

A Book Review of:

Experiencing God

by Henry Blackaby and Claude V. King

In 1990, a workbook based upon the teachings of Henry Blackaby (with co-author Claude King), a Southern Baptist pastor and conference speaker, was published. The workbook, *Experiencing God*, has since sold over two million copies, been translated into 40 languages, and has been taken as a 13-week course by approximately 16% of all Southern Baptists (SBC). By some estimates, this translates to about half of all active members of the SBC denomination. But, according to a spokesman for the SBC Sunday School Board, churches from many other denominations have also gone through the "Experiencing God" course, including Roman Catholic churches. Furthermore, there are now youth and pre-teen editions of the workbook, as well as videos and a leader study guide.

The hardback version of *Experiencing God* (subtitled *Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, LifeWay Press, Nashville, Tennessee) is an expanded and modified form of the workbook. (All comments will be based on the hardback edition.) It was published in 1994 and already has sold 250,000 copies. In addition, thousands have attended "Experiencing God Weekends" and "Experiencing God Weekends for Couples." These weekends are usually sponsored by the SBC, but are open to all denominations. Even the Jesuits at Boston College had scheduled a 1997 Spring "Experiencing God" Conversation Series.

Blackaby's book and seminars are everything that should be detested in so-called evangelicalism today. They take a purely mystical approach to Christian living, and by necessity, undermine and distort the precious Word of God. This brief examination of Blackaby's work is for the purpose of not only exposing it (many outside of Blackaby's Southern Baptist Convention have never heard of Blackaby), but also because it is a clear representation of the sorry state of evangelicalism in America.

The general teaching of *Experiencing God* is wrapped around what Blackaby calls the "Seven Realities of Experiencing God": (1) God is always at work around you; (2) God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal; (3) God invites you to become involved with Him in His work; (4) God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways; (5) God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a "crisis of belief" that requires faith and action; (6) You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing; and (7) You come to know God by experience as you obey Him and He accomplishes His work through you.

Experiencing God is a book that is full of errors, Biblically unsupportable assertions, incredible statements, and story-theology (views based upon anecdotal accounts rather than upon Scripture). Some examples:

(a) The last four of the Seven Realities either contradict Scripture, or at best, cannot be supported or proven by Scripture;

(b) "If you have trouble hearing God speak, you are in trouble at the very heart of your Christian experience" (p. 87). What does this mean? Does God speak to all Christians individually? If so, how? What Scripture is used to support this (Blackaby uses none)?;

(c) After praying to God, Blackaby advises, "Reflect on your feelings. ... How did you feel as you walked and talked with God" (p. 62). What passage from the Bible tells us to reflect on our feelings in order to evaluate our prayer life?;

(d) "Knowing God only comes through experience as He reveals Himself to me through my experiences with Him" (p. 5). Doesn't the Bible reveal God to us? Are our experiences necessary, and more importantly, are our experiences reliable when it comes to experiencing God?;

(e) "With God working through His servant, he or she can do anything God can do. Wow! Unlimited potential" (p. 26). Wow is right! [Kenneth Copeland](#), Paul Crouch, [Benny Hinn](#), and the whole [Word-Faith](#) gang of heretics would shout, "Wow!" too. Can believers create? Can they convict of sin? Can they draw men to God? This statement is a gross perversion of Phil. 4:13 (and is very similar to Manifest Sons of God doctrine);

(f) "When God gets ready to do something, He reveals to a person or His people what He is going to do" (p. 31). Oh really? Actually, this concept is a major emphasis of the book, and a large part of its popularity. But what Scripture supports this? Does God really report to us? Does He reveal to His church what He IS GOING TO DO? If so, tell me, what is He going to do next week? Or, what is the next major movement of God in this world? We can often tell in hindsight what God has done and who He has used, but going forward is a different story;

(g) "You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing" (p. 38). Blackaby would have us "adjust [our] lives to" God (p. 73), rather than repent of our sins. What

kind of "adjustments" are we talking about here? Blackaby often uses this word, "adjust," but it can't be found in a concordance. One wonders why he is so reluctant to use the good old fashioned Biblical words like "repent" or "confess."

