did we fail to care for the Son of Man (25:41-44)? . . . Hypocrisy is not pretending consciously to be more righteous than one is but really believing erroneously that one is righteous, that one has met the divine requirements. The hypocrite actually does not see the flaw in herself (7:1-3). Five times in 23:16-26 Matthew states that the hypocrite is blind to her self-deception. The theme in 23:25-28 is the contradiction between inside and outside. If the Pharisees are described as blind but as knowing or believing that they are righteous on the outside, the blindness must pertain to the inside. Since they have a conscious belief about the outside, what they are blind to, unconscious of, is the inside. The hypocrite is blind to the fact that the only thing that meets the divine requirement is the correspondence between inner and outer cleanness.<sup>22</sup>

When false believers call Jesus, *Lord, Lord*, in Matt 7:21, they are “all too desperately sincere,”<sup>23</sup> and Jesus says in verse 22 that on the day of judgment there will be *many* who will make a claim that they should be accepted into the kingdom of God. Unbelievers who have not believed in him will not make such a claim. Nor is it likely that false prophets and false believers who have consciously rejected Jesus and only pretended to believe in him will dare make such a claim. The most likely people who will

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<sup>22</sup> Dan O. Via, Jr., *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 95.

<sup>23</sup> Zane Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1987), 16.

make such a claim in all sincerity are those who will think that legitimate ground for their claim exists—false believers who are self-deceived about the genuineness of their faith. And Jesus says that they will be rejected because their profession of faith and outward activities are without the inward reality of personal relationship with Jesus and righteous conduct.

Both true believers and false believers may look very much alike on the surface. Thus Jesus' warning about those who will not be allowed into the kingdom of heaven on the day of judgment takes on an immediate and urgent relevancy.<sup>24</sup> The readers of Matthew's Gospel are not to complacently read these warnings as if they are addressed to the outsiders of the believing community. These warnings are issued to those who are insiders—to those who regard themselves as believers. As Ridderbos states, "His warnings . . . are loving admonitions to His disciples to examine themselves to see whether they have the fruits of faith, or most basically, whether they have faith itself. He admonishes them not to deceive themselves in their relationship to Him."<sup>25</sup>

False believers can make a profession of faith and belong to a believing community just as genuine believers do. However, according to Matt 7:21-23, many of them will find out that they had no genuine relationship with Jesus on the day of judgment when, to their surprise, Jesus will refuse to allow them into his kingdom. In this passage, Jesus is

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<sup>24</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (trans. R. H. Fuller; New York: Macmillan, 1948), 165-67.

<sup>25</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (trans. Ray Togtman; Bible Student's Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 157.

issuing a solemn warning that false believers' self-deception in their profession of faith will cost them their eternal destiny.<sup>26</sup>

#### Acts 8:9-24

<sup>9</sup> But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.  
<sup>10</sup> They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."<sup>11</sup> And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. <sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. <sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. . . . <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."<sup>24</sup> And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Acts 8:9-24 shows that even though Simon believed and was baptized, his faith was not genuine. He did not receive the Spirit and thus still remained in the "gall of bitterness and bondage of iniquity" (8:23). So Simon Magus, a false believer, believes the gospel but is still devoid of the Spirit and remains in the bondage to sin. This seems to be a case of self-deception.<sup>27</sup> Calvin's discussion of Simon's self-deception supports our findings of the self-deception of false believers:

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<sup>26</sup> Matt 7:21-23 does not address only false prophets. Similarities of this passage with the parable of ten virgins in Matt 25:1-13, structure of Matt 7:13-27, and Jesus' echo of John the Baptist in the context indicate that all false believers are in view (see Pak, *False Believers in the New Testament*, 31-37).

<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1-13* (ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald; Calvin's Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 233.

