

DP2.06 The Christian Experience of God – Part 1

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Experiencing Confusion

There is something of a crisis among many Christians today over the question of ‘experience’. If not a crisis, there is at least much confusion and uncertainty, a fascination and a longing, perhaps even a vacuum. This goes back some time.

Do you remember the remarkable welcome afforded to J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God* back in the 70s? It seemed to have an impact quite unlike any other recent Christian book. And I am sure that this is partly because of its experiential emphasis. The title of the book is not *God*, but refers to an experience – *Knowing God*.

This article will be what theologians call a ‘prolegomena’ and what ordinary people call an ‘introduction’. I want to make sure that you are itching in the places that I plan to scratch in the second article (appearing in the next Briefing issue). In this article, I first plan to map some of the confused territory we face today – not at this stage offering a path through the bewildering jungles, but first pointing out where they lie, what shape they take and some of the wildlife that inhabit them. I will also discuss why ‘experience’ matters for Christianity and why it is important to chart a path through the confusion.

1. Mapping the Confusion

What is an ‘experience of God’?

The confusion starts with the very word ‘experience’. What are the characteristics of a Christian ‘experience’? What is an ‘experience’ of God?

Some people use the word very narrowly and specifically. A Christian friend said to me recently, “I have never had a spiritual experience in my life”. This person was being very honest, but since I know him well, I know that he was using the word ‘experience’ in a very restricted sense. In much the same sense, some Christians accuse other Christians these days of being ‘against experience’ or ‘anti-experiential’.

Others of us, however, find this rather confusing. How can you be ‘anti-experience’? It’s like being accused of being ‘anti-existence’. The problem is that ‘experience’ is such a general word; such a broad category. It can include virtually all events of human consciousness. We could dispel some of the confusion if we could be more specific, and I will attempt to do so in due course. For now, let us simply note that there is confusion about the extent or nature of the whole subject of ‘experience’.

[Christianity in an Experiential Age](#)

Even if there is confusion about the meaning of ‘experience’, there is undoubtedly much emphasis and interest in ‘experience’ in contemporary Christianity. Some plausibly relate this to cultural factors:

In comparison with recent centuries, the latter half of the twentieth century has emphasised the desire and right of man to experience for himself, that is to receive knowledge through direct sensory perception, through feeling...It is on this basis, rather than on the basis of received traditions and wisdom, or reason or of objective facts, that perceptions are formed and interpretations of life are founded. 'I know' or 'I think' has been replaced by 'I feel'. The objective has had to make way for the subjective and man has become preoccupied with the inward quest for self-fulfillment.

Derek Tidball in *Christian Experience in Theology and Life* (Rutherford House) p.1

In light of this, it is not surprising to find Christians themselves reflecting on their Christian experience. Christian dialogue with non-Christians frequently focuses on Christian experience, because the non-Christian is interested in experience. The non-Christian may want to know, for example, why the Christian thinks that his experience is superior or more authentic. If the appeal of the New Age Movement is largely experiential – if our age craves authentic 'experiences' – then there is certainly strong motivation to express the gospel in experiential terms. Most of us would say that the gospel can speak to a guilt-ridden age, or to an age seeking the meaning of life. But what has the gospel to say to an age that craves experience?

[Experience and the Uniqueness of Christ](#)

However, it is in that attempt to express the gospel experientially that a further crisis has arisen. As Christians have increasingly emphasized their experiences in a world fascinated by experiences, is it any wonder that the uniqueness of Christ is being called into question? For we are no longer simply addressing materialistic atheists or nominal Christians; we now speak to Moslems, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and spiritualists of various kinds – groups who themselves claim to offer authentic experiences of God. The gospel becomes but one more commodity in the supermarket of experience.

I understand that at the last Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Manilla, there was a real sense of uncertainty among some of the delegates about the uniqueness of Christ. We are going to hear much more about this during the next few years, but I want to suggest at this stage that the confusion about Christ's uniqueness stems from the confusion about experience.

