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*This article is an abbreviated version of a paper given at the 50th anniversary conference of the Tyndale Fellowship in 1994. The full version of papers given at the conference, which was on the theme of Scripture, may be read in Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (eds.), **A Pathway into the Holy Scripture** (Eerdmans, 1995).*

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The twentieth-century evangelical emphasis on the authority of Scripture has sometimes been accompanied by a somewhat negative stance towards 'experience'. Evangelical Christians held the conviction that Scripture was the final authority as God's revelation, and there was an accompanying tendency to associate any emphasis on 'experience' with theological liberalism.

Perhaps one of the most widely influential books prompting this negative stance was J.I. Packer's evangelical manifesto, published by IVF (as it then was) in 1958: *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. The core of Packer's argument was that the problem of authority, the most important question the Church ever faces, was that of finding the right criterion of truth. There were three claimants: Holy Scripture, Church tradition, and Christian reason or experience, and these were adopted respectively by evangelicals, traditionalists and 'subjectivists'. The subjectivist position, however, was something of a chameleon, appearing sometimes as rationalism (building on 'Christian reason') but sometimes as mysticism. Liberalism was a form of subjectivism combining both, taking its rationalism from Ritschl and its mysticism from Schleiermacher, but the essence of the liberal or subjectivist position was that the final authority for faith and life was the reason, conscience or 'religious sentiment' of the individual. Liberals 'accepted the viewpoint of the Romantic philosophy of religion set out by Schleiermacher - namely that the real subject-matter of theology is not divinely revealed truths, but human religious experience.'

It was no doubt the reaction against existentialism in the 1950s and 1960s that strengthened this evangelical tendency to react against 'experience'. In his article on 'The Authority of Scripture' in *The New Bible Commentary*, G.W. Bromiley wrote:

The challenge of liberal humanism consists again in individualistic subjectivism which it opposes to the objectivism of the orthodox doctrine of the Word of God. Outward authority is cast off, and it is replaced by the inward authority of the individual thought or experience.²

Francis Schaeffer, too, in his popular apologetics, attacked 'upper storey experiences'.³ 'Experience' was associated with

liberalism, existentialism and subjectivism.

Perhaps the earliest of these mid-century evangelical attacks on subjectivism was an unpublished one made by Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones at a private conference arranged by the IVF at Kingham Hill School in Oxfordshire in July 1941, a conference which led to the founding of Tyndale House and the Tyndale Fellowship. There Lloyd-Jones apparently ruffled some feathers by attacking what he identified as subjectivism in evangelicalism during the preceding 50 years. According to his analysis, the current weakness in biblical theology among evangelicals was that 'experience and subjectivity [in various forms] had been substituted in the pulpit for truly effective exposition of scripture'.⁴

This analysis of Martyn Lloyd-Jones's should alert us, however, to ask just exactly what the character of the evangelical tradition had been. Was an emphasis on experience a recent aberration in evangelicalism, evident only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? And was an emphasis on experience a sign of subjectivism?

The evangelical revival: *Herzensreligion*

David Bebbington, in his most helpful history, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, covering the years from the 1730s to the 1980s, identifies four characteristics of evangelical religion:

*Conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.*⁵

These he identifies as the most constant characteristics of evangelicalism in Britain over these 250 years. The third of these traditional evangelical emphases, that on biblical authority, has been particularly to the fore in the twentieth century in the wake of the rise of biblical criticism and the popularity of so-called scientific humanism. But the first, conversionism, has at times in the past been more prominent, and is in fact wider than Bebbington's rather clumsy term suggests. For evangelicals have traditionally emphasized not only the initial moment of conversion, but the whole life of faith, the whole of Christian experience.