Simon Magus is said to have believed, though he soon after gave proof of his unbelief (Acts viii. 13-18). In regard to the faith attributed to him, we do not understand with some, that he merely pretended a belief which had no existence in his heart: we rather think that, overcome by the majesty of the Gospel, he yielded some kind of assent, and so far acknowledged Christ to be the author of life and salvation, as willingly to assume his name. In like manner, in the Gospel of Luke, those in whom the seed of the word is choked before it brings forth fruit, or in whom, from having no depth of earth, it soon withereth away, are said to believe for a time. Such, we doubt not, eagerly receive the word with a kind of relish, and have some feeling of its divine power, so as not only to impose upon men by a false semblance of faith, but even to impose upon themselves. They imagine that the reverence which they give to the word is genuine piety, because they have no idea of any impiety but that which consists in open and avowed contempt. But whatever that assent may be, it by no means penetrates to the heart, so as to have a fixed seat there. Although it sometimes seems to have planted its roots, these have no life in them. The human heart has so many recesses for vanity, so many lurking places for falsehood, is so shrouded by fraud and hypocrisy, that it often deceives itself.<sup>28</sup>

Calvin's view is that there is a middle position between faith and mere pretense such as the "temporary faith of the sort described in Mark 4 as rocky soil, though not regenerated, acknowledge the truth of what is right, and think that they do believe."<sup>29</sup> Self-deception occurs when people do not believe with genuine faith but nevertheless think that they believe. Calvin points out that the fact that Philip accepted Simon and baptized him shows that it is very difficult to distinguish false faith from genuine one.<sup>30</sup>

### Self-Deception

Self-deception is not a strange notion to the biblical writers. John says that "if we say

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<sup>28</sup> John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 3.2.10.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1—13*, 233.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 234. "How difficult it is to pick out hypocrites is apparent from the fact that Philip accepted him. And this is a test of our patience. . . . In short we cannot avoid this unfortunate experience of wicked and deceitful men sometimes joining themselves to us. . . . we ought to be all the more cautious in our own attitude so as not to admit all sorts without selection."

we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Paul warns his readers not to be deceived about who can inherit eternal life (1 Cor 6:9, 10; Gal 6:7-8). James says someone who believes himself to be religious but does not control his tongue, “deceives his own heart” (Jas 1:26). According to Via, “Both Paul and Matthew see human beings as enmeshed in a self-deception that promotes a cover story of righteousness in order to conceal a real story of unrighteousness (Gal 6:3; Phil 3:6-10; Rom 9:30—10:3; Matt 23:25-28).”<sup>31</sup> Richard Hays, who views that “our propensity for self-deception” negatively influences the way we interpret the Scriptures, also believes that Paul talks about self-deception in his writings.<sup>32</sup>

Plantinga describes self-deception as follows:

Self-deception is a shadowy phenomenon by which we pull the wool over some part of our own psyche. We put a move on ourselves. We deny, suppress, or minimize what we know to be true. We assert, adorn, and elevate what we know to be false. We prettify ugly realities and sell ourselves the prettified versions. Thus a liar might transform “I tell a lot of lies to shore up my pride” to “Occasionally, I finesse the truth in order to spare other people’s feelings.” We become our own dupes, playing the role of both perpetrator and victim. We know the truth—and yet we do not know it, because we persuade ourselves of its opposite.<sup>33</sup>

What makes self-deception possible according to the Scriptures is the fallenness of human heart (Jer 17:9). Bavinck provides an insightful description of the state of the heart:

When we scrutinize that little thread closely, we soon notice that in it there is

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<sup>31</sup> Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*, 133.

<sup>32</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 399. This expression occurs in his discussion of homosexuality.

<sup>33</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1995), 105.

involved much self-deception. For the heart, that great and compassionate heart, is in reality not nearly as magnanimous as it seems. Apart from the fact that often the heart is more asleep than awake, it has very difficult and unpleasant qualities. In that heart circulate altogether different currents than the spontaneous impulses of love for one's neighbor and of willingness to help. We all may be thankful that it is impossible for others to take a peep into our heart, because, if that were possible, their respect for us would receive a real blow. We have played a bit of a game with that heart; we have put ourselves to sleep and have covered the abyss of our real self.<sup>34</sup>