Christians are discovering that their experiences – when viewed simply as subjective, 'experiential' events – are not obviously unique or superior at all. If you focus on experience, and come to the conclusion that Christian experience seems to be matched by the experience of a pious Moslem, then you begin to find it hard to speak with any conviction about the uniqueness of Christ. You come to the conclusion that it is only narrow-minded bigots – people who do not appreciate the reality of religious experience outside Christianity – who can persist in their arrogant claims that Christianity is uniquely true.

We have to come to terms with the fact Christian 'experience' is not in itself unique. The uniqueness of Christianity does not lie in the uniqueness of our experiences – at least, not yet. It is this very fact that has influenced Roman Catholicism (post-Vatican II) to affirm that all religions

have “a genuine spiritual experience of the Absolute” (this quote is from Hans Küng’s *On Being a Christian*, p 102; also see his *Does God Exist?*, pp 600ff.).

Experience and Authority

For many of us involved in Christian ministry, the confusion about ‘experience’ confronts us at a more basic level in a dispute over authority. How many of us have come across the apparently unshakeable conviction of a fellow Christian about something based on their ‘experience’? It is not something you can easily reason with, since it usually stems from what is understood to be a direct apprehension of God’s will.

How are we to view such experiences? What happens when two Christians have conflicting experiences? These sorts of problems make it urgent that we understand and promote a clearer understanding of Christian experience.

Experience and the Holy Spirit

The charismatic movement has contributed much to putting ‘experience’ on the agenda, for whatever else the charismatic movement is about, it is about experience. From the charismatic viewpoint, evangelicalism is guilty of being too cognitive, too light on experience, a religion of the mind and not the heart. And it is thanks to the charismatic movement that popular thought identifies the theology of Christian ‘experience’ with the theology of the Holy Spirit.

The result is at least a truncated view of the Holy Spirit and a too narrow view of Christian experience. I recently heard a paper on the Christian life criticised for its neglect of the Holy Spirit. On examination, the paper mentioned the Holy Spirit at least once on almost every page. What the paper did not mention was the ‘gifts’ of 1 Corinthians 12. The paper’s critic had apparently so identified the work of the Spirit with those ‘experiences’ that all other aspects of the Spirit’s work were forgotten or not noticed. Ironically, what is least prominent in the New Testament about the Holy Spirit has become, for many Christians, the totality of their appreciation of the Spirit.

Neglect of Experience

In the context of all this confusion, there are some of us, I believe, who have reacted by rejecting what we see as spurious claims to Christian experience. In doing so we have, perhaps unintentionally, given the impression that we oppose the very idea of ‘Christian experience’. This is an absurd impression to give. If there is a wrong emphasis and understanding of experience in much contemporary Christianity, then the correct response is not only to criticise the errors, but to teach and promote and encourage the development of true Christian experience.

One of the things I wish to emphasize in these two articles is that authentic Christianity is experiential. We must not surrender the word ‘experience’ to distorted versions of Christianity. We must fight to retain and define it. Remember how the Protestant churches, when the word ‘catholic’ still meant something in popular usage, refused to surrender the word to the Roman Church? To do so would have given the impression that the Roman Catholic Church really was the ‘catholic’ church. In the same way, it would be a miserable mistake if our neglect of this matter led to ‘experiential Christianity’ being defined as something other than evangelical Christianity.

2. What is 'Experience'?

If we wish to answer this question from the Bible, we will not get very far by looking up a concordance under 'e'. The Bible hardly discusses the general concept. However, as we shall see in our next article, the Bible has much to say about many human experiences, and particularly about a believer's experiences.

It may be best, at this stage, to use a broad but not undefined meaning for 'experience'. Human experience should include all conscious states and events. The question then becomes: "What effect does an encounter with God have on the human consciousness?" We cannot answer this question rightly and honestly if we decide in advance that only certain types of 'experience' are legitimate or worth considering as 'spiritual'.

In that sense, we need to abandon the whole concept of 'religious experience', as if some experiences in their very essence are more religious or spiritual than others. Boredom is as much an 'experience' as excitement; peace as much as anger. To say that one is inherently more 'spiritual' than the other is to define God and 'spirituality' in our terms rather than the Bible's. It is quite possible that there are some experiences that we take for granted that are, in fact, encounters with the living God. Only when we understand what God is like, and how he relates to us, can we begin to understand where and in what ways we experience him. It is logically and spiritually wrong to decide in advance that only certain experiences

(e.g., a feeling of intense rapture) constitute an 'experience of God'.

