

Rejoinder to Bacaller's 'Reflective Reply'

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I remain grateful for the opportunity afforded me in 2021 to be part of the inaugural megachurch worship conference hosted by the University of Sheffield. And I am delighted to see that my address has stimulated discussion beyond the conference itself. I would like to begin my response with sincere thanks for the engagement of Sarah Bacaller. In her JCMIn article "A reflective reply to Clayton Coomb's (sic) Unapologetic Apology for Megachurch Worship Practices - (and an introduction to German idealism for Christians)," Bacaller makes a beautiful (if classic) argument for the synthesis of faith and reason—at least that is what I *hope* she is arguing for; at times it seems as if she is arguing for the replacement of faith with reason. Her reasoning is predicated on her assertion that my article rests on a 'God says so' argument that "dichotomises faith and reason." I suspect that Bacaller's parenthetical subtitle, "an introduction to German idealism for Christians" contains the real purpose of the article and in this she has done readers a great service as this is clearly an area both of passion and expertise for her. Since it is neither for me, I will not presume to challenge or add to what she has laid out in this regard. Bacaller suggests that my judgement may be coloured by my experience in a megachurch, but humbly acknowledges that her own may likewise be coloured by her negative experiences. I will engage her critiques in turn.

First, the 'God-says-so' argument. According to Bacaller, in a section titled "Where Logic Doesn't Fly":

Coombs' primary contention could be formulated in several syllogistic ways, with subtle differences, and without any change to the primary faith-focused assertion of his discourse:

Megachurch worship resembles historic revivals;
Revivals are an act of God;
Therefore megachurch worship is an act of God.

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We might even put it this way:

Megachurch worship is an act of God;
Revivals are an act of God;
Therefore they share key characteristics
and should both be accepted as acts of God.

I find this intriguing. My actual argument, which, perversely, Bacaller seems to understand quite well in places, and is *not* the same if you simply shuffle the 'variables', is this. Megachurch worship resembles historic revivals. Therefore, the presence of megachurches provides probable evidence of recent or current revivals. I admit that I stated this more forcefully and with less qualification in my article. But I'm not sure that amounts to a 'God says so' argument. I am happy to own, if pushed, that I have made an "I say so" argument, because I am speaking of my own observations. That is, after all, what good scientists do. They make observations. But I am not doing science. I'm doing history. Revival is a manmade word. It is, like a good medical diagnosis, a term that we give to a package of symptoms or observations. Comparing events or movements across time and culture to observe patterns or trends and to interpret those events or movements by means of those comparisons is simply good historiography. If Bacaller or others wish to challenge these parallels (megachurches represent centralised authority rather than broad based social movements; megachurch worship is unlike the hymns written by Wesley and those differences are substantial not merely stylistic; etc.) , then we would be having the same discussion. But Bacaller does not seem to be interested in having the same discussion. Rather she wishes to invite me "and others who think along similar lines, to consider reframing the God's-eye-view language of their perspectives through reflection on the ethical and relational consequences of such methods." This invitation appears to presume that my initial remarks were ill-considered or hasty and that if I were simply informed of a critical key that I had not considered that I would change the tone of my article, its internal logic and indeed my entire view of the phenomenon of the megachurch. That is unlikely.

I am suggesting that when we observe common features of revivals past-large crowds, new songs, numerous conversions, miracles of healing, stories of encounter and transformation etc.--that these features can be identified in the current or recent experience of many, perhaps most megachurches. In other words, the megachurch

phenomenon is not a *novelty*. It is consistent with how God has acted in history. And I suspect it is at this point that I lapse into the error that I am charged with. So let me state it clearly and unapologetically. I believe in God. I believe that God is personal and not distant. I believe God acts. And yes, I believe that God acts in this way. I believe God 'turns up' in certain places at certain times for his own inscrutable purposes. And furthermore, I believe in revival. I believe that there are times when the Spirit of God moves tangibly and discernibly in a church, a context or a culture and that mysteriously, though measurably (at least in certain ways that I lay out in my original address) this "move of God" is somehow more, or greater, at some times than at others. Pentecostals characterise this as the 'manifest presence' of God (as opposed to his omnipresence). In short I believe God can be experienced and if such an assertion is not in the realm of 'rational' discourse' then maybe rational discourse will not serve the present discussion quite as well as Bacaller hopes.

I speak of the activity of God in this way presuming that most readers interested in this topic will acknowledge that God may and does actually act. But to those who do not share my presuppositions, "move of God" is a term that is synonymous with "revival" for me. If someone does not agree with the characterisation of, say, the Methodist movement, as a revival then they are not going to accept my assertion that "big churches result from big moves of God." But regardless of presuppositions, I would challenge anyone to argue that we are talking about substantially different things when we compare the Methodist movement (for example) to the current megachurch movement. Does Bacaller mean to suggest that the Methodist movement was indeed a move of God and rightly described as a spiritual revival, but the current megachurch movement is not? Or does she actually mean to say that God does not act in this way then or now and we should seek instead for merely anthropological causes for these phenomena? The core of my argument is that the comparison is valid. And its validity does not depend on one's interpretation of the phenomena involved.

If I were to be facetious, I might say that Bacaller's own argument relies on observations and comparisons, and may be reduced to a similarly circular "Kant says so" argument as follows:

Immanuel Kant disagreed with Jacobi on the relationship between reason and experience.

Immanuel Kant represents a high water mark in enlightenment thinking. Therefore, it is more enlightened to adopt Kant's view.

