

# *Experiencing God: An Examination of the Place of Religious Experience in Pentecostalism*



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**ABSTRACT:** *Religious experience has played a large role in the development of Christian theology over the course of history. This particular avenue of understanding God and the Bible is centered in the human ability to experience Him, or believing by means of ‘feeling’. This has been a defining feature of Pentecostal doctrine since its beginnings and has benefited the church in general. There is, however, more to understand about doctrine and experience, and how the human ability to understand through reason is also foundational to faith and belief. The importance of religious experience should be evaluated in light of its advantages and disadvantages to the church’s general and historical doctrine and practice. Churchgoers and theologians of all denominational perspectives need to examine the place of religious experience in the church, and where it could be aiding or damaging their corporate or individual practice of theological doctrine.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pentecostalism, doctrine, practice, religious experience, reason.*

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Since its beginnings, Pentecostalism has thrived off the experiences of collective and individual interactions with God. An emphasis is placed upon one’s ability to feel God’s presence, whether at work within oneself or evidently present with another. This can be seen through the more supernatural occurrences that Pentecostalism underscores as important, and the gifts of the Spirit that are seen as vital in the church. Experience as beneficial for faith is recognized and celebrated within Pentecostalism, as well as many other denominations. An issue arises, however, when experience becomes the foundation to doctrine in the church. Placing too much importance on experiential occurrences can be harmful or even destructive to the church’s doctrine. Most Christians would contend that experience has value and helps to personalize God for the individual. Still others would say that the most precious way of knowing God is to experience Him. For the purposes of this paper, the first view is adopted.

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This paper seeks to explore religious experience as the basis for doctrine and practice, and how it can be helpful or damaging to the church and individual faith. To understand this issue, the question of experience's value in relation to the church and the individual must be asked, and opinions from different sides must be consulted. In order to accomplish this, it is important to note the advantages and disadvantages to experience. It is further beneficial to discuss the historical significance of experience, especially, but not solely, for Pentecostalism. Before this, however, a clarification between doctrine and practice must be made, and why experience could be more helpful to one than the other. This paper will then consider the viewpoints of Pentecostalism, as well as varying other insight into this issue. To begin with, it is necessary to clarify the difference between doctrine and practice, so as to set firm definitions to then discuss religious experience in light of.

### Experience's Role in Doctrine and Practice

The fundamental characteristics of doctrine and practice differ substantially. Doctrine is the basic Christian beliefs, while practice could otherwise be called "tradition".<sup>2</sup> The question that must be asked of this and of experience then is: "what relationship is there between the three?". Doctrine is the core beliefs of faith. A rationalist viewpoint, which values reasoning apart from the experience of the five senses, would state that these beliefs can be informed by experience, but not based entirely off it.<sup>3</sup> This would lead one to assume that experience should be backed up by rational, reasonable thought. Other viewpoints may state, however, that beliefs are based entirely on how one perceives something through the senses.<sup>4</sup> This latter view does not make sense in this context, as evangelical Christian doctrine is based on Scripture, which can be experienced through the hearing or seeing of the words but cannot be understood in this way. Scripture can, by contrast, be understood through reasoning. The ideas presented in it can be comprehended through the intellect. Humanity often struggles to believe something they know as reality. They can know something intellectually but come to understand and believe it by experiencing it. An example of this is the fact that one could know that a bigger sized engine in a car uses more fuel than a smaller one, but this is made very real when that same person has to then put the fuel into the bigger car. Beliefs then, can be experienced, but they should be present first in the mind.

Practice as the avenue for living out doctrine could be described as experiencing doctrine. One can understand their belief by going through how it makes them feel, or how it affects their senses. In this would be the example of the belief that God empowers His church, and the practice of speaking in tongues through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. This causes the believer to truly grasp the reality of their beliefs. It can be further argued that beliefs cannot be known as real *unless* one has an experience with it. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, it will be stated that doctrine can be informed by experience—whether that is through the initial experience of reading or hearing Scripture—or by the practicing of that doctrine.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "Doctrine", "Practice" (Walton Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 345, 935.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Foreman, *Prelude to Philosophy: An Introduction for Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 110.

<sup>4</sup> Foreman, *Prelude*, 110.

