

## DP2.08 The Christian Experience of God- Part 2

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### Experiencing God

In the first of these articles, we looked at the current confusion surrounding the topic of Christian experience. We noted that there is confusion about what counts as Christian experience; about what authority experience should possess; and about the place of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience (and vice versa). We concluded that there is even confusion about how the very subject of theology and experience should relate. So if you finished the first of these articles feeling somewhat confused, then I can only claim to have been successful thus far.

In this article, I will attempt to get beyond the confusion to some clarity. But where to begin?

### The Wrong Starting Point

As I've already suggested, much of the muddle regarding Christian experience begins at the starting point – the wrong starting point, that is. Much of what we hear and read about this subject starts with, and is pre-occupied by, the reported experiences of Christians. If we want to understand the nature of Christian experience, it is argued, then let us begin by analysing what Christians have actually experienced.

This approach has its high-brow exponents in theologians such as Schleiermacher, who began his inquiry by studying Christian piety. Indeed, the substance of his theological work was to describe and explain the nature of Christian piety, even though this eventually led him to a theology that was basically pantheistic.

At a more popular level, this is also the problem with much of John White's recent writing and teaching. He has become fascinated with the phenomenon of revival and has used his skills as a clinical psychiatrist to analyse the experiences of Christians in the great revivals. He has tried to determine whether the experiences of various contemporary Christian movements qualify them to be seen as revivals. Notice that he focuses on the experiences of the Christians concerned and argues out from there. At various points (such as in his book, *When the Spirit Comes with Power*), he argues that certain experiences are simply inexplicable in psychological or other terms, and therefore must be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. John White acknowledges that this approach is liable to lead to a Holy-Spirit-of-the-gaps problem, but this doesn't seem to stop him from falling into precisely this error.

Ultimately, nothing is to be gained by this sort of analysis (cf. 2 Cor 12:1). It fails because you cannot deduce the cause of an effect by looking only at the effect; you cannot understand a relationship by looking only at one side of it. Introspection (looking inwardly at our own experience) is therefore not an adequate or reliable means of understanding Christian experience.

There are numerous examples of this tendency in Christian circles today, most notably people's penchant for labelling activities as 'in the Spirit'. We have laughing in the Spirit, the silence of the

Spirit, the weeping of the Spirit, slaying in the Spirit – perhaps speculating in the Spirit might be added to the list. The experience has been interpreted by looking primarily at the experience and not to the supposed author of the experience. I suggest that this will not lead to any useful or reliable conclusion.

## The Right Starting Point

We will only understand where and in what ways we experience God if we understand what God himself is like and how he relates to us. Indeed, all that I will say in the rest of this article rests on this premise and can be expressed in the following proposition:

**The character of the Christian's experience of God is determined by the reality of the God who has spoken his word and who continues to speak his word.**

This is fundamental to the Bible and to the New Testament writings in particular. I would go so far as to suggest that much of the loss of direction and cohesion among modern evangelicals stems from a failure to grasp this fundamental truth. In the past, it was one of our hallmarks. But today, we have at least to some extent forgotten it. How else could a theologian as able and as unashamedly evangelical as Alister McGrath suggest that experience precedes theology (as we noted in our first article)? McGrath has many excellent things to say but at this point, he has forgotten that the Christians' experience (from the beginning) was determined by the reality of the God who spoke (and continued to speak) his word.

To try to hammer this home, let us take a quick trip through the New Testament. I have listed below a number of very well-known verses, but as you read through them, note the experience that they convey. As you read them all together, I hope you will see how they support my basic proposition (above).

1. Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matt 4:4
2. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. Jn 15:7
3. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:11
4. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. Acts 20:32
5. But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming. Rom 10:8
6. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Eph 6:17
7. ... as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing. Phil 2:16
8. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with

all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Col 3:16

9. And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. 1 Thess 2:13
10. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith... Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Heb 4:2, 11-12
11. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created... Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Jas 1:18, 21-22
12. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.' 1 Pet 1:23-25
13. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. 1 Jn 2:5a
14. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Rev 3:8

That is a highly selective set of texts, but there is hardly a chapter in the New Testament that does not bear witness in some way to this basic thought: that fundamental to the Christian's experience of God is the reality of the word of God.

What is this word of God that is so prominent? It is, of course, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the word entrusted to the apostles, which spread throughout the world (according to Acts), and has been passed down to us through the apostolic writings.