Of course I am just displaying my ignorance. I promised not to embarrass myself by weighing into things that Bacaller clearly understands better than I do. But let's talk about the relationship between reason and experience. Bacaller would certainly not be the first to suggest that a Pentecostal is unduly dependent on experience at the expense of analytical thought, or at the expense of theology (as the accusation is variously stated). But it is not just a 'theology of experience'³⁷ but rather 'decrying analytical thought' that I am accused of. To say that "we must not cheapen what God is doing through megachurches throughout the world in this generation by merely analysing it" is not the same as "decrying analytical thought." It is true—indeed perhaps the main point of my article—that I consider praise and worship as a gateway to an Encounter with God that is *beyond* analytical thought. That is not the same as saying that I consider megachurches and their worship practices to be beyond criticism—though I do think that most megachurch attendees will never 'hear,' let alone engage with the type of discussion that we are having here. But surely I am permitted to defend against such criticism? And when I do, it is surely more helpful to at least begin with the way that megachurch worshippers understand and characterise their own experiences. If doing so requires the price of 'dichotomising reason and revelatory experiences' then I'm afraid that's a price that must be paid.

In the end, the curious dialectic that exists between reason and experience is substantially what we are talking about. My experience leads me to make observations about Christian revivals. Christian revivals themselves, represent a phenomenon not entirely measurable; packages of experiences that point to God's direct action. Cumulatively these experiences represent irrefutable proof of God's agency to those who are expecting and longing to see God act in this way, but to the skeptic, this self validating circle of experience-based reasoning is evidence merely of delusion. Ultimately what it comes down to, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, is whether or not one believes that *God is*.³⁸ Admitting this belief is perhaps the foundation of the

³⁷ Pentecostals are more likely to articulate the tension between theology and experience by saying that we ought to have an experience of our theology rather than conceding that we ought to get our theology from our experience.

³⁸ I must stress at this point that I am not accusing Bacaller herself, or anybody else who disagrees with me of unbelief. Perhaps it is an implicit accusation that she has taken issue with. For this I apologise. But what I am attempting to do is to recast the conversation as one about faith, experience, worship and God's Presence, rather than one about reason and empiricism. For this I do not apologise.

“‘God says so’ argument.” For if God is, then not only must God be permitted to *have* a say, but his ‘say so’ is surely the most important opinion by definition. And this brings us to where I disagree with Bacaller. For what I believe is at issue is not an argument between lazy reasoning on the one hand (“God says so!”) and sound reasoning on the other, or even over the right to disagree about whether and what God has said. Rather the issue is an invitation to expect and experience and enter into what God is saying and doing. This ‘entering in’ is called worship. And it always has been. And one can’t truly understand worship by observing it and documenting the phenomena associated with it. If one hopes to understand worship, one must...enter in. That God can be known, personally; can be *experienced* is the very scandal of particularity on which Christianity (not to mention pre-Christian Yahwism) is built. God is not merely an idea or concept to be understood; not even merely a mysterious Something to be studied and *analysed*—and there it is again. I can’t help it I guess. God is a *Someone* who can be, and desires to be known, sought, and yes, worshipped. And of course that is not to say that one may not use all of their God-given faculties in this pursuit. God is sought and worshipped with the mind, even with rightly directed study, as surely as he is worshipped with the heart and the soul, and as surely as he is worshipped with the Body. So when I speak of ‘mere analysis’ in my article, I am not dismissing analysis itself, or study, or reason, or the intellect or rationality. I am urging not that we stop short of those things, but that we move through them and beyond them into that ‘place’ that can only be understood and apprehended by faith and through experience. To put it another way, I am not seeking an experience devoid of understanding, but an embodied experience *of* what we understand.

C.S. Lewis once famously compared theological development to the drawing of a map. His analogy articulated a fascinating tension between reason and experience with a view to correcting a person who preferred the latter to the former. The man who prefers his personal experience of the beach to reading a map may be compared to a person who prefers an isolated and personal experience of God over the rather more difficult work of formal theology. The genius of the analogy is that it puts personal experience into perspective, because the map itself is drawn from experience and observation. Thousands of real experiences sailing on the real ocean.³⁹ As with historiography, the thing about cartography is that it may only take one experience or one observation to challenge the way that the map has been drawn. But having said

³⁹ The passage, regrettably too long to quote in full, is found in *Mere Christianity*.

that, those experiences may only elicit small changes in a map that has been well drawn and on a route that has been well-travelled. And the first question that will be asked of the person who has the contrary experience is “are you sure you were reading the map right? Because those who have travelled this route have discovered that around the next bend is the harbour that you were seeking; you just had not gone quite far enough.”

Towards the end of her response to my article, Bacaller suggests that my defence of the megachurch is not only motivated but also coloured by my positive experiences in megachurches. Without wanting to diminish the negative ones I have also had, I would simply say she is right. I have had wonderful, transformative experiences in megachurches over many years in attendance. Furthermore I admit that the passion and conviction in my article which seems (to my shame) to have been mistaken for naivety and hubris, is born out of these personal experiences of encounter with God. The point is that I am not the only one having these experiences. They are the same sort of experiences that are claimed by thousands upon thousands of living Christians who navigate these seas, not to mention countless thousands from ages past.

But these are, after all, just my observations. This is the way I see it. And as entertaining as this exchange may be to the few that will read it, I may hope instead for an opportunity to sit down with Bacaller and talk about our respective experiences (and to personally congratulate her for using *Deus Ex Machina* in a sentence without referring to streetwear). I want to take the time to listen to and validate the experiences she has had, to look her in the eye and to apologise. Because I can guarantee that there is *more* in God to experience. After all, God says so. And I honestly look forward to learning more about German idealism.