

RELATING TO GOD THROUGH SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND OBJECTIVE REVELATION

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Introduction

Every perversion of Christianity has been some kind of departure from its interpersonal nature and purpose. The difficulties that have arisen in teaching, practice, and experience have resulted from *depersonalizing God or people* and from *de-interpersonalizing Christian experience*. Christianity addresses persons in relationship both vertically and horizontally because that is the most encompassing, most basic, and most complex reality we participate in. The Christian faith is distorted if it degenerates into impersonal experience.

This study on Christian experience is difficult to focus because (1) natural and supernatural appear to overlap in people created in God's image. (2) A given experience with God can contain elements natural and supernatural. (3) An experience combines objective occurrence and subjective response.

So we are defining subjective experience as experience caused by supernatural agency done directly to the person, whether perceivable by other people or not. It deals with what is not mediated through the experience of another or conveyed to us indirectly by natural means.

Our topic includes (a) what should be the experience of all Christians, (b) what might happen to some without being normative for all, or (c) what was originally possible for some but conceivably not experienced thereafter.

I. Reasons for Concern on This Issue

In one direction . . .

A. We fear dry, lifeless, powerless religion that comes from misemphasizing objective revelation. When Christian leaders commit suicide, fail in their marriages and in raising their children, get involved in significant long-term sin—when we find ourselves all too vulnerable, we consider whether something is missing that could prevent such things. Perhaps these problems come from making Christianity too rational.

B. We fear intolerance that comes from misemphasizing propositional revelation. Christian groups continually divide over doctrinal issues. While Christ's body divides over theoretical, eschatological, and formal issues, the rest of mankind may not even get acquainted with Christ himself. Our attitude may turn them away or disillusion them early on. When our energies turn inward on ourselves, we have little left to direct outward on the world.

In the other direction . . .

C. We fear doctrinal and practical excesses that come from misemphasizing subjective experience. Common subjective experience surely cannot set aside doctrinal differences like those between the wide range of Christian and quasi-Christian groups.

D. We fear false expectancies and disillusionment that come from misemphasizing subjective experience. Scripture does not teach a “name-it-claim-it,” “health-and-wealth,” “faith-formula” Christianity. Faith is not mind over matter. We hesitate to agree that not having special experiences means we are failing to receive everything God offers us, that we are not striving for them earnestly enough, that we have something wrong with our faith, that we have unforgiven sin, or that even our salvation is in question.

E. We fear diversion that comes from misemphasizing subjective experience. Christ warned his audiences (cp. Matthew 12:38-45, *etc.*) and his apostles (Luke 10:20) not to get pre-occupied with signs and wonders. Much of what goes under the name “renewal” are products of modern pop culture with its growing anti-intellectualism, anti-traditionalism, individualism, emotionalism, even thrill-seeking. This yearning for experience may represent another form of self-centeredness excused and encouraged by dressing it in religious garb.

From one misemphasis, we get pre-occupied with the medium more than the Message—with the Bible more than with God who speaks there, with information more than use, with head more than heart. From the other misemphasis, we get pre-occupied with private effects, which become the religious equivalent of stimulation dependency—the religious “high.”

These fears need not become real, because they are extremes; so we ask how we should understand the basic, normal, normative Christian experience without getting into excesses. Frequently truth lies between extremes, because there is an element of truth in them that causes them to arise. We look for the larger whole that incorporates whatever truths lie in the full spectrum of possible Christian experience.

That larger reality is **persons in relationship**. Interpersonalism integrates whatever non-interpersonal things are involved, measures the relative importance of issues, distinguishes potential from normative, identifies what is irrelevant and false, and guides our expectations for personal experience.

II. Christian Experience Is Interpersonal Experience.

A. Christian experience combines objective and subjective.

In respect to objective revelation and subjective experience, the normative Christian experience is not either-or. Since the normal Christian experience with God is interpersonal, there is both a subjective and objective aspect to it. It is both-and. Christianity has the character of *event*; it is something that *happens* and continues to happen. Objective plus subjective is not an **I-idea** connection.