I want to draw your attention to four things about this word of God, and if we lose touch with these things we have lost touch with New Testament Christianity. We need to regain our confidence in these things (if we have lost it).

1. It is a given, known message. The living enduring word of God which Peter speaks of (1 Pet 1:23) is the same word which Paul says he received and then passed on (1 Cor 15:3). This word of God is not one thing today and another thing tomorrow; it is not one thing for you and another thing for me. It is a given, known message.
2. It is complete. There is never a hint in the New Testament that the word of God can be added to. Indeed, it is spoken of as being entrusted to the apostles, and woe betide anyone who tampers with it (1 Tim 6:20).

3. It continues to speak today. This is why the word of God is described as a living and enduring word, the sword of the Spirit (1 Pet 1:23; Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). It is not a dead letter, nor merely a set of propositions. It is living and active.
4. The content of this given complete word is fully found in the Bible.

These points could be elaborated upon, but I suggest that they represent a thoroughly biblical understanding of 'the word of God'. And our basic proposition follows on from this:

**The character of the Christian's experience of God is determined by the reality of the God who has spoken his word and who continues to speak his word.**

We need to ask ourselves: do we believe that? Are we convinced of that...still? Is that what your own experience is like? And is the way you serve others directed towards seeing them have that experience of God and grow in it?

When we receive this word of God as it really is – the word of God – then that is the work of Spirit (or the 'breath of God'). I have gone into this connection at some length in an earlier Briefing and I won't repeat that now (way back in Issues #10-12. Ed).

However, I want to underline that very much of our confusion and division over Christian experience stems not from a loss of confidence in the truth of the biblical word of God, nor its inspiration, nor even its authority. The real problem is that we are no longer sure of the sufficiency of the biblical word of God for our experiential knowledge of God. This loss of confidence may be traced back to a failure amongst some of us to appreciate the experiential knowledge of God that the word of God brings. Perhaps we failed to emphasize enough the experience that the word of God brings, and into that experiential vacuum (if I can crudely simplify it) all manner of things have rushed. We need to fill the vacuum with true and genuine Christian experience.

I also want to emphasize that this approach is not the invention of modern, rationalistic evangelicals. It is not as if we emotionally stunted, mind-centred types have dreamed up this view of Christian experience so as to avoid the embarrassment of having to raise our hands and close our eyes! I want to suggest that this has been evangelical theology all along – by which I mean that this has been biblical, New Testament-style theology all along. It was certainly the view of the Reformers and of Jonathan Edwards.

I mention Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian, because he is a fascinating case in point. As you may know, Edwards was famous for defending and promoting the Great Awakening in North America in the mid-eighteenth century. Many of his critics were concerned at the level of emotion involved, but Edwards was staunch in defending what was happening and in outlining the true nature of revival and Christian experience. He was remarkably discerning, and one can only say of his massive Treatise Concerning Religious Affections that nothing comparable has been written since (and for the word affections we could probably substitute the modern word experiences).

Edwards argued, among many other things, that the only experiences that are truly spiritual arise from understanding or apprehending something of the word of God. Even at a time when tremendous emotions were being unleashed, Edwards said that some were genuine and some were not. The intensity or violence of the emotions tell us nothing, according to Edwards. Rather,

we must ask: Is it an experience that has come from understanding or apprehending something of the word of God. If it has arisen from that, says Edwards, then welcome it as the work of God's Spirit. If it has not, then it is fanaticism:

Now there are many affections that don't arise from any light in the understanding, and when it is thus it is a sure evidence that these affections are not spiritual, let them be ever so high.

I am quoting Jonathan Edwards, not so much because he is the only person who knows about the subject, but because he is so often upheld by those who champion a different understanding of Christian experience. Edwards was a supporter of the revival and a promoter of experiential Christianity, firmly opposed to anyone who dismissed the emotion that was displayed during the Great Awakening. However, he was far more careful than many of his advocates today. He saw with remarkable clarity the dangers into which much of modern evangelicalism has hurled itself in recent times. If only more of those evangelicals who are anxious to promote experiential Christianity would read Edwards! (A further extract from Jonathan Edwards' works is found elsewhere in this issue.)

We ought to recognize that Edwards was simply echoing the Reformers, who themselves were echoing the New Testament. Martin Luther spoke in just the same way, on the one hand to the Roman Catholics and on the other to the Anabaptists. Both groups wanted to separate the work of the Spirit from the means of the Spirit, as Luther would put it. Luther said that if God chooses to deal with us by his word, then who are we to seek to encounter him apart from his word, either through the Magisterium of the Church or the inner light of the mind. Luther argued that to approach Christian experience like that was to attempt to reach out and touch God; rather than allowing God to touch us.