Harran, examining Luther's lectures on Romans, finds that Luther viewed man as "so subject to sin that he cannot possibly achieve a true perception of himself" and that it is only through the action of God that he comes to see himself as who he really is—a sinner.<sup>35</sup> Luther himself states: "For when a man knows himself, he does so only when God gives him light; and without God he does not know himself and therefore is not displeased with himself."<sup>36</sup>

As Via points out, "according to Jeremiah, the heart—the seat of understanding and will—is deceitful and corrupt, impossible to understand in its foolish subversion of its own highest good, its relationship with the divine source of life (2:10-13; 17:1, 9-10)."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *Faith and Its Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 36-37. Bavinck adds that "the Bible teaches that man indeed is a mysterious and complicated being. The Bible says that the heart of man is crafty and cunning, and exclaims: 'Who can know it?' There are unfathomable depths in man, which we ourselves cannot pierce and penetrate. We simply do not know what is going on in our own minds." Bavinck concludes that in light of this, man must surrender to the omniscience of God crying out, "search me, O God, and know my heart" (Ps 139:23) (p. 46).

<sup>35</sup> Marilyn J. Harran, *Luther on Conversion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1983), 98.

<sup>36</sup> Oswald, Hilton C., ed. *Lectures on Romans* (trans. Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus; *Luther's Works*, vol. 25; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972), 424.

<sup>37</sup> Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*, 2. Via also comments, "If the mind is thoroughly integrated and transparently in touch with itself, self-deception is impossible" (p. 17). Via sees Paul as sharing a similar view with Jeremiah: "The divine action is necessary because for Paul the human heart, or spirit, is a dimension of such depth that only the divine spirit can reach it. . . . Since human beings are deformed in their being by

Subtle deceitfulness of human heart makes it possible for unbelievers to suppress the truth (Rom 1:18), and for false believers to suppress the truth about themselves and deceive themselves into believing that they are genuine believers.<sup>38</sup> Frequent use of the word “blind” in Matt 23:16-17, 19, 24 suggests that the self-deceived there are unconscious of their inner self and unconscious of not doing the will of God.<sup>39</sup>

What are some specific causes of the self-deception of false believers? What makes them view themselves as genuine believers? There could be a variety of reasons why false believers would deceive themselves. First and foremost is their desire to believe and come to God on their own terms. It is “the hypocrite’s desire to be right with God ([Matt]

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self-deception even at the depth which is their openness to God—the human spirit—only God can remove the defensive cover story” (p. 49).

<sup>38</sup> According to Greg L. Bahnsen, false believers are in a conflict state in which they hold incompatible beliefs: they know that they are false believers (first-order) but bring themselves to deny both that they are false believers and their believing that they are false believers (second-order). This takes place by manipulating, suppressing, and rationalizing the evidence so as to support a belief (that they believe that they are genuine believers) which is incompatible with their knowing that they are false believers. The reason they do so is to avoid the discomfort, distress, or pain associated with believing that they are false believers.

They know deep in their hearts that have neither the Holy Spirit nor personal relationship with Jesus Christ which can alone enable a person to truly believe in the gospel truth and give true assurance. But they suppress this truth about themselves and hide it from their consciousness. The depth of self-deception would depend on how long and how vigorously this suppression of the truth has been maintained (“The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics,” *WTJ* 57 [spring 1995]: 1-31).

<sup>39</sup> Via elaborates on the unconscious aspect of self-deception as follows. “The clearest evidence for self-deception is 7:3-5 and 23:25-28. The hypocrite depicted there does not notice certain things about himself. The blindness to his inner self, the lack of consciousness of his real story, is explicit. But nothing in 6:2, 5, 16 or 23:3-10 requires that the people described there are conscious of the contradiction between inner and outer. This is unspecified. Therefore, given the explicitness of the not-seeing or unconsciousness in 7:1-5 and 23:25-28, it is perfectly possible to interpret the neutral or unspecified contradiction in 6:1-18 and 23:3-10 as also unconscious” (Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*, 93). Lewis Smedes calls self-deception “corrupted consciousness” (*A Pretty Good Person* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990], 74).