Of importance here is the role of scripture and proclamation. Word revelation is not the reality itself, and propositional revelation does more than lead to ideas, understanding, and belief. The goal of salvation is personal relationship with God through Christ. The role of scripture must fit with the goal of salvation. Scripture points to him of whom it speaks: “*Beyond the sacred page [we] see thee, Lord.*” The Bible is the medium, not the Message.

Furthermore, there seems to be no biblical basis for saying that in conversion or otherwise God operates only through the word, statements, propositional revelation. The descriptive content of Christianity is for all practical purposes available entirely through the Bible. But there is more to conversion and growth than understanding words and the concepts they refer to; there is also motivation and affection, which are kinds of content themselves—contents that can be conveyed in other ways besides propositionally.

Consequently, besides operating **(a) through the word**, God operates also **(b) through the church**, that is, through other Christians who first appropriate the word into their own lives. In both cases God is working through the word. He also operates **(c) through circumstance**. He can plant events in our experience that help prepare us for responding favorably to the word, that strengthen us for greater tasks, and that direct our lives in varying degrees of specificity according to his will. This last operation is *aside from the word*, though not *contrary to the word* or *in place of the word*. It is possible, but not inherently necessary. It is indirect operation, not direct supernatural operation on the person parallel to the message. How frequently God intervenes this way we do not know because he intervenes invisibly. Finally, with Christians God operates **(d) through the relationship itself**. The previous three activities are *indirect*; this one is *direct*. It is direct in the sense that the relationship is direct. It is direct relationship, but *not perceivable* relationship. We know about the relationship by promise, not by perception (see below). But knowing we are in real relationship with an all-knowing person has a guiding and empowering effect on our Christian experience.

B. Christian experience combines objective person and subjective person.

As to objective revelation and subjective experience, the normative Christian experience is not just any kind of both-and. It is an interpersonal kind of both-and, not too subjective or too objective. Christian experience is natural subjective response by a person to natural objective influence from another person. It is not **I-it** relationship, but **I-he** (communing) and **I-you** (worshiping).

1. Normative Christian experience is not impersonal.

Holy Spirit matters belong here because Christ promised to send the Spirit and return to us so we would not be orphans (John 14:16-18). Feeling like orphans means feeling that God is distant, unaware, uninvolved. We conceive of God the Father as being in heaven and Christ the Son with him, but we have the Holy Spirit here with us and in us (John 14:17). The omniscience of God and the presence of his Spirit mean that we are not alone in the world.

We tend, however, to depersonalize this Spirit present with us and in us. That is somewhat understandable because (a) he has no personal name or term of address in scripture (except “Comforter/Advocate/Paraclete”). (b) Scripture never seems to address him in second person (“you”). (c) Some versions even mistranslate pronoun references to him in a few places (Acts 8:16 ASV; Romans 8:26 KJV). (d) The Greek word for “spirit” is *neuter gender*, which people sometimes get confused with *impersonal “sex” reference*. But he is a person because he does what persons do and is treated like persons are treated.

The Spirit is not a **power**, but a person who has power. He is not God's energy or an impersonal power that functions like a force field or an electrical charge. He does not produce in us the kinds of experiences that forces produce.

The Spirit is not a **feeling**, but a person we feel close to. Feelings belong to Christian experience, but they are the kinds of feelings that come from personal interactions, not impersonal ones. Being filled with the Spirit is not a "tingle," a "buzz," a surge of "ecstasy," an experience of "enthusiasm."

The Spirit is not an **attitude**, but a person who influences our attitudes.

The Spirit is not a **principle**, but a person who communicates principles to us.

The Spirit is not an **atmosphere**, but a person who fosters among us a positive interpersonal atmosphere.

The Spirit's effects must be distinguished from the Spirit himself. The effects that come from him are the kinds that come from interpersonal influence and come in an interpersonal way. We do not correlate the Spirit with emotion, intuition, miracle, or mystery just because we cannot fully explain him or his workings.