## Experiencing God: A Pentecostal Viewpoint

The Pentecostal denomination emphasizes the spiritual gift of tongues, or the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. This often involves the experience of having one's tongue speak a language that is foreign to the speaker by the supernatural gifting of God.<sup>5</sup> When this happens, it is not because of prior knowledge of the language by the speaker, but by the working of the Spirit through the speaker. If the tongues is public and requires interpretation, then the interpretation is supernatural as well and not because the interpreter understood the language being spoken in.<sup>6</sup> The experience of speaking in tongues is viewed as the initial sign of the Spirit's power being poured out on the believer. Stemming from this preliminary experience follows others that are evidential of a godly lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> In this way, believers can know they are filled with the Spirit because they can experience the outward expression of His presence in their lives. There is no denying that this is a great expression of God's power for the individual or the church body.

Many early Pentecostal movements were based around the experiential moving of the Spirit through gatherings of people, often resulting in the pouring out of certain spiritual gifts such as tongues.<sup>8</sup> These events are foundational to Pentecostalism and established it as a rightful denomination of the church. This idea around the experience of the Spirit has further served the Pentecostals well. Mass outpourings of the Spirit are often dynamic and attract attention from secular media outlets and persons that are drawn to the dramatic and inexplicable occurrences, providing the opportunity for many to hear the Gospel.<sup>9</sup> It has also allowed for an appeal to cultures that value supernatural experience as important to their own religion, thus making it a viable expression of missional work. These factors show the Pentecostal interpretation of religious experience and its continued influence on this denomination's practices since.

## History and Religious Experience

Revival struck Wales in 1904, and for six months it rushed through the country, leaving behind a renewed sense of God's presence.<sup>10</sup> Later the 1920s, northern China was also swept with an

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<sup>5</sup> The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, *Local Church Constitution and Bylaws*. (Mississauga, ON: The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada International Office, 2018), 35.

<sup>6</sup> David Womack, ed. *Pentecostal Experience: the Writings of Donald Gee. Settling the Question of Doctrine Versus Experience* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1994) 155.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon F. Atter, *The Third Force: Second Edition* (Peterborough, ON: The College Press, 1962), 121-122. Some of the other experiences that one can go through after the initial Baptism are: "holiness of life, holy boldness, a passion for souls, and the ability to worship God 'in spirit and in truth'" (John 4:24).

<sup>8</sup> J. Roswell and Alice Reynolds Flower, "Spreading the Pentecostal Flames," in *Pentecost in My Soul*, Edith Blumhofer (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Roswell, "Spreading", 58.

<sup>10</sup> Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Fresh: Experiencing God in Revival and Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 31.

awakening, as hundreds of people accepted Christ as their Saviour.<sup>11</sup> These are wonderful events that can encourage believers and give hope for cultures and people who have not come to saving faith. One does have to go back slightly further, however, to see that experiencing God move in such a profound way has been happening since the time of the early church. In Acts 2:1-13, the Holy Spirit came on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. They began to speak in tongues and in so doing were able to preach the Gospel to hundreds of people in their native languages. This is an incredibly personal act on the part of God to those who could formerly not understand or had to speak a foreign language to understand. These are events that the entire universal church can see the value of experience in. Through the example in Acts, and the two revival stories, it can be seen that religious experience is an avenue God uses to reach the unsaved.

Within the early movements of Pentecostalism, the church was welcoming to those rejected by society or needing help, regardless of whether they had experienced God by way of healing (another expression of religious experience) or not.<sup>12</sup> There has been a shift in this now, though not dramatic, but one that is nonetheless interesting to consider. Fettke writes: “The healing-deliverance-miracles emphasis has led so many to become one-dimensional in pastoral ministry: lay hands on and pray for the ‘afflicted’.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on further to say that, “If the afflicted are not healed or helped in the way the culture expects, the afflicted are relegated to a kind of second-class citizenship in the local faith community.”<sup>14</sup> As the author describes, Pentecostals have begun to greatly value religious experience, and are now inclined to consider those who have not experienced God as lesser than those who have. With this in mind then, it is important to consider the advantages and disadvantages of experience to understand if this shift is beneficial or dangerous for the modern church.

### **The Advantages of Religious Experience**

There is no doubt that experiencing something makes it personal. Personal experiences, especially ones that cannot be explained, are largely undeniable for most people. Testimonies of various experiences throughout history have helped to shape worldviews and have brought clarity to current issues. Firsthand stories of people’s experiences can be cause for greater understanding of certain issues, and make those issues seem more real.<sup>15</sup> Experiencing something firsthand can change one’s perception, or outlook on an issue. If something is unexplainable, especially in the supernatural sense, however, then it becomes a catalyst for either personal change or catastrophe.

