

How to Understand Pentecostal Experiences of God as a Source for Systematic Theology

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An Article-Based PhD Thesis:

Article 1:

Andersen, John Daniel, and Atle Ottesen Søvik. "Aspects of Experience and Their Role in Systematic Theology." *Theology and Science* 20, no. 4 (2022): 386–400.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2022.2124477>.

Article 2:

Andersen, John Daniel, and Atle Ottesen Søvik. "How to Choose among Conflicting Theories in Systematic Theology?" *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 76, no. 2 (2022):

193–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2021.2017341>.

Article 3:

Andersen, John Daniel. "On Religious Emotions and Their Theological Value: How to Understand the Positive Significance of Christian Affections for Doctrine and Practice?"

Scandinavian Journal for Leadership & Theology 9 (2022): 45–69.

<https://doi.org/10.53311/sjlt.v9.66>.

Article 4:

Andersen, John Daniel. "Mediated Immediacy and the Distinct Theological Contribution of Christian Experiences of God." (Prepared for submission).

Abstract

This article-based PhD thesis explores the overall research question: *How should Pentecostal experiences of God be understood as a source for systematic theology?* By “Pentecostal experiences” I refer to putative encounter-experiences of the triune God within the context of Christian doctrine and practice, and which are understood theologically from a Pentecostal perspective influenced by Pentecostals’ experiences.

In Part One, I present the historical background and contemporary Pentecostal research context of the whole PhD project to situate the four articles and the thesis’ research questions, before I reflect on several epistemological and methodological issues related to the project.

Part Two consists of the four articles. Article 1 discusses some key terms and concepts such as “experience”, understood to be a phenomenon with six different aspects, and its relation to the four traditional “sources” of systematic theology (Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason). The conclusion is a detailed explanation of how the sources influence each other reciprocally in systematic theology by showing how they can be related to the different aspects of experience. This raises another problem, discussed in article 2: How should we choose among conflicting data (of experience) in systematic theology? The article argues that the integration of central data (connected with many other central data) and/or fine-grained data (with detailed explanations) can function as a sub-criterion to identify important data, and hence aid in the overall assessment about data and coherence. An implication of the second article is that data of Pentecostal experiences can be perceived as *prima facie* important since the content of these experiences (the triune God) is central for systematic theology and connected with many other central data such as the text of the Bible, testimonies from Church history, and Christians’ (putative) experiences of God today. However, detailed explanations of Pentecostal experiences make their importance appear even more likely. Thus, a more fine-grained understanding of Pentecostal experiences is what I attempt to gain in the next articles.

Article 3 discusses Christian affections that often are involved in Pentecostal experiences, and how their positive significance for systematic theology can be understood in light of the somatic marker hypothesis on bodily conditioned emotional markings of mental images – especially the image of God. Article 4 discusses the theological contribution of experiences of God (understood as “mediated immediacy”) within a Christian context. The article presents

four philosophical reasons why Pentecostal experiences or Christian experiences of God in general can contribute as a source of knowledge of God, and suggests that their distinct contributions can be specified as manifestation beliefs about God's being and doing towards a person that represents relational and personal knowledge of God.

Part Three summarizes and discusses the thesis' contributions. First, by summarizing the results of the four articles, followed by a preliminary discussion of the articles' contributions to the conceptions of Pentecostal systematic theology as spirituality and doctrine by explaining how systematic theology is the result of a process of experience(s). Finally, I discuss the whole PhD thesis's answer to the overall research question and its contribution to the issue of defining authentic Pentecostal experiences, which requires a theological and normative definition. In this part of the discussion, I pull all the contributions of the articles together in order to suggest a theological understanding: Pentecostal experiences are *revelatory events of divine encounters* that include the fivefold "gospel experiences" and (often) involve *Christian affections*, where the Holy Spirit manifests the same God who has revealed himself through Jesus Christ and the Biblical Scriptures to persons.

After having discussed this theological understanding, I propose a more complete answer to the overall research question by explaining how theologians' first-hand Pentecostal experiences have a stronger implicit function (via Christian affections and richer mental content or revelatory relational and personal knowledge of God) and thus likely a more formal function (as manifestation beliefs or data of Pentecostal experiences) as a source for systematic theology. My conclusion is therefore that Pentecostal experiences (descriptively) can and (optimally) should function as an implicit and formal source of theological knowledge for systematic theology.

The thesis ends with reflections on limitations, further research, and how the PhD project may contribute to an *Affective (Evangelical-)Pentecostal Biblical Pragmatism* that from the outset can be described as a Pentecostal pragmatic coherentism ("active love and faith seeking understanding") that emphasizes the central role of Christian affections and the experiential aspects of the Pentecostal doctrine of the fivefold gospel together with an Evangelical-Pentecostal view of Scripture.