

Scripture and Experience

By Alberto Timm

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was grounded originally on the hermeneutical principle of *sola Scriptura* (the exclusiveness of Scripture). Much emphasis was placed on the grammatical-historical meaning of the biblical text. Other sources of religious knowledge, such as tradition, reason, and experience, were regarded as acceptable only if in harmony with what was understood as the teachings of God's Word. But this approach has lost much of its power under the influence of philosophical existentialism, encounter theology, Pentecostalism, and postmodernism. Today, many Christians rely more on their own subjective experience than on the objective teachings of Scripture.

By contrast, Seventh-day Adventists see themselves as a special end-time prophetic movement raised up by God "to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms."¹ Yet, if true Christian religion consists of a living experience with God and being loyal to the teachings of Scripture, what specific roles do Scripture and experience play in the Christian life? How can they be integrated in order to avoid the risk of overemphasizing one to the detriment of the other?

The present article discusses briefly four distinctive attempts to integrate Scripture and experience into the Christian life. The main purpose is to evaluate critically each of those attempts in the light of God's Word, trying to identify the model that better reflects the biblical view of the subject.

1. Scripture Overruling Experience

Christian denominations tend over time to replace the teachings of Scripture by anti-biblical components of contemporary culture.² Attempting to reverse that process, some people end up overruling personal experience with a strong emphasis on the teachings of Scripture. Under this model, the objective dimension of religion speaks much louder than the subjective one, and obedience to a given body of rules overshadows a living relationship with Christ. The natural outcome of this approach may be formalism and legalism.

Undoubtedly, the cognitive content of Scripture plays a foundational role within the Christian life. The apostle Paul argues that, for someone to believe in God, he or she needs to have an objective knowledge of God (Rom 10:13-15). According to Alister McGrath, "we don't just believe in God, we believe certain quite definite things about him. In other words, faith has a content as well as an object."³

Christ defined His genuine followers as those who live by "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4),⁴ and who hear His "words" and put "them into practice" (Matt 7:24). In the Revelation of John we are warned that "if anyone adds anything" to the words of the prophecy of that book, "God will add to him the plagues described" in it; and "if anyone takes the words away from" that book, "God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city" (Rev 22:18, 19). And Peter adds, "we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). So, we are not allowed to disregard the wording of Scripture, for it is actually God's Word in human language.

However, as meaningful as biblical doctrines are, true religion is much more than just intellectual convictions. It means a spiritual conversion that works from the inside towards the outside of the person (see John 3:1-21), so that he or she becomes a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). Neither rationalism nor social activism can generate such saving experience.

2. Experience Overruling Scripture

Departing from the cold formalism of a mere intellectual religion, many Christians have overruled the cognitive component of Scripture with some kind of existential or charismatic form of religion.⁵ Influential in this process was Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, suggesting that our formal "I-It" relationships should be replaced by more personal "I-You" ones, that is, treating people (and God) as *persons* with whom fulfilling relationships may be formed rather than as *objects* to fulfill our needs.⁶ This approach helped to shape the so-called "theology of encounter"⁷ whereby knowing God personally and individually is the aim rather than knowing about Him.⁸

Many modern Christians, who trust the supposed "voice of the Spirit" speaking to their own minds more than the Bible text, try to justify such an attitude with Paul's statement that "the letter [*gramma*] kills, but the Spirit [*pneuma*] gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). But the context of the statement reveals that Paul is simply contrasting the old and the new covenants. The old (referred to as "the letter") was indeed a limited shadow of the new (see Heb 8). Yet, if we assume that the old was faulty in its very essence, then we have to assume also that God established an erroneous way of salvation for Israel. The problem was not with the covenant itself, but rather with its misinterpretation, first, by ancient Israel, and, later on, by the church in Corinth. Ralph Martin suggests that the "letter" here refers to "a certain interpretation of the Torah which prevailed at Corinth" or, in other words, "a misuse of Moses' law seen as an end in itself and which fails to appreciate its true purpose (Rom 10:4: *telos*) as leading to Christ, its fulfillment (Gal 3:24)."⁹

Despite the distortions proposed by both encounter theology and charismatic theology, personal experience with God is basic for the Christian religion. In contrast to the Greek emphasis on knowing oneself, the Bible places the relationship with God as the basis of all true knowledge. Isaiah invited Israel, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near" (Isa 55:7). Hosea added, "So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD" (Hos 6:3, NASB). Jesus declared that "eternal life" means to know both God the Father and Christ Himself (John 17:3). Such knowledge includes a deep relational aspect, well expressed in Christ's own analogy of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-17), Paul's expression "in Christ" (Rom 8:1, 39; 16:3, 7, 9, 10; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 1:22; 5:6; Eph 1:13), and John's mention of having "the Son of God" (1 John 5:12).

Acknowledging that both Scripture and experience play a foundational role within the Christian religion, there remains still the need to consider in more detail how they interrelate within the Christian life.

3. Experience Equaling Scripture

Seeing the need of keeping together both Scripture and experience, some Christians are tempted to equate experience with Scripture. A classic example of this is the so-called "Wesleyan quadrilateral," in which Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are placed on the same level of authority. However, Donald A. D. Thorsen points out that the image of a quadrilateral may not be the best representation of John Wesley's theology:

If one insists on choosing a geometric figure as a paradigm for Wesley, a tetrahedron – a tetrahedral pyramid – would be more appropriate. Scripture would serve as the foundation of the pyramid, with the three sides labeled tradition, reason, and experience as complementary but not primary sources of religious authority.¹⁰

Any attempt to raise experience up to the same level of Scripture creates a certain kind of divided loyalty, in which sometimes Scripture overrules experience and at other times experience supercedes Scripture. Oftentimes human reason and personal taste decide which of these elements should have primacy. So, those

teachings of the Bible with which one agrees and which are to one's liking are recognized as normative. On the other hand, those scriptural portions which he or she considers senseless or tasteless are regarded as culturally conditioned and obsolete. Even though the authority of Scripture is acknowledged, that authority is frequently overshadowed by experience.