An example may help to clarify this: One can know that a coma is a medical condition that means severe damage has been done to the body. They can also know that it takes the body a long time to heal from the kind of injury that will result in a coma. However, this idea will be made much

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<sup>11</sup> Blackaby, *Fresh*, 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> Steven M. Fettke and Michael L Dusing. “A Practical Pentecostal Theodicy?: A Proposal,” *Pneuma* 38 (1–2) (2016), 164, doi:10.1163/15700747-03801002.

<sup>13</sup> Fettke, *Theodicy*, 164.

<sup>14</sup> Fettke, *Theodicy*, 164.

<sup>15</sup> Alasdair Richardson. “Touching Distance: Young People’s Reflections on Hearing Testimony from Holocaust Survivors.” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 20 (3) (2021), 3, doi:10.1080/14725886.2021.1874692. This article was on the response from students after hearing the stories of Holocaust survivors.

more realistic to someone if they go through this event themselves, as opposed to if they only read about it. The knowledge was there, but the gravity of the implications was not yet known. To take this illustration one step further then, it is an even more powerful experience for someone to be completely healed of the injury in a way that science cannot explain. This is when this becomes what might be referred to as a “supernatural” experience. It is impossible by natural occurrence, so it therefore must be from some kind of force that is beyond the power of the natural world.

This example illustrates the necessity of experience to the natural world, but it also shows how experience can be useful to show others the possibility of a supernatural realm. Further, it demonstrates that one’s experience can solidify their knowledge and make it real to them. With all of this in mind, it is now essential to discuss the disadvantages of experience and how it can shape perception and knowledge to their detriment.

### **The Disadvantages of Religious Experience**

The human experience of God is incomplete. Due to the nature of human beings, experiencing God in His fullest capacity is impossible. In fact, the Bible is clear that no one has seen God (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12) and why this is.<sup>16</sup> Therefore it is clear that any experience one may have with God is fundamentally inadequate to sufficient comprehension of Him. While experience can be helpful in increasing understanding of God through inexplicable supernatural occurrences, it cannot increase that knowledge enough for anyone to fully comprehend God’s existence. This can be seen in the testimonies of people who have come to Christ after going through or witnessing a supernatural incident. After the experience, reasoning of the experience has to be done to truly understand its unnatural qualities. In this way, experience by itself is unable to provide complete comprehension.<sup>17</sup>

Human senses can be easily betrayed and fooled. A simple optical illusion can deceive the eyes into seeing something that is not there, or that is a warped version of the real image.<sup>18</sup> All five of the senses can be lost through disease, old age, trauma to the brain, or trauma to the sense itself. If one is to experience something, it must be done through the senses. The loss or dulling of a sense can have a detrimental affect on someone’s life. Eyesight precision often gradually decreases as one gets older and can eventually cause problems with how one is able to function in their daily life. Loss of ability to hear can also make it hard to understand others and, in some cases, speak. In these ways then, senses can fail or damage perception and cause one’s understanding to be inaccurate. When discussing religious experiences, sense perception will play an important role in how one perceives a given occurrence. Someone speaking in tongues who cannot hear either their own speech or the interpretation of the tongues (whether spoken by them or another and providing there is not ASL interpretation) will not comprehend the full meaning of the experience. In a similar way, someone who is visually impaired will be unable to witness the religious experience of another.

Religious experience is not just affected by loss of sense, however, but also by the perception previous experience will bring. If one goes through trauma, this will affect their ability to comprehend biblical concepts. Someone who has an unhealthy or non-existent relationship with their father will have a difficult time understanding the idea of God as a father, as their past

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<sup>16</sup> Exodus 33:20 makes it clear that “no one may see [God] and live”.

<sup>17</sup> It must also be made clear that reason by itself cannot cause full comprehension of God.

<sup>18</sup> (Personal Communication)

experience will place a negative bias upon them. One article states, “in a large sample of adult childhood abuse survivors, paternal maltreatment was negatively correlated with religious and spiritual self-concept and religious involvement”.<sup>19</sup> Negative experience is not just limited to trauma, as many people can also go through occurrences within their religion that impact them harmfully. Someone who believes the Baptism of the Spirit can only be fulfilled through the gift of tongues, and does not receive this gift, could succumb to a negative idea of the Spirit’s role in their life due to being unable to experience Him in this way. Similarly, if they perceive they are viewed by the church as a lower class of Christian because they have not been given this gift, they may develop a negative outlook on the church itself. This, unchecked and in its extreme form, could lead to an eventual leaving of the faith. Before a decision on this issue can be made, however, a discussion of some opposing viewpoints on the subject must be made.

