Simeon Zahl

_Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross in the Preaching of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt: The Holy Spirit between Wittenberg and Azusa Street_ (London: T&T Clark, 2010). x + 206 pp. $130.00 hardcover, $44.00 paperback.

The focus of this study is a perceived pneumatological impasse in Protestant theology—an impasse between the classical Reformed emphasis on the Word and those movements that focus on personal experience of the Spirit. This debate emerges out of the desire to establish a conversation between the theology of Martin Luther and that of contemporary Pentecostal writers Frank Macchia and Steven Land. Simeon Zahl seeks a way forward through a detailed study of the theology of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919). According to Zahl, Blumhardt held together a Lutheran _theologia crucis_ with an experiential pneumatology, which provides a point of intersection for both Pentecostal and Lutheran theology. Blumhardt develops his father’s—Johann Christoph Blumhardt—theological thought. This study explores the discontinuity between the Blumhardt’s particularly in their different approaches to anthropology. It focuses on 1888–1896 during which Blumhardt-son developed his “sterbert” theology.

Blumhardt’s theology of the Cross, his “sterbert” theology is epitomized in the phrase “die, so that Jesus might live.” This was a motto developed in 1888 and represents a significant shift in thinking from his father. Whereas Johann emphasized that “Jesus is Victor” over demonic powers and the devil, Christoph felt there needed to be a shift to “Jesus is Victor” over the sinful heart of people who reject God. There is a shift from outer evil to inner (human) evil and the development of a pessimistic anthropology that has more in common with classical Lutheranism. This resulted from a critique of the church in which the people of God didn’t seem more holy than others despite the revivals. Blumhardt saw this in terms of a church that focused more on the outward dimension than the inner aspects of Christian life, including the outward focus on the Bible separate from the inner work of the Holy Spirit. What was needed was the action of spiritual death in order that the life of Jesus might be revealed; dying so that Jesus might live represented a call to radical repentance.

The Kingdom of God is often expressed by Blumhardt in terms of the rule of God, the power of God at work in contrast to the power of the flesh. The present aspect of the kingdom was challenged by the failure of his father’s hopes for the fulfilment of the Kingdom during his lifetime. Out of this Blumhardt developed the concept of eschatological ‘stations’ through which God’s people must pass before the Kingdom of God could fully come. There is a forward movement to the Kingdom of God driven by the Spirit, and Christians must not stand still. At
the same time, Blumhardt is careful to say that this is not a neat progression of
the Kingdom within history. The ‘stations’ are not cumulative or progressively
revealed; they need a “death” in order to move to the next station. This fits with
the “sterbert” call to die, although this approach stresses human agency in a way
hard to fit within a pessimistic anthropology. Zahl suggests there is dialectic in
his thinking, sometimes stressing the divine and sometimes the human within
an “under-realized eschatology.”

Zahl focuses on Blumhardt’s use of the category of experience, developing
those used within the Pietist tradition. He suggests three categories of experi-
ence: revelatory experience, external miracles, and punctiliar encounter with
God: the first points to guidance from God; the second to miracles; the third to a
mix of encounters that result in conversion, sanctification, empowerment, and
strong emotional responses. Zahl argues that for Blumhardt the third category
is split into: (a) feelings, such as peace and joy and (b) negative experience, a
new category not used by previous Pietists. It is this ‘negative experience’ that is
seen as key for understanding Blumhardt as a bridge between Lutheranism and
contemporary charismatic theology. Negative experience represents a “painful
encounter with the truth of one’s sin.” It is a revelation of God’s holiness against
human experience; an experience of God’s truth and righteousness; a disem-
powerment. Lutheranism argues that all experience is mediated first by scrip-
tural preaching or the sacraments. In contrast Blumhardt speaks of unmediated
experience but one that does not lead to an over-realized eschatology.

Zahl goes on to argue that Blumhardt’s later life and thought—from 1897–
1919—is rooted in these three themes above despite his turn from the past-
toral to the political. In becoming the “father” of “Religious socialism,” he sees
Blumhardt as building on his sterbert thinking. Zahl makes an important link
between sterbert theology and God at work in the Great War, in which negative
experience could be seen on a massive scale. Unlike other theologies that focus
on experience, Blumhardt’s encouraged him to critique the War rather than
affirm all experience. Zahl critiques Pentecostal reliance on particular positive
outcomes in experiencing the Spirit and the lack of negative experience. It can
be argued that pentecostalism has the negative experience of conviction of sin
as a vital part of its tradition (a line of argument Zahl omits) but this is often
not stressed. Zahl rightly argues that pentecostals need a more self-critical dis-
cernment of the Spirit and a more developed anthropology.

Zahl sees negative experience as the most reliable principle for discerning
the Spirit at work: we most clearly discern the Spirit in obstacles, difficulties and
the thwarting of the ego. He admits that this may seem overly pessimistic and it
does seem hard to equate with any approach to pentecostalism. Yet, his biblical
support, especially from the Johannine writings and his challenge to better