In contrast to encounter theology and charismatic theology, which tend to replace Scripture with experience, the biblical text itself seems to be taken more seriously in postmodern hermeneutics. But, by employing "reader-oriented criticism" in connection with Scripture,¹¹ the postmodern approach is concerned not so much with what the biblical text actually says or how it was understood by its original readers but with how people today understand the text and what meaning it actually has for them. By moving the focus of authority from Scripture to its readers, postmodernists open up the biblical text to a variety of subjective interpretations, all of which are equally valid. Consequently, there is no longer a clear and consistent Word of God, but rather many conflicting words attributed supposedly to God.

Addressing the subject of "relevance and ambiguity of experience," Anthony C. Thiselton warns that if experience "is abstracted from Scripture, tradition, and reason, it is notoriously capable of unstable or diverse interpretation."¹² So, in order to avoid this danger, we have to take more seriously into consideration what the Bible has to say about itself and its relationship to experience.

4. Scripture Mediating Experience

The Bible states clearly that our saving experience with God has to be informed and mediated by God's written word. In the book of Psalms the word of God is metaphorically called "a lamp" to our feet and "a light" to our path" (Ps 119:105). Christ stated that His followers should live "by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Paul explains, "'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:13-15). Those and other biblical invitations to live faithfully by God's Word imply that the Word precedes experience. According to Artur Weiser, "faith is always man's reaction to God's primary action."¹³

Scriptural evidences indicate that the "word" by which Christians should live is not subjective impressions of the Holy Spirit on the conscience of the Christian. That "word" refers to the objective prophetic voices recorded in Scripture. Isaiah warns, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isa 8:20). The apostle Peter explains, "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:19-21).

Even accepting the primacy of Scripture over experience, many Christians today read the Bible no longer to *learn* truth, but only to *nourish* their mystical relationship with Christ.¹⁴ Obedience to the valuable components of biblical ethics is regarded as deriving spontaneously from a personal relationship with Christ. Those components which do not derive in that way are regarded as meaningless and irrelevant. As attractive as this notion might be, we have to realize that the acceptance of Christ as one's personal Savior does not automatically lead to concrete obedience to lifestyle components such as Sabbath observance, tithing, and health reform. When someone accepts Christ, the principle and motivation for obedience is implanted in his or her life (see Phil 2:13), providing no room whatsoever for human merit in salvation; but obedience in concrete terms has to be learned from Scripture.

Speaking of Christ's own experience, the Bible declares that "he grew in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). Ellen G. White adds that from Mary's "lips and from the scrolls of the prophets, He [Jesus] learned of heavenly things. The very words which He Himself had spoken to Moses for Israel He was now taught at His mother's knee."¹⁵ And the apostle Paul counseled Timothy to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:14, 15). This means that the saving knowledge of God must be learned from Scripture and practiced in the daily life.

Concluding Remarks

Since true Christian religion is a personal experience with God and with fellow human beings (Matt 22:34-40), we cannot discard its experiential element without ruining our whole religion. But many Christians today are accepting an experience-centered approach that leaves Scripture open to a large variety of subjective interpretations. Those who support the *sola Scriptura* principle will never regard experience as of the same or higher value than Scripture. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the canonical prophets will guide the believers into full conformity with God's word. According to Christ's own words, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). In other words, our experience should be mediated and guided by Scripture. This means that our personal experience with God, instead of departing from His Word, should grow closer and closer to it.

Independent thinking is regarded as a basic characteristic of a mature person. Undoubtedly, Christians should "be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts."¹⁶ But, at the same time, Christian maturity also means becoming increasingly dependent on God and His Word. In reality, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:6-8).

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¹Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1911), 595.

²An insightful approach to that process is provided by Jacques Ellul in his book *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

³Alister McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine: Its Relevance and Purpose for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 39.

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

⁵A helpful assessment of this phenomenon can be found in Vanderlei Dorneles, *Cristãos em Busca do Êxtase*, 2nd ed. (Engenheiro Coelho, SP, Brazil: Unaspress, 2003).

⁶See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, transl. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

⁷This approach permeates Charles B. Ketcham's whole book *A Theology of Encounter: The Ontological Ground for a New Christology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

⁸An example of the negative impact of such a theology on the authority and function of the Bible may be found in Herold Weiss, "Revelation and the Bible: Beyond Verbal Inspiration," *Spectrum* 7, no. 3 (1975): 53.

⁹Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Word Biblical Commentary; 52 vols.; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 40:55.

¹⁰Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 71.

¹¹For non-Adventist expositions of postmodern biblical hermeneutics, see, e.g., Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-oriented Criticism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988); Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); George Aichele et al., *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹²Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 451, 453.

¹³Artur Weiser, “*pisteuō ktl.*,” in Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, transl. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (10 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:182.

¹⁴See Morris Venden, *Love God and Do as You Please: A New Look at the Old Rules* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992).

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 70.

¹⁶Ellen G. White, *Education* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 17.

4/09

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