

Pentecostal Experiences of Faith

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UDK:27-1:2-67

Professional paper

Received: February, 2014

Accepted: April, 2014

Summary

This article discusses Pentecostal faith experiences and their meaning in enriching the lives of believers. The article points to two levels of cognition, or so called “experiences of faith”: the religious experience of faith and great self-commitment. Experiences of faith can differ not only experientially, but also by their intensity and depth. This article first discusses what faith is, then what an experience of faith is, and finally what we consider to be an experience of faith. In the first part, general experiences of faith are discussed, especially the difference between religious experience and the experience of, as we called it, great self-commitment. The second part of the article provides an overview of the meaning of great self-commitment, actually experiences of Holy Spirit activity in a believer.

Key words: faith, experience, self-commitment, reason, soul, repentance, salvation, love, Holy Spirit

Introduction

Contemporary sociologists of religion agree that the phenomenon of faith is very complex, so multi-faceted and fluid that it not only seeks analysis of its numerous dimensions, attributes and aspects, but also of its many different theoretical approaches (Tadić, 1998, 361). While authors like Spinoza insist that faith does not look for truth, but piety, and everything should be submitted to reason and reasonable explanation (Spinoza, 1957, 4), in fact that is impossible because in order to understand a supernatural God, we need to also look for understanding in the

light of supernatural personal experiences. For these reasons, Buber, for example, proposes the introduction of an “I – You relationship” principle: “God cannot be found within this world, God cannot be found outside of this world. One who strives with a whole being towards her/his “You” and surrenders whole being of the world to it, finally finds Him who cannot be looked for” (cited in Devčić, 2003, 146). My opinion is that faith and reason must be open for cooperation if we are determined to reach the fullness of the faith experience. In this sense, I agree with Mel Thompson’s attitude that the experience of faith does not always need to be drastic and reserved only for those near the threshold of finding a new faith! For him, a general experience of faith includes a sense of review, new insights and evaluations of holiness and depth (Thompson, 2003, 17). Hence, we have two available options: first, to be satisfied with religious experiences of faith which, it seems, provide reasonable explanations on one side, but from the other side, do not provide a supernatural divine experience which could present an argument strong enough to leave the sphere of reason; or second, to accept that God is a transcendental being, and in order to experience him, we have to seek supernatural revelation. Why do Pentecostal believers insist on experiences of faith? We will display Pentecostal experiences of faith in order to explain to what extent they provide enrichment in the lives of believers.

General Experiences of Faith

General experiences of faith which, according to Thompson (2003, 17), include a sense of review, new insights and evaluations of holiness and depth, require us to find satisfaction in religious experiences which overcome reasonable explanations without offering some supernatural divine experience which provides a strong argument to leave the sphere of reason or to accept that God is a transcendental being and that if we want to experience him, we have to seek supernatural revelation.

Before we can understand the experience of faith, we have to consider what faith is. Faith as a religion or system could anticipate a completely different meaning from a “great reliance” on somebody or something, in our case, on God. In her article “Dimension of religious experience in Croatia,” Ankica Marinović Bobinac indicates that the results of socio-religious research in Croatia display the domination of a traditional type of religiosity, or so called by her, collective religiousness (Marinović, 2005, 342). Practically, faith is generally accepted today mainly as some kind of legacy left by our ancestors, a life style, ceremony or folklore (maintaining heritage) within a specific religious group. In his book *Philosophy of Religion* (2003, 3), Mel Thompson assumes that if Richard Dawkins

of Oxford is right, then people could just “pick up” religion by following their parents or some other people in the same way they “pick up” a virus!

There is a need to draw a clear line between this concept and faith expressed by reliance on God. The Bible, specifically Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Confidence in what we hope for, or as the Croatian dictionary says, “great reliance in God,” sets a completely different foundation from which to consider the experience of faith, from a plain religious approach to collective religiosity. Faith in the Christian God, although often perceived within a group of rules and regulations anticipating basic moral principles, basically reveals the divine call and purpose of human existence. Not only does the Christian God reveal himself, but he also reveals himself to humanity in order to disclose his divine plans. The Christian believer expresses his/her faith by relying on God’s promises of salvation, life, and eschatology. Hence, Celestin Tomić (2006) rightly emphasizes that “to believe in Christian sense does not mean only to accept certain truths, a certain worldview, a certain system of salvation” because our faith is not just “ideology, myth, utopia”, and certainly is not “only one of religions”. Christianity is actually “faith in a personal God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, man’s Liberator from all anxieties, fears, loneliness, abandonment, sins and punishments, sickness and death.” Moreover, our faith is the “solid answer to all life problems and it is based on the reliability of the salvation event that reaches its full completion in Jesus Christ” (Tomić, 2006). Two forms of faith are recognized in the Bible: faith as a deep reliance on God, and faith in God’s existence. Demons also possess faith in God’s existence, as James describes in his epistle: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). Therefore, Mel Thompson writes, “to believe something is about commitment and trust” and “to believe that something is true simply means considering something right, no matter what kind of reasons are at stake” (2003, 54). In that sense, Nikola Dogan (2003, 150), while writing about desacralization, also mentions Weber’s interpretation: “The world is not enchanted any more, but rational, actually dis-enchanted,” and since the modern world does not reject faith, but on the contrary, much research shows an increasing need to believe, we can conclude that faith is much more than humankind’s need for a God who encourages humanity toward good and improvement. Faith has a special purpose in the life of a believer. It is there to connect the person with the creator in whom is reliance to live today and forever.

Finally, faith as assurance for what we hope for has the task of leading us closer to the knowledge of God. In this, we find reason to discuss the experience of faith as our main subject. It is important to emphasize that faith does not exclude reason and should not be considered as separated from logical reason-

ing. "Faith has priority in a sense of assumption and postulation, and reason in a sense of final goal, because every believer strives to gain reasonable knowledge about what he believes" (Devčić, 2003, 30). We can conclude this part by talking about the purpose of prayer, quoting a beautiful prayer by Anselmo (*Proslogion*) mentioned in a book written by Ivan Devčić (2003, 32): "I do not ask you to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand." Faith leads to experience, and experience leads to reasonable consideration and to an understanding of what we believe.

The Experience of Faith

Experience in general can be described as what is related to a sense of experience (anything I claim, I know it comes through what I saw, heard, tasted, smelled, touched or felt, emotions about something), but also what is related to the process of thinking and using analytical-deductive methods in order to develop a conclusion.

Since we already presented faith through two aspects, each having its own area of experience, obviously it would be necessary to consider the experience of faith through the same two aspects. Since Christian faith has the Bible as its one and common source, maybe it would be more acceptable to look for one linear experience with two levels of cognition instead of two different parallel experiences. Considering the principles of synthesizing faith and reason, Devčić uses the answer of Pope John Paul II which justifies this particular approach. John Paul II recalls the 1st Vatican Council by emphasizing, "there is a double line of cognition, different not only according to origin but also according to object: according to origin, because naturally we know by reason when we follow one line and by divine faith when we follow the other; and according to object, because in addition to what you can achieve by natural reason, we have an access to hidden mysteries of God which cannot be known unless they were revealed from above" (Devčić, 2003, 37). According to Devčić, in order to understand the experience of faith when interpreting phenomena of the world, it is necessary to anticipate two origins (2003, 100): "one substantial and one spiritual, corresponding to body and soul within the human being" because the experience of faith engages the whole person, "mind and emotions, values and relations – and it seems like touching the most basic, fundamental sense of personal identity" (Thompson, 2003, 17).

The first level of the faith experience can be found in God's creation: everything we see, touch, taste, hear, and smell. Nikola Dogan (2003, 68) points to Aristotle's thought that "on the basis of rational cognition and by the means of analogies with all creation, we can use nature as a source of knowledge of God.

Moreover, man can find out what God is in himself, his essence and nature, since between God and man there is a possibility of true knowledge and understanding.” In other words, we can experience God if we look with eyes of faith deeper into nature, actually God’s creation. In his epistle to the Roman believers, Paul writes, “since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:19-20).

The experience of God’s creation is not only found in creation, but also in sustaining and caring about what was created. We can call it providence. God’s providence – “belief that God provided everything we need means that nature expresses God’s purpose” (Thompson, 2003, 194). “Man is completely dependent on God Creator and Giver of life” (Dogan, 2003, 100).

Studies show that religious people meet their needs by understanding God’s existence. A generally accepted belief is that God exists, and if I am a good person, God will reward me; if I am a bad person, God will punish me. Within her study of religious experience in Croatia, Ankica Marinovic concludes that Croats are predominantly religious, but only a small number of people have had a profound experience of faith. In support of her research, she shows a table of different religious experiences where we see the percentage difference between people who have had some moments of awareness that there is a God, and those who have experienced a powerful supernatural encounter that changed their lives. “This framework formulation is elaborated by using ten variables (well-known from the time of studies of religious experience by W. James to date), which is evident from the table:

Table 1. Different Religious Experiences

Variables	%
There are moments of awareness that there is a God	76.5
I have a feeling God knows me and protects me	67.3
I experienced the fulfillment of my prayers	55.4
I feel I can be in touch with God	40.1
I experienced God’s punishment	28.3
I felt a miraculous experience that strengthened my faith	22.2
I experienced the activity of the Holy Spirit	22.1
I have had a supernatural experience I cannot explain	13.5
I experienced close contact with evil	7.9
I experienced a supernatural life-changing encounter	5.7

* Percentage of respondents who answered “yes”. Difference to 100% is generated by respondents answering “no” (2005, 347).

This data shows that there is a difference between what people feel and what they have experienced, and that religious people have little or no supernatural

faith experiences whereby their religious experience is actually reduced to ritual practice, mass attendance, or the performance of sacraments and certain prayers. They only find special faith experiences in pilgrimages and in performing good deeds. Believers perform determined activities to please God. Their experience is sacrifice, sacrifice to God through offering thanks to God's providence, or even a pledge for what is expected from God. In this kind of approach to faith, believers can somewhat recognize the results of their faith, or even experience some kind of deeper experience of faith. Their hopes remain that God will take into account all their sacrifices and sufferings. Thus, hunger, disease and other problems that believers face are considered part of God's plan for them, or as usually said, their path of the cross.

On the other hand, believers who have chosen to go beyond religious praxis and to put their full confidence in God in every aspect of their lives, through that confidence, have gained a deeper experience of God who supernaturally provides for them.

Within the Evangelical Pentecostal tradition, the experience of faith occupies an important place. God is good and he is the source of all good. The Bible teaches that God is love, and that means he wants only the best for each believer. If we follow the good news of Jesus Christ, we can clearly recognize the salvation message, the message of providence in every material and health aspect of human life. The good news also says that God takes care of the emotional and mental needs of believers. As faith is the assurance of what we hope for, then faith as great confidence should lead to a deeper religious experience. As faith leads to the experience of faith, so lack of faith departs from it.

Jesus' service on earth was marked by the message that the "heavenly kingdom is at hand" (Mathew 3:2). In other words, it is here. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes this further and points out that the sacrifice of Jesus tore down the curtain that separated us from the Holy of Holies (through the experience of the divine presence). The term "at hand" signifies the closeness of God's kingdom which is reflected in that the lame walk, the blind see, etc. When Jesus went to his homeland, he encountered infidelity among his fellow citizens. Mark (6:5-6) says, "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith." This example leads to the conclusion that faith which is bigger than the belief of God's existence is necessary to experience the supernatural. Faith is an assurance of what we hope for. There are many testimonials today that people experienced faith in a supernatural way, and they were healed or experienced supernatural providence of their needs. There is a record in the New Testament of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish (Mathew 14:13-21). The Israelites left Egypt, and they were passing through the desert for forty

years. Their footwear was not overused, God provided water from stone, and food was falling from the sky (Psalm 105:40-41).

The Holy Spirit and Conversion – The Pentecostal Approach

A special faith experience available to Christians is the experience of the Holy Spirit. According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit is the third divine person of the triune God. Jesus Christ announced his death and resurrection, and told his disciples that he was not leaving them alone, but the day would come when God would pour his Holy Spirit over them. He hinted at Joel's prophecy: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will have dreams" (Acts 2:17). The apostles testified to the fulfillment of this promise on the day of Pentecost, and many other disciples of Jesus experienced it later. History remembers a crisis, or absence of the Spirit, which generated different explanations of the experience. If faith and reason cooperate, "in other words, faith helps reason to look beyond, to raise a view above its own boundaries, and to stop being held its own hostage" (Devčić, 2003, 38), there is also a moment when a supernatural experience stops. If it naturally stops at some point, then reason has to stop looking for a rational explanation. "Faith, however, has its *lumen fidei*, which implies a special ability of cognition and reliance in veracity of what is known. Natural faith expresses various signs which prove that we can rely on Him, while supernatural faith provides inner enlightenment, because God's grace is not limited only to redemption, but there is also its illuminating (cognitive) role" (Devčić, 2003, 39). The experience of the Holy Spirit in contemporary history started with the Pentecostal movement in the second half of the 19th century. This revival is an expression of social and theological discontent among the lower and middle social class groups. Followers of "holy revival" disapproved godlessness in most denominations, as well as an increasing accumulation of wealth and a lack of simplicity in churches. They formed new religious communities and committed to seek perfection in Christ. These former Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the same way as the early church described it in Acts (*History of the Pentecostal Movement*). This was followed by a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit known as "Azusa Street". The experience was described in the book of the same title: "Yesterday, New Testament church experienced its Pentecost. We had a blessed time together. Everywhere in the hall, husbands and wives were lying on ground under force. Heavenly atmosphere shook this church. I have never heard such singing before. It was a heavenly melody, seemed to be coming continuously from the throne of God" (Bartleman,