Let me once more quote my basic proposition and then briefly explore some of the details of the Christian's experience of God.

**The character of the Christian's experience of God is determined by the reality of the God who has spoken his word and who continues to speak his word.**

**The heart of Christian experience: faith**

What experience does the reality of the word-speaking God produce? The heart of it is faith in God.

That's how it has been since God spoke to Abraham, and Abraham "believed the LORD", thus becoming the model for justification by faith. That is the proper effect of the word of God, not least because of its content. When we discover that the word God speaks is a gracious promise, then it is quite understandable that its appropriate experiential effect should be trust in that word (note how these two things are linked in, e.g., Rom 1:1-4; 16:25-27).

Again, these are familiar ideas – but we need to remind ourselves of them. These ideas must shape our lives and our preaching and teaching. The goal of Christianity is not the teaching and acquisition of information, although it is easy to gain the impression sometimes that it is. I asked a preacher friend some years ago what he hoped to achieve through his preaching. Sadly, his reply was: 'I really want my folk to gain a good grasp of Biblical Theology and learn how to interpret the

Bible for themselves’.

That’s not a bad secondary or tertiary goal, but it confuses the means with the end. Whether we are preachers or not, the goal of all our reading and study and preaching must be that we trust God more and more (and that our hearers, if we have them, should do the same).

To hear a word which you realize that God himself is breathing to you, and to realize that it is such a word that you are not terrified of God, but trusting him – what an experience that is! Faith in God brought about by the gospel of Christ – there can be no human experience in this life or the next to surpass it.

When you hear God speak a word like that to you, you might cry; you might collapse in a heap; you might (like Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress) jump three times for joy and sing a little song. It really doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you experience the word of God in such a way that you find yourself trusting him. We all must grow in that experience, whether we are a new Christian or an aging pastor.

The experience of being able to trust God is at the heart of Christian experience and there is only one means of finding it – through the living, active word of God.

### The persistence of Christian experience: hope

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

Here is an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit: that I should find myself and my concerns and my dreams oriented towards the future that God promises. Abounding in hope – that is our experience of God and again it stems from the gospel that God speaks to us.

You might say (as might I) that abounding in hope is not quite the way you would describe your current experience of God. If it is not, there is only way that it can increasingly become our experience: by hearing and putting our trust in the word that God speaks to us, the gospel.

Again, our goal must be that we ourselves and all those whom we love and serve should grow in that experience.

### The power of Christian experience: love

In a number of New Testament passages we discover that faith and hope find expression in a somewhat surprising way.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that

has come to you.

Colossians 1:3-6a

When you trust God and abound in hope, you'll also find yourself loving the brethren. Love for our fellow Christians does not arise in the New Testament simply from a command – it springs from the gospel; from our trust and hope in God. To find yourself loving other Christians is an experience of God.

### The paradox of Christian experience: joy

A friend said to me last year that he disagreed with some of the things I had been saying on this whole subject, which is fair enough. I was sorry to hear his disagreement, however, because it revealed that I had not been communicating very clearly. His disagreement was this: 'I really think there is a place for emotions in the Christian life'.

Of course there is a place for emotions in the Christian life! If ever I have given the impression otherwise, then perhaps it is just this face that I have been born with. The New Testament rings with joy. It might be expressed in a number of ways; it might have some sadness attached to it; it might be borne in the crucible of suffering; it might be expressed in the most exuberant or laid back way. In the end, the way we express it does not really matter. What does matter is that we do not confuse the joy of the gospel with the many other ways that we can experience joy.

As a young Christian (in age and every other respect) I was often concerned at the level of my Christian emotions (the lack thereof). I used to build them up by putting some music on the record player (we still used vinyl in those days). I'd play some music that I liked, very loud, and always felt much better afterwards. I felt that my spiritual barometer had gone up.

That was obviously nonsense. I should have applied the Jonathan Edwards test: Does your joy arise from understanding or apprehending something of the word of God? If only I had known.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, let me restate my proposition, for although I have skated only briefly over much of this subject, I hope that the heart of the matter has become clear:

**The character of the Christian's experience of God is determined by the reality of the God who has spoken his word and who continues to speak his word.**

If we lose touch with this fundamental truth, we will end up being mystics or sacramentalists or both. And there is no New Testament basis for being either.