6:1b) and to have life but also to have this on her own terms, to have life by taking the wide gate and easy way (7:13-14). In order to believe that she can have life by taking the easy way, she must convince herself of the lie that that way is enough.”<sup>40</sup> Westphal puts it more bluntly: “The God some want to see is an idol, the cosmic legitimizer and guarantor of their own will to power.”<sup>41</sup> This seems to be what Paul is saying in Phil 3:18-19 when he warns the readers of the professing believers “whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly and whose glory is in their shame.”<sup>42</sup> As already argued above, self-deceived false believers are those who regard themselves as genuine believers but their faith is not in the true God but in a false god of their own. Plantinga’s indictment on this count is directed to all believers but especially applicable for false believers:

After all, how many believers really believe in *God*, as opposed to some deified image of themselves? How many, for example, really do attend to the countercultural images of God in Scripture—the ones that judge and condemn as well as the ones that affirm and comfort? How many of us would rather fashion God in our own image so that God’s pleasures and peeves will merge conveniently with our own? Believers, not just secularists, exchange “the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being” (Rom 1:23).<sup>43</sup>

Being in a group setting (such as a group of believers) also helps strengthen self-deception. To meet social needs such as support, acceptance, and approval, an individual may suspend his or her independent critical faculties and yield to the demands of the

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<sup>40</sup> Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*, 95-96.

<sup>41</sup> Merold Westphal, “Religious Experience As Self-Transcendence and Self-Deception,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (April 1992): 186.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph P. Martin points out that it has been convincingly demonstrated that professing believers are in view in this passage (*Philippians* [ed. Leon Morris; rev. ed.; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 160).

<sup>43</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 108-9.

group.<sup>44</sup> This means that someone who may be unsure about the genuineness of his faith may accept the judgment of the group that says that he has genuine faith. This social dimension of self-deception is sometimes described as “mimetic engulfment”: “we refuse to look inside of ourselves but rather believe what others believe about ourselves. That is, we become engulfed in other’s opinions about us.”<sup>45</sup>

Another reason people deceive themselves about their faith can be to maintain their self-esteem.<sup>46</sup> As members of a believing community, it would be a great attack on their self-esteem to acknowledge that their faith may not be genuine. And the longer they have been false believers, the more the reality of the absence of genuine faith would have been pushed deep into the unconsciousness that they no longer may be consciously wrestling with this issue. Self-deceived false believers then are committed to maintaining their self-esteem by upholding a positive view of themselves and their beliefs.<sup>47</sup> This involves not

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<sup>44</sup> Charles V. Ford, *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!: The Psychology of Deceit* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric, 1996), 260; Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, “User-Friendly Self-Deception,” *Philosophy* 69 (April 1994): 214-16. Rorty draws attention to “the political complexity involved in drawing the boundaries between deception and socially induced self-deception. Deception and self-deception are not merely detached conclusions of invalid arguments: they are interactive processes with a complex cognitive and affective aetiology. . . Self-deception is typically not a solitary activity. Like other intentional activities, it works through sustaining social support. As standard ordinary beliefs are elicited and reinforced by our fellows, so too are our primary self-deceptive strategies. The canny self-deceiver puts herself in situations where her deflected attention will be strongly supported by her fellows. ‘How wonderful that you are beginning your Spiritual Retreat . . .,’ the world says to the uncertain and frightened traveler. Though she may be aware that she is more apprehensive than pleased by the prospect of her journey, she attempts to block her resistance by using conventional social forms to distract or submerge her attention.”

<sup>45</sup> Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*, 95.

<sup>46</sup> Ford, *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!: The Psychology of Deceit*, 278.

