REVIEW ESSAY

Revitalizing Theological Categories:
A Classical Pentecostal Response to J. Rodman Williams's *Renewal Theology*

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So traditional categories—such as regeneration, sanctification, confirmation—do not suffice. Hence, we must turn in another direction. The turn we need to make, I am convinced, is toward an action of the Holy Spirit which fits no category, but one that does make most of our traditional theology operational. For what has happened, in part at least, is that a new dynamism has been unleashed that has vitalized various theological categories.

The above statement was made by J. Rodman Williams in his provocative little book, *The Era of the Spirit,* written in 1971 to explain and defend the Charismatic Renewal, in which he had been an active participant since 1965. Williams meets the challenge of reviving traditional, especially Reformed, theological categories in his recent *magnum opus,* the three-volume, *Renewal Theology.* Though Williams has taken issue with a few points of traditional Calvinist theology, one could say that his participation in the Renewal movement has caused his Calvinism to take on vitality (or, in his words, become more “operational”). One could even argue that Williams’s journey into the Charismatic Renewal was itself a “Calvinistic” pilgrimage. Williams claimed that driving him onward was “the vision of a world filled with the knowledge and glory of God.”

If the heart of historic Calvinism is the “God-centered” life dedicated to the sovereignty and glory of God,

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2 The term “Charismatic” is being used of both Protestant and Catholic wings of the Renewal movement.
3 Williams, *The Era of the Spirit,* 38.
then Williams's journey toward the Charismatic Renewal might be viewed as an attempt to rediscover the spiritual depth and vitality of his own theological heritage. Indeed, the Puritan vision of life as a journey of faith into the depths of God's grace for the *gloria Dei* is expressed in every section of Williams's *Renewal Theology*.

What we find in the volumes of *Renewal Theology* is a "Pentecostalization" of this Puritan vision. This attempt at revitalizing such a vision of faith is significant, especially in the light of Emil Brunner's observation that the Reformed theological heritage has resulted in a more rational approach to theology that neglects the significance of suprarational pneumatic experience. Can the glory and sovereignty of God so central to the Calvinist vision be made "operational" from within the spirituality and, even, reading of Scripture dominant in Pentecostal/Charismatic communities? Williams answers in the affirmative and has written the three volumes under review to make his case. At the very least, he exposes us to the fascinating prospect of an American Reformed theology that is open to the challenges of pneumatc experience on the formative level of hermeneutics and theological method. Whether or not he is consistently successful in accomplishing this task is a question this review essay will attempt to answer.

It is important to note from the start that Williams's interest in theological revitalization did not stem primarily from his scholarly research or ecumenical dialogue, but arose out of his labors as a teacher in Charismatic seminaries and, most importantly, among Charismatic lay audiences both in person and through television. This context is important, for it explains why Williams views his theology as an explication of "the contents of the Christian faith as set forth in orderly exposition by the Christian community." The primary task of theology for Williams is pedagogical, that is to teach the beliefs of the church. Though Williams would like his theology to correct wrong beliefs, *Renewal Theology* is neither very reflective nor critical vis-à-vis the church's confession, worship, or praxis. Moreover, consistent with Williams's pedagogic purposes, the sections of the volumes tend to be more encyclopedic in their treatment of topics than creative and integrative. They catalogue what the Christian community believes, particularly those Protestant communities involved in the Charismatic renewal. For example, in the same discussion he speaks of the "sign" of water baptism variously as a "pointer," a possible "means" of salvific grace, and a "physical counterpart" of a spiritual experience, without recognizing the tensions between these designations or the challenges

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