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Experience over Scripture in Charismatic Exegesis

Thomas Bird

Neither the charismatic nor the non-charismatic will deny that the Neo-Pentecostal movement is based on an experience. The experience is normally called “baptism with the Holy Spirit” and is usually considered to be subsequent to conversion. Both parties are also in agreement that a major change takes place for an individual when he has this experience. The two changes which are emphasized and praised most by proponents of the charismatic movement are an increased reading of the Bible and a greater willingness to witness. These are certainly laudable changes. However, accompanying the increased reading of Scripture is a new hermeneutic, that is, a new approach to looking at Scripture. Accompanying the free witness to others, there is also a new set of teachings. This essay seeks to establish the nature of one aspect of this new hermeneutic through the example and teaching of “Lutheran” charismatics. The new hermeneutical principle is then assessed on the basis of traditional Lutheran principles of interpretation.

I. The Charismatic Position

The hermeneutical principle to be considered is this: personal experience verifies and confirms articles of faith. Because the charismatic movement has its ultimate distinction in the area of experience and feeling, namely, the experience of the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the feeling of being filled with the Holy Spirit, one would expect to find that experience and feeling become a principle by which one interprets Scripture. In many writings and testimonies of “Lutheran” charismatics this principle is developed.

A. Rodney Lensch

Rodney Lensch, a former Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, clearly teaches that experience is needed to verify and to confirm Scriptural teachings:

To be perfectly frank I didn't feel loved of God although intellectually I could say, “Yes, but God's Word says you are even if you don't feel it.” But when the Holy Spirit flooded my soul with love, I felt it. There was no need to keep quoting Bible passages. The Holy Spirit was now ministering that love from within my heart and not just through my intellect.¹

This statement by Lensch is significant not only because of the experience which verified the teaching, but also because of the teaching involved. The teaching in question for Rodney Lensch is the very love of God. Lensch seems to need another means of grace beyond the Word of God to work love in his heart. His experience allegedly confirmed the teaching of God's love and afterwards, since he felt that the Holy Spirit was ministering in his heart, "There was no need to keep quoting Bible passages."

Further statements by Rodney Lensch seem to confirm that his charismatic experiences are used to support Scripture. In fact, the Scriptures sometimes seem to be subordinated to his experiences. Concerning his experience of speaking in tongues, Lensch says:

As others were praying I took a step of faith and yielded my tongue to the Holy Spirit . . . For the sake of confirmation I asked the Lord to expand the language and to make it edify my spirit as the Bible says it should.²

The test of tongue-speaking as a true spiritual gift must come from Scripture, yet it is quite apparent that for Rodney Lensch the gift of tongues is verified by the experience of an expanded language and a feeling of edification. Rodney Lensch provides another example of experience taking precedence over the teaching of Scripture when he speaks of receiving direct revelation from God:

After praying in the Spirit for some time in my study one morning the Lord revealed to me a word of wisdom. It came into my mind in torrents. Quickly I grabbed a pencil and began writing these thoughts down. When I finished I had six full-sized sheets of instructions.³

B. Ervin Prange

Verification by experience and immediate revelation with an emphasis on subjective feeling is also the pattern of another Lutheran charismatic spokesman, Ervin Prange. The key chapter in Prange's *The Gift Is Already Yours* is the chapter in which he lays the groundwork for his charismatic experience. First he states the problem in his ministry:

I was a "man of God," but it had been so long since I had felt His presence that my attitude was almost that He didn't exist.⁴

Again the emphasis is on feeling. Yet the possibility arises that Ervin Prange is mistakenly identifying feeling with faith, that is, *fiducia*. Thus he might be saying in his own terminology that he has not that trusting faith of the heart that grasps Jesus as its object. If he calls saving faith "feeling," then he might be con-

trasting saving faith with *notitia*, the mere knowledge of Jesus and His saving work. But by reading further in Prange's work, it is evident that he is *not* identifying saving faith with feeling. Feeling is something he must have beyond faith. Concerning a passage in Ephesians,⁵ Prange says:

"By faith" — maybe that was the answer. We were supposed to live by faith and not by experience. But if Christ really lived in us as that passage so boldly stated, then shouldn't there be some kind of experience of that life? After all, life was experience and not just concept or faith.⁶

Prange was looking for something beyond faith, beyond the Scriptural teaching. He wanted to feel Christ.