### Other Viewpoints

When examining other points of view, Mysticism is apparent as major opposition. Mystics believe that one can have an experience with God apart from knowing Scripture, and that this experience is elevated to a place of authority above Scripture.<sup>20</sup> The Alexandrian school of thought was regarded as ascribing to this idea, though perhaps unfairly, but it has progressed through history as a common belief in the church.<sup>21</sup> This concept diminishes the authority of Scripture, and views human feelings and the ability to experience God in themselves in a divine way.<sup>22</sup> While this form believes feelings to be the ultimate source of knowledge, another form of Mysticism believes that God reveals truth to humanity through their feelings.<sup>23</sup> Thus, both forms oppose the idea that doctrine should be founded on Scripture, reasoned through, and complimented by the experience of practicing belief.

Another point of view that differs from the above stated one is originated by Plato. This idea holds that reason is the only source of knowledge and that there is no place for feelings. But, as one scholar states, “it is highly impersonal knowledge and, as some would say, highly depersonalizing”.<sup>24</sup> It allows for what is real to be manipulated to accomplish any purpose it needs to, thereby removing ethical standards as humanity becomes viewed as mere things to be used.<sup>25</sup> Thought that follows this idea is therefore against the value of experience as a way of personally knowing God through one’s feelings, as they regard feelings as having no importance whatsoever.

There are other points of view, but many of them stem out of these main two that elevate either the place of experience above Scripture or diminish experience as worthless compared to

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<sup>19</sup> Sulani Perera, and Patricia A. Frazier. “Changes in Religiosity and Spirituality Following Potentially Traumatic Events,” *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 26 (1), 2013), 2. doi:10.1080/09515070.2012.728883.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 62.

<sup>21</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 62-64. Hodge cautions against labelling the Alexandrian school of thought as Mysticism when he states, “Although the Alexandrian theologians had these points of agreement with the Mystics, yet as they were speculative in their whole tendency, and strove to transmute Christianity into a philosophy, they are not properly to be regarded as Mystics in the generally received theological meaning of the term”.

<sup>22</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 62.

<sup>23</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Montgomery Boice, *Foundations*, 20.

reason. Both of these ideas are flawed, however, as can be seen by the weaknesses pointed out in each. Mysticism takes authority away from Scripture, and the elevation of reason impersonalizes God and fellow humans as merely 'things'. With this understanding in place, it is possible to come to a personal determination on the place religious experience should have in the church.

### **Religious Experience: Foundational or Not**

Although several other points of view were addressed, it would be further insightful to look into the benefits of such views, and how they have perhaps helped the church throughout history. Similarly, it may be useful to know of the hinderances they have also brought to the church, and the school of thought that corresponds to each in modern society so as to understand the opposition one might face. There is also use for more discussion into denominational points of view on this issue, and why Pentecostalism is distinct from evangelicalism because of its beliefs surrounding religious experience.<sup>26</sup>

Upon the basis of the past research then, comes an understanding of the place religious experience should play in the doctrine and practice of the church. Perhaps the church, and specifically Pentecostalism, should be careful of making religious experience necessary for their doctrine. The disciple Thomas, upon his experience of touching and seeing Jesus, believed that He had risen from the dead, but Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Thomas needed the experience of the risen Christ, as did many of the other disciples when they went to the tomb in search of evidence. Christians following, however, cannot see the empty tomb, or touch Jesus' hands and side, yet they believe He rose because of what the Bible says. This belief is then made real to them through the inworking of the Spirit, and the personal relationship God cultivates with each individual. Nevertheless, they realized first because of their ability to understand through reason what the Bible stated.

Therefore, experience is necessary to doctrine, but only in the facets of initial introduction to it (i.e. reading of the Bible), and the personal connection to it that comes after reasoning. For practice, religious experience is key, as it could be argued that one cannot practice something without experiencing it in the practice. Finally, although religious experience can be beneficial to Christianity, the significance weaknesses that are apparent with it should be a source of concern when making it foundational. Instead, reason should be employed as well to balance out experience's weaknesses and highlight it's strengths. Consequently, one cannot fully know God without religious experience, but one cannot fully know God through religious experience.

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<sup>26</sup> A good article to look at for more information on this is Tania Harris' conversation around Pentecostalism and its differences from evangelicalism. She examines revelatory experience in Christianity throughout history and the differing viewpoints around it. Harris, Tania. 2020. "Where Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism Part Ways: Towards a Theology of Pentecostal Revelatory Experience 1." *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 23 (1): 31-40.

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