We must also recognize that when we talk about 'experience' we are focusing on the subjective side of things. What God is like, what he has done, who Jesus is, the significance of his work – these are objective facts, the reality of which depends in no way on my experience. By focusing on Christian experience, I am drawing attention to the subjective effects (if I can put it like that) of these objective realities. And I am suggesting that even where Christians think that they are pretty clear about the objective realities, there is confusion about the subjective experience.

How is it that Christians, who can agree point by point through the historic creeds or confessions, are divided over experiences? Indeed, perhaps even more puzzling, how is it that those who have massive differences in belief about the objective realities – differences over which lives have been surrendered – can find a unity in their experiences? It usually means that the agreement or disagreement (as the case may be) over objective realities were superficial.

3. Why Experience Does (and Doesn't) Matter

I am conscious of two possible reactions to what I have said so far. One is to welcome an emphasis on experience and to hope that what I have yet to say will deliver the goods. It is high time, you might say, that evangelicals moved from their cognitive religion and into a fuller experience of God.

The other reaction, I suspect, is caution. We have the Bible, you might say, and we believe it – what do we need with all this subjective stuff?

I want to address both these reactions, and recognize that both are valid, up to a point. However, both need thorough qualification. Let me try to put 'experience' into its proper perspective by

asking two questions.

a) Is this a Right Christian Inquiry?

There are at least three good reasons for being cautious about a theology of experience, and these three reasons might be enough to convince some that what I am proposing is not really a proper subject for Christian inquiry.

Firstly, this sort of inquiry focuses attention on us rather than on Christ. It is an egotistical inquiry. The criticism that is made of much modern psychology is also valid here: "...again and again it is the fully experiencing self which they are concerned with" (Tidball, 'Theology', p 7). Is not a fundamental work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel to turn us away from ourselves to see the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and to reach out in love to others? If we focus on experience, are we not in danger of working against the Holy Spirit?

The answer to this must be "Yes!", and those who are tantalized by experiences need to take that to heart. There is something almost nauseating about some versions of experience-dominated Christianity. It is the kind of religion that can only flourish among the prosperous, who have time and money to spend on pursuing more and more exciting experiences. It does not look like "sharing in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory". It does not sound like "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us". We are to glory now, not in our experiences, but in the cross of Christ.

However, if you draw the conclusion that it is therefore inappropriate to reflect on Christian experience and to foster a right understanding of Christian experience, then you differ from the apostolic writers. Most of the New Testament letters begin with explicit, sometimes quite detailed, references to the experience of the Christian recipients of the letter. We will see in the next article that this experience is not turned in on itself; it is not self-absorbed. Paradoxically, it is a mark of true Christian experience not to be terribly interested in experience, but to be interested in Christ. But if that is so, it needs to be said; it needs to be taught.

A second problem with a theology of experience is that it might appear to be a contradiction in terms. Is it not the case that, in the Bible, faith in God often stands against the voice of experience? When Abraham believed God, his experience was of an aging body, a barren wife and a land full of Canaanites. Is this not also true of the Christian life? The love of Christ stands against (and triumphs over) the experiences of life – neither death nor life, angels nor demons, present nor future can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, the sword – according to Paul, these are the experiences of the Christian life. Despite my experience, the love of God holds strong!

There is a dangerous possibility, then, that focusing on present Christian experience will breed false expectations. Someone has commented: Just as credit cards have taken the waiting out of wanting, so the charismatic movement has taken the waiting out of wanting God. There is something phoney about certain attempts to arouse a level of Christian experience that is expected because of an inadequate eschatology. It is distressing, to say the least, to watch people inducing themselves into a state of hyperventilation (like I used to for a thrill at primary school) and then describing that physical experience as the touch of God.

That is not reality, subjective or otherwise. It is illusion. And it is certainly not what we should pursue in a theology of Christian experience. However, neither should we allow these distortions to deflect us from thinking and talking about what a Christian's experience is or should be like. The apostles, in almost every letter, thanked God for the present experience of their readers and prayed to God for them to experience more.