A close look at Prange's testimony of his charismatic experience further clarifies his position:

I heard myself saying, "God, you and I are going to have it out right now. Either you are going to become real, or I am going to give up this farce . . .

. . . What an infinite distance there was between those grandiose proclamations of God's power and the petty frustrations of everyday life! How could a man think he was passing out the bread of life every Sunday and still remain so utterly hungry himself? I was empty, and I knew it. This was the end of the line.

All at once, a voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. It was clear and deep and distinct, neither thunder nor whisper. "The gift is already yours. Reach out and take it."

In an instant, there was a sudden shift of dimensions, and God became real . . . I, too, was fresh and new. I felt forgiven and cleansed. A life-time load of guilt had evaporated like fog in the morning sun. Then I noticed that I was praying in a new language of praise.

. . . For the first time in my life, God was an actual experience and not merely a symbol or a concept.⁷

The "grandiose proclamation of God's power" and "the bread of life" were not sufficient to satisfy Prange's hunger. Holy Scripture and a saving faith worked by the Gospel were not enough. He confronted God with an ultimatum and God spoke to him directly. By means of this encounter and the gift of tongues, Prange felt that God was real. Prange *felt* that he himself was forgiven. For Prange, assurance of God's existence and forgiveness can be demanded of God outside of Scripture.

C. Vernon Serenius

A few more short excerpts from the writings of Lutheran charis-

matic spokesmen show conclusively that using personal experience to verify and to confirm articles of faith is a Neo-Pentecostal hermeneutical principle. Vernon Serenius, another Lutheran charismatic pastor, makes this statement:

Since it is axiomatic that spiritual things are spiritually discerned, it is evident that spiritual truth cannot be arrived at by intellectual pursuit alone. It must come through revelation by the Holy Spirit. But one must be willing.⁸

That spiritual truths come through revelation is an important conclusion, but what does Serenius mean by "revelation"? Later in his work he says:

There is a knowledge which passes all human understanding, which only God's Spirit can give through his revelation — the Holy Word, and the experience of His living presence.⁹

Serenius considers both the Holy Word and subjective experience to be direct revelation from God. Indeed, the burden of his publication concerns "God's revelation of Himself outside of that which the Word itself brings."¹⁰ He further states that the central truth of God's plan is revealed "when one approaches God's Word on the basis of personal experience of His living presence."¹¹ By personal experience, Serenius does not mean the work of the Holy Spirit in creating faith. He means an experience involving special manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Such experiences, he says, provide the "basis" for understanding God's central truth.

D. Larry Christenson

Larry Christenson, a major leader of Lutheran charismatics, also describes this understanding when he speaks on the values of speaking in tongues in his book dedicated to the teaching of this particular gift. Two benefits ascribed to speaking in tongues are that "one finds himself able to understand the Bible far better,"¹² and afterwards there is "an awareness of having entered a vast new spiritual realm."¹³ Thus the experience of speaking in tongues can be used hermeneutically to understand Scriptures.

II. The Lutheran Position

Simply stated, this new principle of Biblical interpretation is that subjective experience verifies objective revelation. Such a hermeneutical principle must be assessed very carefully. Is it Lutheran to hold that personal experience verifies and confirms articles of faith? The Lutheran Confessions deal clearly and emphatically with this subject:

We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the

only rule and norm according to which all doctrine and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.¹⁴

This is the *Sola Scriptura* principle of the Lutheran Reformation. This statement sets Scripture apart from and above the Lutheran Confessional writings. This principle also sets Scripture apart from and above human reason, the church, tradition, and especially human feeling or experience.

