Wolfgang Vondey


This constructive account of Pentecostal theology by Wolfgang Vondey is a mature presentation of Pentecostal thought and life that stresses Pentecostalism as an experience of God and way of life rather than speculative doctrine. Vondey chooses to work with a decidedly ‘from-below’ methodology: “theologically reflection begins with the discernment of the self in the community of those who have encountered God” (23), or put differently, theology is a “reflection upon one’s own testimony unfolding within the larger Pentecostal story that is itself participation in the story of God” (33). Vondey’s book thus falls into two parts, the first addressing the narrative testimony and ritual of Pentecostal believers and the second drawing theological reflection out of this.

In the first part, Vondey examines the narrative testimony of the five-fold full gospel in the lives of Pentecostals: they are saved, sanctified, Spirit-baptized, healed, and commissioned for the coming kingdom by Jesus Christ. Vondey creatively orients each of these around the central Pentecostal ritual of ‘the altar’ as the place—literal or metaphorical—of encounter with God. Pentecost is the symbol of this altar experience, a reality in which present-day Pentecostals participate. Thus, one is saved when called to the altar, sanctified when waiting at the altar, Spirit-baptized when encountering God’s fullness at the altar, healed when transformed to leave the altar, and commissioned when sent from the altar to the ends of the earth. This is not a fixed sequence, of course: each of these take place at different times, in crisis moments and/or progressively, and the whole is pervaded by the apocalyptic urgency of Jesus’ soon return. Vondey does especially well in this part at shepherding insights from the breadth of lived Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity into a coherent ritual narrative.

The second part draws theological reflections out of this Pentecostal liturgy. Here Vondey works from the cosmos back to the altar, with chapters on creation as pervaded by the Spirit and spirits; humanity as empowered by the Spirit to image God; society as spiritually-confronted and transformed; the church as “a charismatic, hospitable, empowered, egalitarian, and persistent movement of the Spirit of God” (228); and God as himself the eschatological altar at which all creation will worship. Much here will give rise to thought—and praise! To mention only a few of Vondey’s creative developments: charismatic existence as anticipating the life of the resurrection (193–197), and the reworking of the Nicene marks of the church and, indeed, the doctrine of God in light of the five-fold full gospel (227–253, 256–280).
Vondey’s presentation of Pentecostal theology is a winsome, masterful account attuned to all the latest in Pentecostal scholarship. It is both innovative in its presentation of the whole of the Pentecostal full gospel narrative as centered around the altar, and yet broadly Pentecostal—and, at points, ecumenical—in its constructive appeal. It will gain a wide readership, and justly so. Indeed, it is the ideal book for an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course on Pentecostal theology.

Yet I am not without my concerns. A brief autobiographical note may help frame these: I have been a Pentecostal all my life, and still am, but all my theological training has been with Reformed, Anglican, and Catholic theologians. This has given me a quasi-outsider’s outlook on contemporary Pentecostal theology which, as exemplified by Vondey’s book, brings me a mixture of hopefulness and apprehension.

One of these concerns involves Vondey’s polemic against “doctrine,” strongly voiced in the prolegomena and reappearing throughout. He describes it variously as a “conceptual system” (145), with “propositional and prescriptive terms” (29) and elements “logically isolated from one another in a ‘strict theological sequence’” (22). What he thinks doctrine typically does is distract from the experience of worship, which good Pentecostal theology both “emerges from and aims at” (19). Yet doctrine, from the Latin doctrina, simply means teaching, a task the Spirit empowers people to undertake. Good Christian teaching involves both what we ought to do and what we ought to believe. Vondey states his wish to overcome some of theology’s modern limitations, its “Western ideas and constructs” (33), while perceptively noting Pentecostalism’s own shaping by “a modernist rational and pragmatist mindset” (77). I suggest that playing off praxis against doctrine is a fruit of the modern spirit, not the Spirit of Pentecost. Greater engagement with premodern theology would open up new modes of reflection here, ones free from modern inhibitions and doctrinal in a good sense.

The greater concern, however, has to do with what kind of theology this is. So much contemporary theology makes claims by talking in a ‘religious studies’ voice about what Christians believe and do. Pentecostals run to “the perceived presence of God at the altar” (42); they “consider the world sacred because it originates from God” (160). Why not claim more forthrightly that God transforms people at the altar, and invite them there, or that the world is sacred because it is made by God? This, to my mind, would be more in line with early Pentecostal theology and testimony. Vondey does fully own his ‘from-below’ methodology, with more than a tip of the hat to Paul Tillich (283–288). Yet I fear this is a way of, as Karl Barth famously put it, talking about God by talking about humanity in a loud voice. Vondey is bound by the conven-