<sup>47</sup> James F. Peterman, “Self-Deception and the Problem of Avoidance,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 21 (winter 1983): 572. Peterman remarks that self-deception is seen as a species of error, but not as a simple error. Self-deception requires that the error be motivated and that the self-deceiver mistakenly believe that he has good reasons for his

paying attention to the evidence that may reveal that their faith is not genuine. Via observes, “The self-deceived person persuades herself to believe contrary to the evidence in order to evade somehow the unpleasant truth to which she has already seen the evidence point. . . . The blindness or ignorance of the self-deceived person is generated by the absence of spelling out a life engagement.”<sup>48</sup>

An important question is, What prevents false believers from becoming genuine believers? What prevents them from having genuine faith? John 3:19-21 declares that it is the love of darkness and doing evil that prevents a person from coming into the light. Matthew attests to the fact that the reason people do not understand the word of God is their calloused heart and their willful closing of their ears and eyes (Matt 13:15).

No one can see spiritual truth and genuinely believe the gospel without the enablement of the Holy Spirit. As Paul explained, “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). Thus Grenz correctly remarks that illumination is necessary because of the blinding effects of sin: “In our state of bondage, we simply cannot grasp spiritual truth. . . . If clear understanding is to come, it

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belief. But self-deception is not the same as mere wishful thinking. For the self-deceiver, unlike the wishful thinker, believes that he believes what he does because it is reasonable to do so. The self-deceiver mistakenly believes that he has good reasons for his belief.

<sup>48</sup> Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*, 11. Via further notes that, according to Paul, the motive of self-deception is as follows. The reason that we conceal the truth from ourselves and do not spell it out is that we want to be blameless in our own eyes, want to be justified, on the basis of our own effort (Rom 10:2-3; Phil 3:3-9). “The anxious desire to be what we want to be disposes us to believe that we actually are: this is simply the way the human mind works. Paul would qualify this by adding, No, this is the way the fallen mind, the mind of the flesh, works” (p. 27).

must be given by God.”<sup>49</sup>

In summary, self-deception of false believers is mainly caused by their suppression and distortion of the truth about themselves through various and subtle ways.<sup>50</sup> Even though their faith, without the aid of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, is faith in a deficient Christ, they nevertheless persuade themselves that they are genuine believers.

#### IV. Conclusion

It is quite disturbing to read Jesus’ words that on the day of his return, he will say to many who claim to have served him, “I never knew you” (Matt 7:21-23). One way to help false believers is to clearly differentiate between genuine faith and false faith. Luther shows considerable concern in distinguishing between genuine and false faith in his sermons and writings. For example, he once said: “If it does no good, it is then certainly a dream and a false idea of faith.”<sup>51</sup> Describing a false faith, Luther says,

Whoever has not this [saving] faith talks but vainly about faith and works, and does not himself know what he says or whither it tends. He has not received it. He juggles with lies and applies the Scriptures where they speak of faith and works to his own dreams and false thoughts, which is purely a human work, whereas the Scriptures attribute both faith and good works not to ourselves, but to God alone.

Is not this a perverted and blind people? They teach we cannot do a good deed of ourselves, and then in their presumption go to work and arrogate to themselves the highest of all the works of God, namely faith, to manufacture it themselves out of

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<sup>49</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1994), 540.

<sup>50</sup> Both cognitive and volitional elements are involved in self-deception. There is cognitive element of twisting of the truth in the reasoning process of false believers in seeing themselves as genuine believers. And there is also the volitional element of refusal to spell out to themselves how their behavior contradicts their alleged faith.

<sup>51</sup> Martin Luther, "Justification by Faith," in *Classic Sermons on Faith and Doubt* (ed. Warren W. Wiersbe; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 79.

their own perverted thoughts.<sup>52</sup>

Luther's words about faith, which are found in the preface to his commentary on

Romans, seem appropriate as closing words of this article:

Faith is not that human notion and dream that some hold for faith. Because they see that no betterment of life and no good works follow it, and yet they can hear and say much about faith, they fall into error, and say, "Faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved." This is the reason that, when they hear the Gospel, they fall-to and make for themselves, by their own powers, an idea in their hearts, which says, "I believe." This they hold for true faith. But it is a human imagination and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, and so nothing comes of it and no betterment follows it.

Faith, however, is a divine work in us. It changes us and makes us to be born anew of God (John 1); it kills the old Adam and makes altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers, and it brings with it the Holy Ghost. . .<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>53</sup> Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, xvi-xvii.