The centrality of this emphasis is evident if we trace the heritage back to the leading figures of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival. What is immediately apparent, and what has sometimes been almost forgotten in more recent times, is their tremendous debt to German pietism and its emphasis on *Herzensreligion*, the religion of the heart. What is sometimes forgotten by evangelicals today is that pietism and the eighteenth-century evangelical revival in Britain and her American colonies was not so much a reaction against

'liberalism' (if the deism of that day may be anachronistically described as such) as it was a reaction against dead orthodoxy. It is in that context that we must understand John Wesley's comment:

*A man may be orthodox in every point ... He may be almost as orthodox as the devil ... and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.*⁶

Faith therefore was not mere *assensus* but *fiducia*:

*It is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart.*⁷

Genuine Christianity was *Herzensreligion*. It was a matter of 'the heart strangely warmed', of assurance ('an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine* ...'). It was a matter of the witness of the Spirit, in short, of Christian experience.

Thus, to the standard Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition and reason,⁸ Wesley added experience. Albert Outler described this as 'the Wesleyan Quadrilateral', a term he was later to regret, since it seemed to convey to some the idea of four equal factors in the shaping of doctrine.⁹ Wesley's emphasis on *Herzensreligion* or Christian experience was not unique to him, nor to the Arminian wing of evangelicalism, but was equally shared by his Calvinist brethren. Whitefield, preaching on 'Walking with God', could say that when we sit daily with Mary at Jesus' feet, by faith hearing his words,

*We shall then by happy experience find, that they are spirit and life, meat indeed and drink indeed, to our souls.*¹⁰

In his account of his own conversion he wrote:

*I now resolved to read only such as entered into the heart of religion and which led me directly into an experimental knowledge of Jesus Christ and him crucified.*¹¹

Most notably of course, Jonathan Edwards wrote a whole treatise on Christian experience, his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* in 1746.¹²

Puritans and Reformers on experience

This characteristic emphasis on experience was not a new invention of the eighteenth century, however. J.I. Packer in his study of the Puritans emphasizes that Puritanism was a movement of revival: 'Personal revival was the central theme of Puritan devotional literature.'¹³ Sinclair Ferguson attributes to John Owen the axiom that the Christian life is one of 'spiritual sense and experience'.¹⁴ But for a definitive presentation of evangelical faith, we go further back to the Reformers themselves. James Atkinson maintains that the beginnings of

the Reformation were experiential, not doctrinal:¹⁵

*To apprehend Luther's experience of faith, to understand Luther's religious experience, is to know in essence the theology of the Reformation.*¹⁶

He quotes the Reformer:

*When I had realised this I felt myself absolutely born again. The gates of paradise had been flung open and I had entered. There and then the whole of Scripture took on another look to me.*¹⁷

Similarly, the English Reformer, William Tyndale, writes of Christian experience,¹⁸ as also does John Calvin. In reference to God's revelation of his attributes in Exodus 34:6f., Calvin writes:

*Thereupon his powers are mentioned, by which he is shown to us not as he is in himself, but as he is toward us; so that this recognition of him consists more in living experience than in vain and high-flown speculation.*¹⁹

Clearly, too, this is for Calvin a matter of the affections and disposition of the heart:

*Whoever is moderately well versed in Scripture will understand by himself, without the admonition of another, that when we have to deal with God nothing is achieved unless we begin from the inner disposition of the heart.*²⁰

He takes it for granted in writing about prayer, that 'no one can well perceive the power of faith unless he feels it by experience in his heart'.²¹

Calvin saw the focus of conversion in the affections of the heart. He expresses this in his sermon on Ephesians 3:14-19:

*It is not enough then to have some vague knowledge of Christ, or to engage in airy speculations, as they say, and to be able to talk a lot about him, but he must have his seat in our hearts within, so that we are unfeignedly joined to him, and with true affection. That is the way for us to be made partakers of God's Spirit.*²²

But this emphasis on the heart and the affections and on experience in Calvin does not topple over into subjectivism. Experience is an integral part of evangelical faith, but in a way quite different to the later tradition of subjectivism stemming from Schleiermacher.