The third difficulty that some (rightly) see with an experiential emphasis is that there has been a remarkable tendency for contemporary culture to shape Christian understandings of experience. This can be seen again and again in the history of Christian thought. The massive and (in its time) influential experience-based theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher was profoundly shaped by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, not the Bible. More familiar to many of us is the existential theology of Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, John Macquarie, and others. These were shaped more decisively by contemporary existentialism's analysis of human experience than by the Bible's. Much closer to home, the evangelical tendency to present Christian experience wholly in terms of personal 'relationship' with God owes more than we usually realize to the modern social sciences on one hand and to Jewish philosopher Martin Buber on the other. And of course, it is hardly accidental that the culture that holds seminars on how to be powerful in everything from how you talk to how you dress has produced a fascination with the experience of Christian power.

I am not saying that there are not grains of truth scattered through all of this. I believe there are. But it is easy to understand the scepticism of many Christians towards the very culturally-determined look of many modern 'experiential theologies'.

However, again it is precisely because of this tendency that we must fill the vacuum. We need to speak and teach biblically about Christian experience.

b) Is Theology Based on Experience?

Finally, and briefly, we need to touch on the relationship between theology and experience, for I suspect that much of the current confusion arises from an inadequate understanding of that relationship.

Theology itself, as we usually think about it, is not about our experience of God so much as about God himself. But is that correct? If theology is God-knowledge (theos-logos), then might there not be a place for an experiential knowledge of God? If there is a distinction between the two, which is prior: theology or experience? Does experience arise out of theology, or is theology generated to explain our experience?

This is a common theme in modern theological writing, including evangelicals. Alister McGrath, in his book on Justification by Faith, writes:

Underlying the Christian faith is first and foremost an experience, rather than the acceptance of a set of doctrines. The New Testament bears powerful witness to the experience of the first Christians – an experience of the presence and power of the risen Christ in their lives, charging them with meaning and dignity. (p 129)

What exactly is McGrath talking about? He goes on to say:

The essential purpose of Christian doctrine is to provide a framework within which

the experience of the first Christians may become ours. Just as engineers may construct a channel to bring water from a reservoir to a parched and arid desert area in order that it might flourish and blossom, so Christian doctrine provides the intellectual framework by which the experience of the first Christians may be passed down to us. (p 129)

It is not clear to me exactly what McGrath means, but I am sure that many readers will get the impression that an experience came first, then theology (or doctrine), which in turn conveys the experience to later generations.

If that is what our theologians are saying, no wonder there is confusion! If McGrath is talking about the experience of the very first Christians, namely the apostolic witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, then it will take better Christian doctrine than I have yet known to pass that experience on to me (at least, within my lifetime). It is simply not true that my experience, as an 'experience', is the same as theirs, nor does anything in the New Testament suggest that it should be so.

But, of course, that is not what McGrath means. He is talking about what he calls the religious experience of the early Christians which, he seems to suggest, is the basis for Christian doctrine as it subsequently developed. He goes on to assert that the great patristic doctrinal disputes about the incarnation, the person of Christ and the Trinity, were undertaken because some intellectual frameworks (like that of Arius) were inadequate to convey genuine Christian experience.

It seems to me that this is simply not true. Arius's views on the identity of Jesus were not challenged because they produced a defective Christian experience but because they contradicted Scripture. Indeed, how can one determine what constitutes the normal or 'correct' Christian experience unless it is established by Scripture?

More importantly, the doctrines of the New Testament (such as justification by faith) did not arise in order to convey to the next generation the primitive experience of the presence and power of the risen Christ. The doctrine preceded the experience, from the beginning. Prior to the experience of the first Christians was the gospel, the word of God.

As I hope to demonstrate in the next article, the Christian's experience of God is the experience of God's word, and Christian doctrine is no more (and no less!) than an exposition of that word, an elaboration of that gospel. Justification by faith is not something constructed on the experience of the first Christians, like the Philippian jailer. It is an elaboration of the word, which brought about his experience: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved".