TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF THE
THIRD ARTICLE IN A POST-BARTHIAN ERA:
A PENTECOSTAL REVIEW OF DONALD BLOESCH’S PNEUMATOLOGY

Frank D. Macchia*

Vanguard University, 55 Fair Dr. Costa Mesa,
CA 92626-9601, USA
email: fmacchia@vanguard.edu

ABSTRACT

Donald Bloesch’s recent history of pneumatology entitled, The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts, is an insightful investigation into a variety of issues concerning the works and gifts of the Holy Spirit that seeks to address current challenges to Evangelical theology. Bloesch uses his historical discussions to defend the necessary inseparable connection between the Spirit and the divine Word incarnated and revealed in Jesus Christ. His paramount concern is to avoid the dual dangers of a mysticism that lacks Christological direction and a Christologically directed rationalism that lacks vibrant experience. However, this review argues that Bloesch’s efforts seem short sighted in that he does not take pneumatology beyond the Barthian subordination of the Spirit to Christ nor does he take pneumatology beyond the dominant concern of modern Protestant theology with the issues of epistemology and revelation. A further criticism is that Bloesch’s responses to Pentecostalism, though insightful in places, is hindered by a lack of exposure to current Pentecostal scholarship.

Promise and Limitation: Some Preliminary Remarks

Donald Bloesch begins his recent pneumatology, The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts, with the following words, ‘in the present theological milieu

* Frank D. Macchia (Dtheol, University of Basel) is Associate Professor of Theology at Vangard University in Costa Mesa, CA, USA. He also serves as editor for Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.

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Word and Spirit are increasingly separated and this cleavage runs through evangelicalism as well.¹ This initial sentence of his first chapter signals part of the heartthrob of Bloesch’s entire book, which is not so much a systematic or constructive theology of the Spirit as it is a survey of the history of approaches to the work and gifts of the Spirit from the vantage point of certain thematic interests. He definitely does not want to offer just a history of pneumatology as an end in itself, but for the purpose of suggesting which elements in various streams of tradition are more fruitful than others for bearing faithful witness to the biblical portrayal of the Spirit’s work. At points in his discussion, I felt that he could have been more constructive theologically and seriously engaged in the biblical text as a way of negotiating between the ideas he discusses. But Bloesch does have a thematic focus to his historical survey that is valuable, namely, the forging of a pneumatology that has a christological point of reference. He wishes to keep the Spirit connected to the Word and to develop a robust pneumatology from the foundation of God’s redemptive act in Christ.

The christological focus, however, is only one side of Bloesch’s central concern. He is also interested in coming into conversation with Wesleyanism, Pentecostalism and other pneumatologically oriented movements. He does not want his christological focus to turn into a christomonism in which the work of the Spirit in bearing witness to Christ and in realizing Christ’s redemptive work in us is denied a vital role to play in redemption. Bloesch thus states that redemption is not fulfilled without the work of the Spirit realizing God’s salvation in us. So, Bloesch wants both to reconnect pneumatology to Christology and to lift up the necessary role of the Spirit in God’s redemptive plan.

In general, I applaud Bloesch’s intention. I am hopeful about the prospects of a pneumatological reshaping of key theological loci, without the loss of the necessary christological point of reference. As I will note, I was particularly interested in Bloesch’s application of George Lindbeck’s preferred ‘cultural-linguistic’ hermeneutic to the work of the spirit in revelation. Bloesch’s insistence that the biblical text points beyond itself to the Christ event through the work of the Spirit is an important emphasis to place alongside the dominant focus of postliberalism on the function of the text in shaping our imaginative interpretations of faith and identity. In general, Bloesch displays an impressive amount of learning with regard to theological positions on the work of the Spirit as he seeks to grant