2. Normative Christian experience is not essentially miraculous.

The tendency to *depersonalize the Spirit* relates to the tendency to *supernaturalize Christian experience*. Supernaturalizing means interpreting something natural as supernatural or caused supernaturally. It comes from one of two sources. The first is the concept of natural depravity, the belief that each person biologically inherits a deformed nature caused by Adam's disobedience. Correcting that deformity requires supernatural operation. In traditional theology one aspect of that re-ordering, "re-creating" act is (a) the Spirit's supernatural "regeneration" of our deformed nature itself. Although this kind of regeneration would be done by a person, the operation itself would be impersonal. What the Spirit would do he would be doing *to* our nature. He would not be using personal influence but impersonal power; he would not be addressing the willing but the capacity for willing. Some theologians speak also of "a second definite work of grace": (b) the Spirit's supernatural "sanctification" that removes the vestiges of inbred sin. This concept underlies the doctrine of "entire sanctification," which says that a sanctified Christian can in principle avoid all sin and lead a life of perfect love. Conceiving of conversion and growth as essentially supernatural activities moves Christian concerns into the category of *nature* ("ontic being," hypostasis) instead of keeping them in the categories of *action* and *relationship*.

We have not seen adequate biblical basis for the doctrine of natural depravity (vs. psychological depravity). As a result, we have not understood Holy Spirit operations in conversion and growth as supernatural ones. Interpersonal operations are not stimulus-response or supernatural. Consequently, we do not include in subjective experience those kinds of experiences that would be part of supernatural conversion and development. If something is miraculous, it is not interpersonal *per se*.

Relationship to a supernatural Person does not make the relationship itself supernatural, and the relating does not mean supernatural experiences are produced. Human relationship with God occurs through the capacity we share with him. The image of God in us makes their relationship possible. Since personhood is something we and God have in common, it is not above our nature, supernatural, or miraculous.

3. Normative Christian experience is not necessarily perceivable.

Besides experiences that derive from *the Augustinian-Calvinistic view of mankind*, a second source of supernaturalizing experience is supposing the Spirit's work is perceivable. Christian experience with the divine is a different thing from perception of the divine. We have real relationship with the Father, with Christ, with the Spirit; but that real relationship is not perceivable in a sensory or extra-sensory manner. God "manifests" himself to us so we can "perceive" him and identify who he is. He must move into our realm before we can "sense" him. That was a reason for the incarnation (John 1:18). No one has ever seen God in his own nature (Exodus 33:20; John 1:18; 6:46; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16; Hebrews 11:27; 1 Peter 1:8; 1 John 4:12, 20). Samson did not know the Spirit had left him (Judges 16:20). If he could have perceived the Spirit himself, he would have noticed the absence of the Spirit. We will be like Christ and see him as he is (1 John 3:2). We have a direct relationship that we know about indirectly through promise in the word.

We need a sense of God's presence, and we should seek to have it; but we seek an *interpersonal sense of presence* rather than a *sensory or extra-sensory perception of presence*. We gain that sense through activities that reinforce awareness of his real presence: fellowship with the faithful, Bible reading, prayer, fasting, meditation—the "spiritual exercises." Finite awareness of omniscient presence is conscious response to communication through indirect means, not involuntary response to direct stimulation.

This approach does not deny what is possible, as if the Spirit could not give someone a "buzz." Rather, it observes what is natural and normative in Christian experiences, because they correlate with the nature and purpose of the faith. We are also not arguing that the Spirit no longer does what he used to do. We simply find no biblical basis for saying that supernatural subjective experiences ever happened to every Christian. We should not then expect them or claim to have them if we cannot distinguish them as divine. Consequently, we must pass to tests for distinguishing Christian experiences from their alternatives.

III. Pattern for Testing Christian Experience

In our estimation, *scripture does not teach any pattern of supernatural experience for the whole church age*. The New Testament does not say that (1) such experiences would cease with the apostles, that (2) they would always continue among true believers, that (3) they would come as "latter rain" after centuries of drought, or that (4) they would manifest themselves any time the gospel penetrates a new ethnic group. There is no biblical basis for believing that "the normal Christian experience" involves supernatural experiences.

A. Take a first-century viewpoint and apply tests.

We do well to *take a first-century viewpoint and apply tests* Christians then would have had to apply (1 John 4:1-4). That approach keeps us from both unbounded subjectivism and a spirit of denial. It makes us cautious but not obscurantist. First-century Christians had to test genuine Christian experience against competing phenomena. Taking a first-century

viewpoint and applying tests sidesteps the moot question about New Testament teaching on the duration of supernatural experience.

The main question is not whether supernatural experiences occur, but what we make of them. The issue is not *the raw experience* itself but our interpretation of *what it is*, our explanation of *what caused it*, and our inferences about *what to make of it*. In the modern Christian scene, the problem is not so much *deliberate misleading* as it is *sincere misreading* that ends up misleading. It is not so often bad motives as it is misunderstanding scripture and experience.

B. Use objective tests for subjective experiences.

Gideon used objective signs with cakes and chevron stew to verify that “*it is you that is talking to me*” (Judges 6:17). On the road to Damascus, Paul asked for identification because God does not let demonic entities claim to be his agents (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15).

Let other people help test our subjective experiences. Other people have not had our experience, but that does not mean we alone can evaluate it. The crux of the matter is identifying our experience with the word. Determining what certain biblical examples were like is an exegetical matter, and other people stand on equal footing with us in that regard. They cannot deny we had an experience, but they can discern whether we should equate it with New Testament signs. In some ways, it is harder for us to be “objective” about our own experiences.

IV. Tests for Genuine Christian Experience

A. Definitional test

Before anything else we must determine from scripture what certain Christian experiences really were. Revelation was more than having an idea come forcibly to mind. Prophecy was more than “for-telling” what spontaneously struck someone. Some Christians apparently reason that since they have God’s Spirit, ideas that come to their minds on Christian matters the Spirit has planted there, particularly if the idea is new to them, if they are reading the Bible and praying, if they have first asked God to show them how to understand or what to do. This whole procedure may be nothing more than supernaturalizing what “pops into my mind” from the “tacit dimension.” The origin of an idea is hard to account for, but we do not identify the Spirit with the creative urge that is simply part of what it means to be in God’s image.

For me to suppose that I have had a divinely originated subjective experience, I must be able to distinguish it from experiences I have on matters that are not even religious or Christian. The responsibility for that lies especially with me because other people have not had my subjective experience; so they cannot analyze some aspects of it.

Speaking in tongues means speaking in actual human languages (xenoglossia), not ecstatic utterance (glossolalia). Paul uses the expression “tongues of angels” (1 Corinthians 13:1), but as an exaggeration for emphasis akin to other heightened expressions in the context: “*move mountains*,” “*give my body to be burned* [note textual issue],” “*know all mysteries and all knowledge*,” “*give all my belongings to feed the poor*” (13:2-3). To the

Galatians Paul makes another hyperbolic statement about angels: “*If an angel from heaven should preach to you anything else . . . let him be accursed*” (1:8-9). Angels are spirits, who do not have tongues (Luke 24:3; Hebrews 1:4, 14) to make audible languages between themselves. Languages as sound-symbol systems would require the physicality of angels and their realm. Furthermore, if we have never heard angels speak, we have a problem identifying our verbal experience with their speaking. Finally, even angelic languages would have structure to convey meaning. The nature of interpreting tongues follows from the nature of tongues and the nature of revelation.