2006, 45). The Pentecostal experience, concludes Stanko Jambrek, is a movement of restoration that brings several crucial changes in the life and performance of traditional Christian communities. It changes the way of worship and celebration, introducing lively singing and praises with alternating testimonies from a dynamic relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Gifts of the Holy Spirit are used in life and worship, especially the gifts of speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues, words of wisdom and the gift of healing. It is pointed out that the gifts of the Spirit from the First Epistle to the Corinthians 12:8-10 were used by God in order to train the local church for ministry. Baptism in the Holy Spirit provides the believer with a deeper sensitivity for spiritual reality and the activities of the Holy Spirit, as well as Satan's and his demons, and provides a spiritual force that manifests itself in the ability to worship, to preach the gospel, to gain liberation and overcome evil (Jambrek, 4).

As Nikola Dogan concludes, humans are spiritual beings: "He is the Beginning and the End of everything. God is a man's spring, but also foundation and goal of all things that are, have been and will be" (2003, 109). Only when the human spirit becomes filled with the Spirit of God does the person become a complete being, earthly and heavenly in one. The path to dialogue with God comes through repentance. Mel Thompson explains that conversion also includes a new worldview and a new integrated sense of his own ego. Citing William James, he says this exact experience "leads to change in the way we perceive the outside world, as well as change in self-consciousness" (2003, 24). The experience of conversion felt as a call to repentance, a call by the living God, affects the entire human existence, even to the extent that one who has this kind of experience is requested to formulate truly radical answers: responsiveness or deafness to the call, attitude for or against, yes or no, acceptance or refusal. Indifference is impossible in such an important case (Tadić, 1998, 368). When talking about conversion, Stipe Tadić refers again to William James and lists four basic features of this experience: a) a person who experienced an (authentic) religious experience has no access to adequate wording to express it. The one who does not have this kind of experience is not able to describe it in corresponding quality and enthusiasm. In such a kind of experience, the whole person is "affected" or "smitten". Furthermore, b) since the value and quality of the experience cannot be expressed in words, a direct personal encounter is necessary in order to understand it. Those who have not experienced it relate to those who did in a completely inappropriate way. The cognitive value of this experience seems like an insight into the depth of truth: "It opened up my eyes." These are enlightenment events, discoveries full of meaning and importance. They also become standards of future conduct: "I will do nothing in the way I did it before". Also, c) such conditions are relatively short, but highly impressive: "Eternity experienced in a moment." It is impossible

later to reconstruct it fully or willingly to remember it in the future. One who has seen them lives onwards for them or from them. And finally, d) despite his/her own humility, a person is not the “object” of the event, although he/she feels “possessed” by some supernatural force (1998, 366).

The conversion that was preached by John the Baptist and Jesus and his disciples, which recalls the central message of the Bible, consists of repentance for sins and the establishment of a new covenant with Jesus through baptism which leads to new birth. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and scribe, asked Jesus how he could inherit the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responded that if he was not born again of water and the Spirit, he would not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. Conversion is not just plain remorse and grief over what we have done, but a profound change in behavior that is visible to everybody.

