Stephen C. Torr


Outstanding books often are born from their author’s experiences—Stephen C. Torr’s *A Dramatic Pentecostal/Charismatic Anti-Theodicy* shares that same great tradition. Launched in part by his own deeply personal suffering (particularly his mother’s unexpected death), Torr investigates the knotty problem of evil, developing an “anti-theodicy” response to his guiding research question: What does it mean to produce a fitting Pentecostal/Charismatic performance in the face of seemingly innocent, meaningless suffering when God appears to be absent? Torr aims to answer this question by “developing Biblically rooted, systematic guidance for the production of a fitting Pentecostal/Charismatic performance” in the face of distressing situations (14). The author locates his project within systematic theology while drawing on related disciplines such as hermeneutics and biblical theology, and emphasizing evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic ecclesial streams. The authority and use of Scripture, the centrality of Jesus (especially the “Easter event”), the work of the Holy Spirit, and the practice of testimony undergird Torr’s illocutions throughout the book.

Engagement with diverse Christian approaches to suffering (Chapter 2) gives Torr’s readers a solid introduction and concise critique of several competing theodicies, including classical (Augustine’s *Free Will Theodicy*), evangelical (Plantinga’s *Free Will Defense*), pluralist (Hicks’ *Soul-Making Theodicy*), open theism (Pinnock and others’ *Openness Theodicy*), and process (Griffin’s *Process Theodicy*) theological approaches. Ultimately, Torr rejects all theodicy attempts, believing they “attempt to solve the unsolvable” while ignoring the “sobering reality that the problem of evil and suffering is a felt experience to someone, somewhere that requires a practical response” (46–47).

Chapter 3 comprises lengthy devotion to Pentecostal/Charismatic approaches, focusing attention on how each model answers questions related to evil—the term’s origin and meaning—and what can be done about evil and by whom. The writer considers three distinct approaches ranging from extreme human responsibility emphases to extreme determinism perspectives. The first approach (human responsibility emphasis) includes Word of Faith, Agnes Sanford, and Morton T. Kelsey. The second grouping (God’s responsibility emphasis) consists of Kathryn Kuhlman and Charles Farah. The third type (relatively equal emphasis on divine and human responsibility) comprises Francis MacNutt, John Wimber and Ken Blue. Torr posits there exists across this spectrum a
shared practical emphasis and a high view of the Bible, yet a contradictory and distorted use of Scripture via proof-texting to support each proponent’s authority. Rightly identifying this problem as unacceptable, he calls for development of a “hermeneutical method ...” that is “conducive to Pentecostal/Charismatic theology” (99). This is the stated aim of Chapter 4, wherein Torr develops his “Dramatic Pentecostal/Charismatic Hermeneutic,” while engaging three key interlocutors: two Pentecostal scholars (John Christopher Thomas and Kenneth J. Archer) and an evangelical postconservative scholar (Kevin Vanhoozer). Torr proposes a “Vanhoozian, dramatic, Biblical hermeneutical methodology that ... resonates with and can be employed by Pentecostals without compromising central features” of Pentecostalism (129). He finds value in Thomas’s and Archer’s methods, which attempt to maintain a high view of Scripture, yet Torr also raises important concerns about their overemphasis on the community’s role and the result of controlling “‘correct’ interpretations of Scripture and the work of the Spirit” (114). Torr then explains effectively—and embraces explicitly—Vanhoozer’s “drama” and “canonical-linguistic” approach as fitting for a “dramatic” Pentecostal hermeneutical method that provides the necessary “hermeneutical tools” with which to answer the central question and aim of his proposal (129–130). In the next chapter, though, Vanhoozer’s understanding of evil and suffering gives way to N.T. Wright’s more substantive work on the matter (137).

Chapter 5 addresses the problem of lament (especially in the Old Testament and particularly from the Psalms) as Torr claims, “Lament is never the production of a theodicy. Instead, it is always about face to face confrontation in the context of relationship, where honesty rules and the soul of the lamenter is laid bare before God” (158). He adds, the “Old Testament suggests that lament done right, in the end, leads to praise” and brings about a “new stage in the relationship between God and the sufferer in which a new level of maturity is reached” (168). Torr then moves (in Chapter 6) to the New Testament and to “the divine command performance of God incarnate seen in Act 3,” examining Jesus’ own improvised performance and the role of the Holy Spirit. Here, Torr’s proposal for a fitting performance (in light of God’s osten-
sible absence during seemingly innocent and meaningless suffering) involves improvising on Jesus’ performance and lamenting to the Father with the Spirit’s aid while carrying on “our through-line towards eschatological consummation” (196). Additionally, Torr integrates into his conclusion the practice of (Pente-
costal) “testimony,” advocating both “core testimony” and “countertestimony” being vocalized and heard in faith communities—thereby ensuring “legitimate testimony” and realizing complementary rather than selective Scripture reading that solely permits “victory” stories (209–214).