The Scriptural basis cited by the Formula of Concord is from Paul's letter to the Galatians: "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed."¹⁵ Further Scriptural support is found in the words of Jesus to the Pharisees: "For the sake of your tradition, you have made void the Word of God."¹⁶ To this statement Jesus adds a prophecy of Isaiah: "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men."¹⁷ Extra-Scriptural teaching and tradition cannot be made equal to, much less contradict, Scripture.

Again, the basis of Christian teaching is clearly outlined in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord:

Holy Scripture remains the *only* judge, rule, and norm according to which as the *only* touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong.¹⁸

This statement applied in the first instance to the Roman Church which held that Scripture along with *tradition* verified articles of faith. It applied also to those "enlightened thinkers" at the time of the Reformation who claimed that Scripture along with *rationalistic thinking* confirmed articles of faith. But also in the minds of the Confessional writers were those who felt that Scripture and *personal experience* confirm articles of faith.

The current charismatic emphasis on personal experience, the claim of direct revelation from God, and the use of such experiences and revelations to produce or to confirm Christian teachings closely correspond to the practices of the Enthusiasts of the time of the Reformation. Because of his special dealings with the Enthusiasts of his day, Luther stands firm in his writings concerning the relationship of Scripture with any other writing or with experience. Thus Ralph Bohlmann points out:

Luther answers this claim of the Enthusiasts in the Smalcald Articles. There he emphasizes that God gives no one His Spirit or grace "except through or with the external Word which comes before." If we maintain this truth, Luther contends, we shall be protected from those "who boast that

they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure.”¹⁹

Here Luther says not only that feelings and supposed experiences of the Holy Spirit are invalid apart from the external Word of God, but also that people should be protected from such claims because their claims result in twisting the Scriptures. Such twisting of Scripture is exactly the opposite of the result that a student of the Bible desires. Luther’s words in the Smalcald Articles go one step further in describing the danger of resorting to personal spiritual experiences:

We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.²⁰

In many of his writings, Luther points out the dangers of relying on experience for verification of God’s will.

Indeed, the statements of contemporary charismatics clearly show some of these dangers. Reliance on experience leads to abandoning reliance on God’s revealed Word. After discussing his charismatic experience, Lensch says concerning his ministry:

Instead of having to work everything out in advance I realized that the Holy Spirit inside my heart was fully able to give instantaneous direction and utterance as I needed it.²¹

A reliance on charismatic experiences also causes much doubt and confusion. In picturesque language Larry Christenson says:

. . . the believer’s relationship with Christ is incomplete until all three links [repentance and faith, water baptism, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit] have been forged on the anvil of personal experience.²²

But if a person is taught to resort to his personal experience rather than the testimony of Scripture to determine his relation with Christ, then the result will inevitably be destructive confusion.

In short, the principle that personal experience clarifies Scriptural teaching opens the door to a new hermeneutic and the abandonment of the traditional Lutheran principles of interpretation. This charismatic hermeneutic is destructive of the Christian faith and stands in sharp contrast to the position of the Lutheran Confessions: “. . . We can affirm nothing about the will of God without the Word of God.”²³

FOOTNOTES

1. Rodney Lensch, *My Personal Pentecost* (Kirkwood, Missouri: Impact Books, 1972), p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
4. Ervin Prange, *The Gift Is Already Yours* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1973), p. 45.
5. Ephesians 3:17.
6. Prange, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 53.
8. Vernon A. P. Serenius, *That They May Be One* (Alexandria, Minnesota: Vernon A. P. Serenius, 1973), p. 80.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
12. Larry Christenson, *Speaking in Tongues* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1968), p. 27.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 464, 1 (italics supplied).
15. Galatians 1:8.
16. Matthew 15:6.
17. Matthew 15:9.
18. Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 465, 7 (italics supplied).
19. Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 85.
20. Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 313, 10.
21. Lensch, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
22. Christenson, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
23. Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 217.