As concerning as some of Blackaby's statements mentioned above are, the real distress lies in Blackaby's distortion of the Word of God. Even though the book is peppered with numerous references to the Bible, and some of what Blackaby says is supported with Scripture, including speaking highly of the Word and its importance, we charge him with distortion of the Scriptures. We do so along three fronts:

(1) Misuse of the Scriptures -- 2 Tim 2:15 is clear that if we are to be a people approved of God we must accurately handle the Word of truth. The teachers of the Word of God have an awesome responsibility to understand and deliver God's truth, not their own opinions. On this score Henry Blackaby fails miserably. As just three examples of Blackaby's misuse of Scripture, keep in mind that Blackaby is attempting to use the following passages as support for his views:

John 14:26 -- *The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things.* -- "The Holy Spirit of God will be your personal Teacher. ... He will be at work revealing God, His purposes and His ways to you" (p. 3). Simply completing the verse clarifies it's meaning: *And bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.* Jesus was not talking to us but to His apostles. The Holy Spirit would teach them, and bring to their remembrance those things that they would reveal to the church largely through the writing of the New Testament. This verse is not a promise to the average believer directly.

Heb. 1:1 -- *God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways.* Blackaby utilizes this verse, with a few others, to prove that God will speak to His people today, apart from the Scriptures: "If anything is clear from a reading of the Bible, this fact is clear: God speaks to His people. ... God does speak to His people, and you can anticipate that He will be speaking to you also" (p. 83). Note carefully that Blackaby is **not** referring to the written Word of God alone. In using Heb. 1:1 as a proof text, Blackaby has ripped it out of context. Reading the very next line: *In these last days has spoken to us in His Son* (Heb. 1:2), shows that Blackaby has totally misused Scripture. Rather than a proof text for God speaking to us apart from Scripture, Heb. 1:1,2 coupled with Heb. 2:1-4, is a proof text of God's revelation which was "In His Son," and has now been recorded by the apostles in the

Word of God. This passage proves that there is ***no additional revelation apart from the Bible***, not that God is speaking to us today apart from the Bible. Blackaby could not be more wrong.

Rom 8:26,27 -- Blackaby uses these verses to teach that the Holy Spirit, "Helps us know the will of God as we pray. ... The Holy Spirit's task is to get you to ask for it (God's will)" (pp. 110-111). Of course, the passage teaches no such thing. Rather it tells us that, "The Spirit Himself intercedes for us." The Holy Spirit is not some mystical bellhop from God prompting us to ask for just the right things before we can get them (as Blackaby claims). Instead, recognizing our weaknesses, the Holy Spirit prays for us, according to the will of God.

(2) Neo-Orthodoxy -- Another front along which Blackaby must be challenged is that of his neo-orthodox leanings. Blackaby would surely deny the neo-orthodox handle, but his theology has clearly been influenced by neo-orthodoxy.

Neo-orthodoxy is a "Christian" theology which finds its roots in the existential teachings of Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Barth was a German theologian attempting to move away from liberalism in the early-1900s. Unfortunately, as Barth recognized the error of liberalism and started marching toward conservative orthodoxy, he never made it. Along the way he formed his own views which eventually took the name neo-orthodoxy or Barthianism. Blackaby is not a true Barthian, but his view of Scripture has been influenced by this movement.

One of neo-orthodoxy's "contributions" to evangelical Christianity is the view that revelation to man from God takes many forms. The Bible is no longer the sole authoritative voice of God in this age, it is just one of them. God not only can, but we should expect Him to speak to us in visions, dreams, circumstances, hunches, feelings, poems, novels, music, etc.

The neo-orthodox view is widely accepted today among professing Christians, thanks to the influence of the Charismatic movement. So most readers of *Experiencing God* are not shocked when they read, "God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes and His ways. When God speaks to you, you will be able to know He is the One

speaking, and you will know clearly what He is saying to you" (p. 87).

According to neo-orthodoxy, not only does revelation come from sources outside the Bible, but even the Bible itself is not the Word of God unless God chooses for it to be. Blackaby says it like this in response to the question, "Can't I get a word from God from the Bible?" (Notice that even Blackaby recognizes that his system confuses people about what is the Word of God). His reply, "Yes, you can! But only the Holy Spirit of God can reveal to you **which truth of Scripture is a word from God in a particular circumstance**" (p. 88). (Emphasis added.)