Calvin on experience as fully rational

According to Judith Rossall,²³ when the Renaissance humanist concern with experience in the world as opposed to the abstract knowledge of the scholastics is seen as the background to Calvin's epistemology, it may be readily understood why experience is more central to Calvin's theology than might at

first appear. For while, since Kant, experience has been treated as private and subjective, Calvin was a realist whose focus of interest lay not in the subjective appropriation of experience, but in the objective reality of that which was experienced. For Calvin, 'experience' does not refer to isolated, subjective, more or less emotional events internal to the subject, but holistically to 'the arena of human life in which events occur which properly interpreted show that man deals with God in everything'.²⁴ God acts within the world in such a providential way in all the circumstances of our lives, accommodating himself to us, so that we may perceive his actions and encounter him in direct intuitive knowledge. So the believer recognizes the Creator from the 'marks of his glory' engraven upon all his works. The appropriate response is thanksgiving, piety and love for God.²⁵

But this knowledge of God in creation only has a secondary role, since in Christ, the believer encounters not simply the power of God but his very presence:

*Hence all thinking of God without Christ is a vast abyss which immediately swallows up all our thoughts ... We cannot believe in God except through Christ in whom God in a manner makes himself little in order to accommodate himself to our comprehension, and it is Christ alone who can make our consciences at peace so that we may dare to come with confidence to God.*²⁶

But if we experience God in Christ, that can only be an experience of God in his Word. Calvin integrates 'Word of God' as applied to Christ and 'Word of God' as applied to Scripture as fully as possible. Thus: 'Scripture is vital to the experience of Christ, for only by a right understanding of Christ, perceived from the Scriptures, is it possible to find communion with him.'²⁷

*This then is the true knowledge of Christ, if we receive him as he is offered by the Father, namely clothed with his gospel.*²⁸

*To reject the gospel embodied in Scripture is to reject Christ himself, for Christ has no commerce with us, nor we with him apart from Scripture.*²⁹

It is therefore evident that, since *a priori* the Word of God which is Scripture and the Word of God which is Christ cannot be separated, we cannot know Christ apart from Scripture. Consequently, our experience of God in Christ is rational through and through. It is rational first in that it is direct, first-hand *notitia intuitiva*, and that intuitive knowledge of all real objects of experience is not only rational but the basis of all rational knowledge. It is not merely second-hand conceptual knowledge about Christ we gain - doctrines, truths, statements, propositions - but direct experiential knowledge of the living Christ himself present to us in the power of his Spirit.

That intuitive knowledge is as fully rational as abstract conceptual knowledge. But secondly and equally, this knowledge is fully rational in that it is conceptual from the beginning. It is not that the intuitive direct knowledge of Christ comes to us in a wordless, non-verbal, raw experience which may then be put into an arbitrary form of words either of our own choosing or that of the apostle or prophet. It is rather that the incarnate and risen Word only comes to us clothed in the verbal Word of gospel and Scripture.

The evangelical *via media*

A return journey must be undertaken from the teaching of the evangelical fathers of the Reformation back to the twentieth century. This allows us to look more analytically at the Anglo-Saxon evangelical tradition in the light of Calvin. H.D. McDonald, in his comprehensive and thorough study, *Theories of Revelation*,³⁰ opines that two broadly opposing doctrines of revelation appeared in England between 1700 and 1860: the subjectivist and the objectivist. Evangelicals are to be identified with neither.

McDonald traces the subjectivist tradition from the influence of Schleiermacher through Coleridge and F.D. Maurice, and back beyond Schleiermacher to the early Quakers, Barclay, Fox and Penn, with their view of revelation as the indwelling light. Broadly, this wing stressed the immanence of God, had a tendency towards pantheism and spoke of revelation primarily in terms of the Spirit. However, McDonald not only distinguishes the evangelicals from this subjectivist tendency but, unlike J.I. Packer in *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*, he also distinguishes the evangelicals from those he identifies as the 'objectivists'. On this wing he places the 'orthodox', quoting Bishop Butler, Samuel Clarke, William Law and others. These gave exclusive stress to the objective aspect of revelation. Revealed religion was conceived of as merely informational and conceptual, either adding a few ideas to natural religion, or as a body of disclosed truths to which assent had to be given. Broadly, this wing stressed the transcendence of God, had a tendency towards deism (sharing its rationalism although opposing it), and saw revelation primarily in terms of the Word.