Faith Experiences Lead to Salvation, Love and Communion with God

Conversion is directly connected to salvation. That is why Nikola Dogan claims that Christianity basically “speaks about divine intervention in human history through which God, by the power of his love, liberates man captured by himself, leads his people from slavery to freedom, brings fullness of life and thus provides entire history with hope and inner sense” (2003, 365). Sinful humanity is helpless, and the only possible solution for it is God’s salvation. Humanity cannot save itself, it cannot perform enough good to compensate for sin and to gain a reward. That is why the cross of Jesus offers reconciliation between God and human. The narrative of the prodigal son presents a beautiful illustration of the relationship between God the Father and human, the child of God. The decadent son spent his inheritance and ended up being a servant, enjoying less than the pigs of his new master. This is an illustration of human spiritual poverty. Every day, the father watches for his son to return. In the moment of return, the father reacts in exactly the opposite way of how we might react. He hugs his son, forgives him, and washes him from all dirt (sin, guilt and condemnation). He gives him new clothes and a ring, which means a new identity. God saves humans from suffering their deserved punishment; he saves them from being separated from God’s holiness and leads them to new life which flows into eternity.

All this leads us to love. Love is the most complicated to understand, although heavily described and sung about. It points to one of humanity’s deepest needs, the quest for love. “Christianity in its roots and its manifestations is basically a religion of love” (Dogan, 2003, 403). God is love, and God is the center of Christianity which leads us to the conclusion that love is the main Christian value. A

eulogy to love says something like the following: if I would have this and that, and I do not have love, all I have is worth nothing. Then Paul concludes, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). Nikola Dogan says that love is the most important and the best relation of all possible relations a human can realize: "Love is an encounter between two people within the deepest secrecy of their being" (2003, 107).

Love leads us directly to establishing a close relationship with the creator. Nikola Dogan ends his book by saying that "man is a seeker for God, and until he finds it, he has no peace," and we are filled with longing "for the lost God"... "seekers for God throughout whole human history" (2003, 424). Human's genesis and end are marked by an encounter with God. The biblical message brings reconciliation and fellowship with the holy God. Through faith, we can experience that God is not far away or disinterested, but he is here, close, at hand. We just need to reach out for him. So, religion can be defined as a human's connection with a transcendent being (Dogan, 2003, 32). Starbuck's collection of manuscripts could help us to get an idea of the kind of relationship we are talking about. A record of the man at age forty-nine, who is probably one of thousands of Christians who wrote about an almost identical experience, says, "God is more real to me than any other thought or thing or person of whom I feel positive presence, and even more when I live in accordance with laws written in my body and mind... I talk to him as I would talk to a companion in prayer and praise, and our fellowship is wonderful. He replies to me over and over again, often in words uttered so clearly that it looks as my outer ear translated them to tone, but generally within strong mental impression" (William, 2011).

Conclusion

The experience of a believer is linear. It begins with a religious heritage or need that the transcendent God take care of the things we cannot control. Somehow, it begins like the first steps of a child who is learning to walk. It is the most magnificent event when an unbeliever becomes a believer. A linear experience of that kind has to have a starting point, but there is no end point. Relationship with God starts in this life and lasts forever. Faith is not a legacy, or a synonym for personal identity. Faith is much more, a tool that leads us into sincere, deep, and wonderful fellowship with God the Father, an experience which is hard to describe in words. The Pentecostal movement has rediscovered this wonderful communion with God which becomes fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Maybe at first glance, the religious experience of Pentecostal Christians is no different than other similar experiences woven with prayer, repentance, love and fellowship. But if we look at a genuine Pentecostal believer more closely, we would be able to recognize that

his/her experience leads him/her to a new reality which is inaccessible by reason. This reality implies a supernatural encounter and fellowship with God which provides increasing understanding of God and his supernatural activity.

A believer with a Pentecostal experience is equipped and ready to help another person open up to God because, from his/her own experience, he/she knows that the almighty God is always ready to help that believer's spiritual experience to keep from getting old or faded, but rather getting more distinct and fresh every day.

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Translated from Croatian by Dalia Matijević

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Pentekostna iskustva vjere

Sažetak

U radu se raspravlja o pentekostnom iskustvu vjere i značenju koje to iskustvo ima za obogaćivanje života vjernika. Rad ukazuje na dva nivoa spoznaje ili kratko nazvana 'iskustva vjere': religiozno iskustvo vjere i veliko predanje. Iskustva vjere, ne samo što mogu biti iskustveno različita, već su različita po intenzitetu i dubini iskustva. Ovaj rad prvo razmatra što je vjera, što iskustvo vjere, a potom što smatramo pod iskustvom vjere. U prvom dijelu se raspravlja o općim iskustvima vjere, posebice se razmatra razlika između religioznog iskustva i iskustva, kako smo ga nazvali, velikog predanja. Drugi dio članka sadrži pregled značenja velikog predanja, tj. iskustva djelovanja Duha Svetoga u vjerniku.