Steven M. Studebaker

From Pentecost to the Triune God: A Pentecostal Trinitarian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012). x + 281 pp. $34.00 paper.

Steven M. Studebaker’s most recent book is a compelling construction of a Pentecostal Trinitarian theology. While different than his previous books in focus, Studebaker’s writing here remains precise in research and argumentation. The author identifies two constructive tasks for himself at the outset of his work—first, to demonstrate “the theological significance of the Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit for Trinitarian theology” (2); second, to show how the Spirit’s prominent role in the biblical texts reveals the identity of the Trinity as a whole.

In his first chapter Studebaker takes up this first task. Recognizing that within Pentecostalism experience and theology have not always been seen as necessarily linked, Studebaker asserts in these early pages that “Pentecostal experience, and especially the Pentecostal experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—Spirit baptism—[is] a legitimate and fertile source of theology in general and Trinitarian theology in particular” (12). Studebaker enlightens his methodological argument in this chapter with a consideration of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 as a case study. While recognizing the critical role of discernment in understanding religious experience, an analysis of this biblical text leads him to the conclusion that “Pentecostals, along with all Christians, should neither shy away from drawing on what they believe is the work of the Spirit for theological purposes nor allow the fear of religious subjectivity and relativism to keep them from giving their experience of the Spirit theological significance” (35).

With this argument for the role of Pentecostal experience as a source of theology in place, Studebaker moves into the most substantive section of the project. Specifically, in this second chapter he takes up his second task—to examine the role of the Spirit in the biblical narratives in order to articulate a Pentecostal Trinitarian theology. The heart of this chapter is a consideration of “three narrative roles of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit of creation/redemption, the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit of Pentecost” (67). Each of these roles is examined through three characteristics of the Spirit—the liminal, constitutional, and eschatological. Studebaker weaves these roles and characteristics together in such a way that the significance and richness of the Spirit’s activity throughout the biblical narratives is undeniable. The Spirit is not an afterthought or follow-up to the presence and work of the Father and Son. Rather, the Spirit is ever-present and vital in forming the very identity of the Trinity.

With this constructive work in place, the next three chapters of this book attempt to widen the conversation. Studebaker surveys Eastern and West-
ern Trinitarian theologies—both past and present. He also explores reformed evangelical Trinitarian theology and the works of Jonathan Edwards, David Coffey, Donald Bloesch, and Millard Erickson. While his task in these chapters is not explicitly constructive in nature, Studebaker’s purpose remains consistent—“to overcome the implicit subordination of the Spirit to Christ in traditional Trinitarian theologies and ... to make a Pentecostal contribution to traditional Trinitarianism” (166). To this end, his fifth chapter surveys the contributions made by contemporary Pentecostal theologians to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The final two chapters of this book build on this Pentecostal Trinitarian theology but move in a different direction than the preceding pages. In the penultimate chapter, Studebaker puts forth a theology of religions—and more specifically a theological foundation “for seeing the religions as the liminal space for the work of the Spirit of Pentecost” (216). Engaging the work of Amos Yong and other Pentecostals, Studebaker does his most interesting theological work in this chapter. It is here that he endeavors to push Pentecostals and evangelicals to rethink whether religions “can be the context for the grace of God’s Spirit and salvation” (239). Studebaker’s suggestion that religions can play this role is grounded in his proposed Pentecostal Trinitarian theology. Studebaker spends some time in this chapter on mission, and specifically the Spirit’s mission, yet unfortunately does not engage many contemporary missional theologians (e.g., John Franke or Darrell Guder). Such engagement would enhance and refine both Studebaker’s Pentecostal Trinitarian theology and also missional theology. It is a direction I hope Studebaker pursues in the future.

Studebaker’s final chapter focuses on how a Pentecostal Trinitarian theology supports a strong mandate for creation care. Here he presents compelling discussions of both the role of the Spirit in creation restoration and also various understandings of common and special grace. While Studebaker’s words concerning the connectivity between theology and creation care are important for Pentecostal and evangelical theologians to read, it would have been helpful—and also would have brought his discussion to a new level—for Studebaker to engage more of the voices in ecological theology in the wider Christian tradition. Specifically, feminist theologians have written extensively on ecology and creation care, yet only a few of them get mentioned in Studebaker’s footnotes (e.g., Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson). Of course, Studebaker is not alone here; the reticence to engage the feminist Christian traditions (including white feminists, womanists, mujerista theologians, etc.) is a wider problem in the evangelical world.

Throughout this book Studebaker is cognizant of currents in both Pentecostal scholarship and Trinitarian theological scholarship. This strengthens his