By seeing the evangelicals as distinct from both subjectivists and objectivists, H.D. McDonald has given us a fuller and more accurate analysis than J.I. Packer was able to do in his much briefer and more popular manifesto. The evangelical tradition of the eighteenth century achieved a balance by doing justice to both the objective and subjective aspects of revelation, seeing revelation in terms of both Word and Spirit. The Wesleyan wing leaned slightly more towards the subjective, and McDonald characterizes Wesley's doctrine of revelation as 'revelation by the Spirit through the Word'. The mildly Calvinist tradition of Simeon leaned more towards the objective, a position

characterized by McDonald as 'revelation in the Word through the Spirit'. But both saw Scripture as objectively the Word of God, and both saw that faith and knowledge of God were not simply matters of accepting information. A living faith in the God of Scripture (and thus necessarily in Scripture too) was made possible by subjective enlightenment by the Spirit.

The evangelicals of the eighteenth century may therefore be regarded as truly the heirs of Calvin and the other evangelical fathers of the Reformation. Their view of revelation as simultaneously objective and subjective agrees with a description of the knowledge of God as relational or bi-polar. As a result of God's revelation in his Word by his Spirit, it is given in grace to the human subject to know God personally and experientially as the Divine Object. This experiential knowledge has therefore (like all genuine knowledge of the real or objective) both a subjective and an objective pole. The two are not mutually exclusive, but necessarily complementary in the relationship. Objective revelation in Scripture and in the presence of the living God in his Spirit (*The God Who is There*' in Schaeffer's title) and subjective experience of the living God through his Word in Scripture by the Spirit are therefore not contradictory in the evangelical view, but complementary.

It is fully in accord with the evangelical tradition right back to the Reformation therefore that evangelicals today, after a period of about 50 years in which the objective aspect of knowledge of God has been emphasized, should now integrate with that emphasis a new appreciation of the subjective. But if a new appreciation of Christian experience is to be welcomed as restoring the balance of the evangelical tradition, some caveats and clarifications should be borne in mind none the less.

Experience and Scripture in evangelical theology

First, a distinction needs to be made between 'religious experience' and the Christian experience of God. The study of religion and of the religious experience of mankind is valid in its own right, but as a phenomenological, anthropological, psychological and sociological study, it can tell us little or nothing about the validity or objective reference of these experiences. Study of religion is essentially a study of the human subject, not of the divine object, however that divine object may be conceived. The idea (from Schleiermacher) that there is a common core to all religious experience is unacceptable to evangelical faith.

Secondly, within Christian theology the individual's experience of God cannot be regarded as the final authority. Each may have the right of private judgement and the duty indeed to be true to conviction and conscience, but that does not mean that each is equally right! Neither can we regard the corporate experience of the Church, formulated in tradition, as the final authority. James Packer struck exactly the right note here in

'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God. There cannot be some combination of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience as the final authority. Final authority lies in Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), for in Scripture alone we have the Word of God. And yet tradition, reason and experience each have a role.

Positively, the relationship of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience may be characterized like this. *Scripture* alone represents the objective pole in the relationship. The truly human witness of the apostles and prophets is the result of the *prior* inspiration of the breath of God. Scripture is therefore the very Word of God to us. *Reason* and *tradition* represent the subject pole. 'Reason' is a short-hand way of referring to the activity of formulating and expressing this knowledge of the living God, gained through his Word and by his Spirit. 'Tradition' refers to the accumulated formulation of the Church, the corporate subject, in creeds and confession over the centuries. *Experience* is the intuitive, experiential, cognitive relationship between the two. The respective roles of the four are therefore well expressed in Outler's analysis of Wesley's hermeneutical method: 'Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture.'³¹

Thirdly, the concept of experience within Christian theology must be re-cast to lose the focus on the subjective. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put his finger on a persistent evangelical weakness when he diagnosed the problem of evangelicalism as subjectivism in 1944. The danger of all talk of experience is that because of our sinful preoccupation with ourselves (the *cor incurvatum in se*) we topple over into subjectivism and become fascinated with the state of our own souls. We become preoccupied too easily with the episodes of our own spiritual pilgrimage, our 'blessed experiences'. It is as if the bride were so entranced with her emotions and the feelings of the wedding day and so wrapped up in her own reactions that she neglected to pay any attention to the bridegroom. For truly objective knowledge, the focus must be not on our experience of God, but on the God whom we experience.

