

# The Relationship of Experience to Revelation

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

## But I Saw It!

Stories abound, especially from the mission field, about strange and “miraculous” events that demonstrate God’s supernatural intervention in the spread of the Gospel. It is not uncommon to hear about people being “healed of diseases,” being “raised from the dead,” or missionaries being supernaturally protected by “armies of angelic warriors.” In this country one only has to watch a few hours of charismatic television programming to hear the most wild and fantastic stories about how God has supernaturally intervened to provide everything from tremendous wealth to close-in parking at the local shopping mall. In examining these stories of God’s miraculous intervention we find a common thread running through them. This same thread, in fact, now runs through most people’s lives without them ever pausing to acknowledge or examine it. That thread is the elevation of personal experience to the level of the highest source of truth.

## What Is Your Source Of Truth?

Philosophically there can be only one of two possible sources of truth. Truth is either derived from personal experience, or by divine revelation. For example, the truth that when dropped, objects fall to the ground has been experientially proven by countless generations of people.

Conversely, that which occurs outside the physical realm, such as the existence and activities of angelic beings cannot be proven experientially, but instead relies on divine revelation. The problem for most people comes when they either ignore or confuse which truth source applies in a given situation, and thus arrive at potentially false understandings of reality. Generally this problem occurs when experience is used to prove or understand that which belongs to the non-material world.

We can express the relationship between experience and revelation in one of three equations, whereby:

**E= Experience**

**R= Revelation (The Bible)**

- **E > R.** In this Worldview people consider the phenomenon that they have observed, experienced, or in many cases heard about, as the determining factor in terms of reality. Thus, if they have seen somebody “healed” or heard somebody “speaking in tongues,” they conclude that it must be true because they saw it. People living with

this Worldview are not open to having their conclusions tested against the objective standard of divine revelation, and when confronted with a Biblical argument that contradicts their experience they will reject the teaching of the Scripture. Thus in this Worldview experience interprets Scripture.

- **E = R.** People holding to this Worldview have a high regard for the Scriptures and understand their necessity for our knowledge about spiritual things. The problem with this Worldview is that it assumes that where the Scriptures are silent, clinical evidence rules. For example, although the New Testament gives numerous instances of demon possession, nowhere does it clearly teach that the people who were possessed were Christians. Furthermore, the New Testament does not describe or prescribe any method for determining whether someone is in fact demon possessed. Thus, so-called “Deliverance Ministries” have no firm basis in the Scriptures but instead are heavily reliant on the experience and opinion of man.
  
- **E < R.** This is the only Worldview that is truly compatible with the nature of divine revelation and the clear statements of the Scriptures concerning themselves. In this Worldview, experience is subservient to revelation and is interpreted in light of the Word of God. Thus, for example, one may observe certain phenomenon such as “speaking in tongues” but rather than conclude that it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, they will examine what the Scriptures teach about tongues. By holding to this view one is not denying what was seen and heard, but rather is determining whether it is what it is claimed to be based upon the divine revelation of sacred Scripture. You may have heard a person making strange and unfamiliar noises with their mouth, but that does not mean that they were doing anything more than making strange and unfamiliar noises. The conclusion that it was the Biblical gift of tongues is purely an assumption without Scriptural support.

### **What Does the Bible Say?**

In II Peter 1:17-21 Peter addresses the issue of the reliability of the Christian message based upon the surety of the Scriptures. In verse 17-18 Peter recounts for his readers the fact that many years before, he was personally on the Mount of Transfiguration and saw Christ in His glory and heard the Father’s commendation of Him. Yet, Peter writes that he has a source of truth that far exceeds even that fantastic experience – the truth of the prophetic Scriptures. *“And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place...”* (II Peter 1:19 – NASB). Ultimately, Peter’s faith in Jesus as

the Christ was not because of the miracles that He performed, nor because of the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, but because Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Him.<sup>1</sup>

## Practical Helps

- In order not to be bounced around in this whole area it is imperative that a person answer the following question. **Which is inherently more reliable, inerrant Scripture given by God, or random human experience which is unedited by God?** How you answer this question will be the basis for the theological grid through which you will filter and interpret all of the data of life. We submit that there is only one acceptable answer and strongly encourage you not to abandon it regardless of what you see or hear.
  
- In order to negotiate the treacherous waters of experience, a person has to be an approved workman with the Word of God (II Timothy 2:15). The only way to become competent in the handling of the Scriptures is to practice; so we encourage you to be like the noble Bereans and examine the Scriptures daily to see if these things are true (Acts 17:11).

We trust that this short study has been profitable for you and contributes to your obedient walk of faith. *Psalm 119:105*

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For further study we recommend the following:

1. Charismatic Chaos – John MacArthur
2. Sola Scriptura (The Protestant Position on the Bible) – Don Kistler Ed.
3. Our Sufficiency in Christ – John MacArthur
4. The Coming Evangelical Crisis – John Armstrong
5. Ashamed of the Gospel – John MacArthur
6. God in the Wasteland – David F. Wells

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Michael, *The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1968, pg. 87.