Myk Habets (ed.)

This hefty volume represents a tangible response to Lyle Dabney’s call of years ago that theology needed to start, rather than end, with the confession of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work. To be clear, a “Third Article Theology” (TAT) is distinct from First (the Father, creation, and so on) and Second Article (Christ’s life and work) Theologies by starting methodologically with the confession of the Spirit. In such a way, the approach is not simply looking at the Holy Spirit (which would be pneumatology proper) but through the Spirit at all other aspects of dogmatic consideration. With this approach, the assumption is that new and neglected aspects of theological reflection will come to light. Given the number and variety of chapters on offer in the volume, I believe this methodological orientation has borne considerable fruit and can continue to do so for years to come.

The anchors of this volume are the editor’s chapters, especially the first two. In both “Prolegomenon: On Starting with the Spirit” and “Spirit Christology: The Future of Christology,” Habets sets out programmatically much of what he believes is at stake with TAT. In the first chapter, Habets catalogues the possibilities within various confessional communities. Pentecostalism is referenced at this point, and it should be noted (given Pneuma’s readership) that a claim here is in need of more development. Habets remarks that “Pentecostal theology in some quarters is tending to dislocate the work of the Spirit from the work of Christ in such a way that their respective missions are conceived as separate operations, each with its own integrity and ends, rather than as distinct but coordinated missions. Contemporary Pentecostal scholarship is divided over an understanding of the economic activity of God, with many positing a freedom of the Spirit from Christ such that any catholic notion of the Trinity has to be abandoned for a version of a social doctrine of God, or for an implicit tritheism” (7–8, italics original). Given the sweeping nature of this assessment, it would be helpful to have more references than one footnoted author (who, incidentally, is also a contributor to the volume). Pressing on, I should note that other fellowships and movements are mentioned, and these can only be considered briefly as well. This is followed by a series of ten methodological theses. The theses are helpful touchpoints to see the methodological character of TAT. Hybets’s second chapter touches on what is a very significant contribution of TAT: offering a reconsideration of what “Spirit Christology” can mean. For many thinkers past and present, “Spirit Christology” carries with it the theological association of adoptionism. This need not be the case, as Hybets (alongside
others in the volume) offers past and present alternatives that account for a pneumatological and Christological dynamism in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This emphasis is helpful and can prove to be a significant corrective to pneumatologically deficient Christologies.

The book on the whole is divided into six dogmatic parts: theology proper, Holy Scripture, Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and public theology. The twenty-four chapters within these parts cover a number of topics, and the list of contributors represents a good mix of established scholars and those early in their careers. As with any collection as extensive as this one, the appeal of each chapter varies depending on readers’ interests and tastes. There is a mix of description and prescription, analysis and construction, thereby making it less of a reference work and more of a collection of pieces that together aim to make a contribution to Christian dogmatics.

I have one significant concern with this book, and I label my reservation a “concern” rather than a “critique” per se because it is a concern than can be registered in relation to much of what goes as Christian dogmatics today. The field of dogmatics has to do with Christian speech; it has to do with bearing witness to and confessing all that the God of Christian worship has said and done; it involves trading in holy mysteries, and so a complexity is at work here as well as a particular orientation that involves holy fear, love, faithfulness, and obedience. And yet and further still, dogmatics is pursued by people who are bodies in space and time. The grain and character of their witness will be shaped by who they are, their communities, what they have seen and heard, and their varying experiences, both positive and negative. Dogmatics is lacking, at least in my opinion, if it does not account for, or at least gives expression to, this human, material dimension. And so, I would have liked to have seen authors and topics within the volume account for these dimensions, not simply for the sake of diversity per se in an effort to be inclusive and representative of various voices (as important as that end is) but also and for the sake and integrity of Christian dogmatics as a field itself. For instance, repeatedly in the volume the perspectival framing of “above or below” made its way. The gap itself represents a kind of binary thinking reflected in many Western intellectual sensibilities. Could other voices make headway here, not simply in terms of reconciling the two but rethinking the whole paradigm altogether? I am inclined to think so. Moments with this kind of discourse can be found in the volume, but overall, this represents a lost opportunity.

This concern notwithstanding, I find this volume to be very significant, and I do hope it enjoys a wide readership in part so that TAT can take hold in theological discourse. Given my recent work, I suppose I can be included as a