Fourthly and finally, in thinking of the objective pole of revelation, there are two dangers to be avoided. On the right of the evangelical *via media* there is the scholastic idea that revelation is purely abstract and that revelation is to be equated with the Bible alone in the sense that revelation is purely verbal or conceptual or propositional. That is the position which McDonald characterized as 'objectivist' (as distinct from 'objective') and it is not true to the evangelical tradition. At times in recent decades, evangelical apologetics has sounded rather like this. On the left of the evangelical *via media* is the idea that there is some mystical or charismatic experience of God to be had apart from the rational, conceptual revelation in Scripture, or by falsely separating the incarnate Word from the

written Word, or by regarding the Scriptures as anything less than the Word of God *in toto*.

True Christian experience is rational, experiential, converting, sanctifying and life-changing knowledge of God in and through the incarnate Word by the Spirit. But as the evangelical tradition has insisted from the Reformation until today, that experience of God in Christ is to be found through the evangel, the gospel, the Word of God embodied in the witness of the apostles and prophets in Holy Scripture.

- ¹ J.I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (London: IVF, 1958), pp. 50, 148.
- ² *The New Bible Commentary* (London: IVF, 1953), p. 21.
- ³ F. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (London: IVF, 1968), p. 53.
- ⁴ Douglas Johnson, 'The origin and history of Tyndale House', unpublished paper. On the conference, see Geraint Fielder, *Lord of the Years* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), pp. 83ff.
- ⁵ D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 3.
- ⁶ John Wesley, *Works*, Vol. I, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), p. 220; Sermon 7, 'The Way to the Kingdom', I, 6.
- ⁷ John Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XVIII, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), p. 250.
- ⁸ Cf. R. Bauckham and B. Drewery (eds.), *Scripture, Tradition and Reason* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988).
- ⁹ Albert C. Outler, 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral - in John Wesley', *WTJ* 20 (1985): 7-18. Cf. also *idem*, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), pp. 64ff.
- ¹⁰ *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), p. 170 (italics added).
- ¹¹ Timothy L. Smith, *Whitefield and Wesley on the New Birth* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), p. 44 (italics added).
- ¹² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 238.
- ¹³ J.I. Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), pp. 41ff.
- ¹⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 78, referring to Owen's *Works*, Vol. II, p. 36.
- ¹⁵ J. Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1983), p. 84.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ¹⁸ William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises* (Parker Society; Cambridge: CUP, 1948), p. 13.
- ¹⁹ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:10:2.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:3:16.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 3:20:12.
- ²² John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1973), pp. 291f. Cf. also *Comm. I John* on 1 Jn.2:3 and *Comm. Harmony of the Gospels* on Mt. 13:19.
- ²³ J. Rossall, 'God's activity and the believer's experience in the theology of John Calvin' (PhD thesis, Durham, 1991).

- ²⁴ Charles Partee, 'Calvin and experience,' *SJT* 26 (1973): 169-81.
- ²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:2:1, 1:5:9, 1:10:2.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:6:4.
- ²⁷ Rossall, 'God's activity', p. 97.
- ²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:2:6.
- ²⁹ Calvin, *Comm. Gospel of John* on Jn. 12:48; *idem, Comm. Harmony of the Gospels* on Lk. 11:27;
- ³⁰ H.D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation* (London: Macmillan, 1959) and *Theories of Revelation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), combined in one volume, *Theories of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).
- ³¹ Outler, 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral'.