New Testament material on baptism in the Holy Spirit does not always indicate a necessary, direct, supernatural, visible outpouring of the Spirit beyond “the gift of the Spirit” to all at conversion. The issue is much too involved for treatment here, but we can stress a point about procedure. We cannot settle the experiential question without first settling the exegetical one; otherwise, we let personal experience dictate Christian doctrine. On this question the issue is not believing the Bible or believing experience, wanting the Spirit or not. The problem centers on identifying personal experience with New Testament phenomena. For my part, “baptism in the Spirit” is an alternate expression for “gift of the Spirit,” normally meaning indwelling presence. It is simply and significantly interpersonal relationship with God in the person of the Spirit. Any supernatural manifestation associated with baptism in the Spirit is a non-uniform effect based on the relationship itself.

Being slain in the spirit rests on a misunderstanding of Paul’s Damascus road experience and perhaps some other indecisive texts. The phenomenon accommodates biblical material to ambiguous experiences unidentifiable as to cause and pointless as to effect.

Dreams, visions, and trances recur in both testaments. The previous items involve understanding the New Testament as to what the *experience as such* was. These items involve interpreting *individual experiences* to make sure that they are divine in cause and nature.

B. Doctrinal test

Since God is consistent, anything he reveals later harmonizes with what he has established before, especially in confrontation with opposing agencies. No experience subjective or otherwise can authenticate a doctrine or practice incompatible with God’s revelation in scripture (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; John 16:13-15; Galatians 1:8-9; Hebrews 9:26-28; 1 Peter 3:18; Jude 3).

There are cautions here. (a) The doctrinal test assumes correct understanding of previous revelation. (b) The doctrinal test applies only when there has been previous revelation on the matter at hand, or when (c) the prophet has been wrong on some claim; nothing else that prophet says should be respected either. (d) The doctrinal test assumes that the items on which someone errs are sufficiently important that God would take his Spirit from him on that account.

C. Moral test (John 9:31, 33; Mark 9:39)

The moral test does not mean that people must be morally perfect before they can have supernatural experiences from God. But Jesus observed that it is not natural for a person to speak against God soon after relating to God in a special way.

D. Practical tests

1. Are we in control of ourselves (1 Corinthians 14:32)? The Spirit gives control; he does not throw us out of control.

2. Do our experiences draw attention to us (2 Corinthians 2:7-9; Matthew 4:3-4) more than glorify God (Matthew 5:16; 9:8; 115:31; Luke 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; Acts 4:12; 21:17-20) or benefit other people? Are we trying to get attention? Do our experiences border on exhibitionism? Are they used for making money (Acts 3:6; 8:18-24; 16:16-18)?

3. What results come from our experiences? Do they always succeed (Deuteronomy 18:20-22)? Do they stand the test of time?

E. Control test

What is not distinctive to Christianity cannot distinguish Christian experience. Some experiences inside Christianity take place outside it as well. We must assume either that the beliefs involved are not very important or that the experiences are not distinctively Christian. Conversely, we must differentiate between the true and the fake in these other arenas. What looks like our experience may not be the same thing; it may be meant to deceive the very elect (Matthew 24:24).

Testing and evaluating must balance healthy caution and willing openness. We do not want to be so gullible that we believe every experience ("spirit") or so skeptical we cannot be corrected. Because we want certainty and security, we may be prone to accept any experience that looks close; because we fear excesses, we may overreact against anything special. We must be discerning (1 John 4:1) and cautious (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

V. Alternatives to Genuine Christian Experience

The Holy Spirit does not correspond with the subjective, the affective (feelings, emotions), the intuitive, the mysterious, or the miraculous. He is a person; so his guidance and empowerment occur first of all through interpersonal means. The alternatives to a . . .

A. Divine reconstruction of experiences are frequently impersonal ones.

B. Psychological

Here belong *psychosomatic phenomena* that illustrate the significant impact that the mind and mental attitude have on the physical body and *vice versa*. *Altered states of consciousness* involve some curious subjective experiences. *Illusion* and *warped perception* do not compare with Holy Spirit phenomena, but to the person with mental difficulties they may not be distinguishable. *Hallucinations* are not to be confused with visions, seizures with baptism in the Spirit or being "slain in the Spirit," catatonic states with trances, and so on.