Blackaby is not saying that only the Holy Spirit can open our eyes to Biblical truth (the doctrine of illumination); he is saying something entirely different. To Blackaby, the Bible is no longer the "Word of God," it becomes the Word of God when God uses it to speak to you through your experience/your circumstances. God can also speak to us in a poem, or *The Wall Street Journal*, or your mother-in-law, or through impulses, as well as dreams or visions. Blackaby has thus made the Word of God totally relative and experiential, rather than Biblical.

(3) Mysticism -- "Mysticism is the idea that spiritual reality is found by looking inward [through deep meditation or contemplation]. Mysticism is perfectly suited for religious existentialism; indeed, it is its inevitable consequence. The mystic disdains rational understanding and seeks truth instead through the feelings, the imagination, personal visions, inner voices, private illumination, or other purely subjective means. Objective truth becomes practically superfluous. Mystical experiences are therefore self-authenticating; that is, they are not subject to any form of object verification" (adapted/copied from *The Vanishing Conscience*, merely using this definition of mysticism should not imply that we endorse the author of the book, since we most certainly do not).

From this definition of mysticism, we find evangelicalism in general, and *Experiencing God* in particular, to be completely infiltrated with mysticism. Following are some examples of mysticism in *Experiencing God*.

In the Introduction, Blackaby assures us that the Holy Spirit will mystically convince us that the teachings of *Experiencing God*

are from God: "When I present what I see as a Biblical principle, you can depend on the Holy Spirit to confirm whether that teaching comes from God or not" (p. 3). Not to disillusion Mr. Blackaby, but the Holy Spirit confirmed to me that what Blackaby writes is pure nonsense. How did the Holy Spirit tell me this? Not through some warm fuzzy and a sense of peace, but through the careful examination of the infallible Word once for all inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit confirms truth in the Scriptures, not through feelings.

Blackaby often makes the following types of statements:

- "When God reveals His work to you, that is His timing for you to begin to respond to Him" (p. 35, cp. pp. 81 & 99);
- "Truth is not discovered; it is revealed. Only God can tell you what He is doing or is wanting to do through your life" (p. 46);
- "When God starts to do something in the world, He takes the initiative to come and talk to somebody" (p. 66, cp. p. 73);
- "When He comes to a person, He always reveals Himself and His activity" (p. 69);
- "What God speaks, He guarantees will come to pass" (p. 82);
- "When God reveals truth to you, by whatever means, that is an encounter with God" (p. 85, cp. p. 86 -- this type of mysticism is also neo-orthodoxy);
- "When God speaks to you, you will be able to know He is the one speaking, and you will know clearly what He is saying to you" (p. 87, cp. p. 100);
- "What you do in response to God's revelation (invitation) reveals what you believe about God" (p. 135 -- Blackaby constantly uses the word "revelation");
- "We forget that when God speaks He always reveals what He is going to do -- not what He wants us to do for Him" (p. 137).

Note in these instances that Blackaby is not talking about God speaking to us through the Bible. He is clearly teaching that God speaks, reveals, talks, or invites the believer through extra-Biblical, mystical means.

How then are we supposed to hear the voice of God? Blackaby tell us to pray the following prayer: "God, I pray that I will come to such a relationship with You that when You speak, I will hear and respond" (p. 90). What if you question this mystical approach to God? Then you clearly have a spiritual problem: "Oh, don't let anyone intimidate you about hearing from God. One critical point to understanding and experiencing God is knowing clearly when God is speaking. If the Christian does not know when God is speaking, he is in trouble at the heart of his Christian life" (pp. 83 & 94). Not only do you have a spiritual problem, according to Blackaby, you also are in direct disobedience to the Word of God: "When He gives you a directive, you are not just to observe it, discuss it, or debate it. You are to obey it" (p. 158).

This whole paradigm also comes with its own special blessing: "If you walk in a consistent relationship with God's provision for you -- the Holy Spirit, and His own presence in your life -- then you should never come to a time that you do not know the will of God" (p. 170). (Emphasis added.) This unsupportable concept is perhaps the chief attraction to Blackaby's whole system.

In conclusion, the teachings found within *Experiencing God* are a dangerous mixture of Biblical truth with mysticism, neo-orthodoxy, and good old fashioned misuse of Scripture. Blackaby follows and perpetuates a trend that has found great acceptance in many evangelical camps today. It is the trend toward a personal relationship with Christ even at the expense of truth. It does not seem to matter whether a teaching agrees with Scripture; all that matters is that people feel better and seem closer to God. In the process, the sheep are led further away from the true God, and the Word of Truth is despised.

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