C. Paranormal

Paranormal refers to a wide range of phenomena studied by psychic researchers: telekinesis, precognition, telepathy, apports, materialization, clairvoyance, clairaudience, extra-bodily-experiences, hypnotism, poltergeist phenomena, psychometry. Paranormal may not differ from demonic or psychological, but theoretically it may. Some people have natural capacities other people do not have. Inasmuch as human persons have them, the capacities are not supernatural; they are “normal.” Inasmuch as not all human persons have them, they are not normal, but “*para*-normal.”

We need to be aware of what happens in arenas outside the Christian setting. Literature about psychological and psychic research challenges us to distinguish these things from special Christian experience. Most of us do not realize the range of human potential and natural possibility, which sets us up for supernaturalizing Christian experiences. The medical profession continues to gain appreciation for mind-body interdependence and the extent of control the mind can exert over the body. Curious experiences occur in quasi-Christian groups and pagan religions. We wonder whether these are unusual natural phenomena that people interpret in terms of their differing worldviews. If so, they no more mark Christian experience than they legitimize any other viewpoint.

D. Demonic

Appealing to the demonic to explain Christians’ experiences is probably overdone. Someone who has the promise not to be snatched out of Christ’s hand (John 8:28; 10:28-29) would not likely be unconsciously oppressed or possessed by demonic agencies (cp. 1 John 5:18). Nevertheless, Christians do subject themselves to this danger in extreme efforts to worship by getting rid of personal identity (self), to becoming zero, to letting go of themselves. Such efforts belong more to Eastern mysticism than Christian worship. When people create a vacuum that removes their personal wills, they may be inviting in whatever entities are “out there”—demons, “extra-terrestrials” (?). People leave the interpersonal character of Christianity and relationship to God by losing touch with their own personal identity.

Tests eliminate certain phenomena from being divine or at least distinctively divine. Tests do not identify which alternative a given case is, and they do not need to. Our concern is to avoid *misidentifying* what we have experienced. *The tests help keep us from supernaturalizing our experiences.* They keep us from misinterpreting what may be natural experience common to many or all people simply as human beings. *Tests keep us from confusing divine and demonic.* The underlying test is the interpersonal one.

The safeguard is this: **if you cannot distinguish an experience from other possibilities, do not consider it divine.** Don’t strain to be a *prophet* just because you think your situation needs one. Don’t try to add authority to your ideas by saying, “God told me.” Don’t require *God’s special leading* just because you want special help, and don’t require God’s special leading to be *knowable special leading*. Don’t require more *certainty* than God intends to provide. Take ambiguous experiences as data to consider rather than as signs to follow. Affirming the lesser claim is the safer policy.

In summary, past objective revelation *tests* current objective revelation. Objective criteria *test* subjective experience, and subjective experience *confirms* objective revelation. *New* revelation and special divine guidance must be distinguishable from alternative

possibilities. Normal and normative subjective Christian experience is interpersonal rather than impersonal. Experiences are not ends in themselves; they are given for interpersonal purposes beyond themselves in edification and outreach.

Conclusion

Like human experience generally, Christian experience is faith experience (2 Corinthians 5:7). “*Walking by faith, not sight*” means conducting our lives by trust more than direct experience. A trust situation is an interpersonal one because “I” is trusting “you.” In the Christian application of this principle, we trust the promise of God to save us, to be with us, to guide and empower us, to protect us from more than we can handle (1 Corinthians 12:13). Even though experiences like Christ’s appearance to the eleven would certainly help us, we do not need the direct basis for the certainty that Thomas wanted (John 20:24-29). Jesus told him that people who believe without seeing are more blessed than those who believe by direct experience. Scripture was written to give adequate reason to believe through credible testimony like that of Thomas’s fellow apostles (John 20:30-31; cp. Luke 16:37-41). God evidently deems that sufficient; anything else he may decide to do goes beyond what is necessary.

We approach subjective experience and objective revelation in this way, remembering that **every perversion of Christianity has been some kind of departure from its interpersonal nature and purpose.**