

THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

Pneumatology and Pentecostalism

Edited by

Michael Welker

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.



2007A 7472

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Published 2006 by
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The work of the Spirit: pneumatology and Pentecostalism /
edited by Michael Welker.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 0-8028-0387-3 / ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-0387-0 (pbk: alk. paper)

1. Holy Spirit. 2. Pentecostalism. I. Welker, Michael, 1947-

BT121.3.W67 2006

231'.3 — dc22

2006027813

www.eerdmans.com

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a consultation entitled “Pneumatology: Exploring the Work of the Spirit from Contemporary Perspectives,” held in New York City in November 2004. It brought together international scholars in the areas of theology, biblical studies, religious history, anthropology, and natural sciences. The interdisciplinary discourse on the topic had a specific profile as scholars with Pentecostal and Charismatic religious backgrounds and scholars with Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, and Roman Catholic heritages entered into a dialogue with each other. The conference took place almost a century after the so-called “Azusa Street Revival” in Los Angeles, which is often regarded as the initial event in the amazing development and spreading of last century’s Pentecostal and Charismatic movements — movements that now encompass more than one fourth of the two billion Christians in the world.

One of the main interests of the John Templeton Foundation is to support research on “spiritual realities.” This is a very complicated area in which a myriad of vague notions have been propagated. They have often prevented serious academic discourse and have driven respected scholars away. The combination of a dialogue among different traditions of faith and a dialogue among different academic disciplines including the sciences and philosophy was meant to provide space for critical and self-critical reflection on “spiritual realities.”

We thank the John Templeton Foundation for its generous support of the consultation and of this publication. We are particularly grateful to

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Mary Ann Meyers, who with great enthusiasm, kindness, and care planned and organized the meeting and the process of collecting and revising the contributions. We also thank Dr. Charles Harper for his constructive presence in the consultation, and Jennifer Hoffman, Alexander Massmann, and Tobias Hanel for assisting in the preparation of the volume.

MICHAEL WELKER

Introduction

MICHAEL WELKER

One easily runs into a “tower of Babel”-like constellation when one tries to deal with the notion of “the Spirit.” Do we have as many different concepts and images of “the Spirit” as we have areas of knowledge, religions, and philosophies? Does every thinker, believer, or spiritually oriented group interested in this power create an individual notion of “the Spirit”? This book wants to show that “the Spirit” can be a nonelusive topic in communities determined to deal with academically accessible realities and to raise, to test, and to defend truth-claims.

In order to do so, it presents an encounter among three different traditions and groups of thinkers. One of these groups has dealt with “the Spirit” for many centuries (theologians and biblical scholars from the so-called mainline churches); the second group has reflected on churches and religious movements that center on “the Spirit” and its workings and have experienced an extremely strong resonance in the last century (theologians and historians which come out of or deal with the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements); the third group are scientifically and philosophically trained scholars who are familiar with nonreligious areas of knowledge and have standards to judge whether a concept of “the Spirit” can be convincing in their not necessarily religious environments.

Although the members of the consultation “Pneumatology: Exploring the Work of the Spirit from Contemporary Perspectives” came from very different backgrounds, they were all willing to work together in a “truth-seeking community.”

- The members of the first group did not simply want to affirm century-old teachings and dogmatic convictions. They offered fresh views on the biblical traditions and raised new questions about the personhood and the workings of the Spirit in creation and inside and outside of religious institutions.
- The scholars of the second group did not simply take the enormous resonance of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement (whose more than 500,000,000 members now constitute one fourth of Christianity) as a proof of the truth of its experience and notions of “the Spirit.” Rather, they critically reflected on the history, the theological grounds, and the future of this powerful movement.
- The third group compared theological and nontheological experiences, thoughts, and theories of the Spirit. It did so not by claiming a mediating or even superior perspective (i.e., scientists and philosophers tell conflicting theologians where the real truth is to be found). Rather, they identified phenomena at the boundaries and limits of conventional scientific and classical philosophical thinking, phenomena which could open one’s eyes for the complex personality and reality of “the Spirit” witnessed to by very different faith traditions.

Part I

The biblical scholar James Dunn, who has written several important books on the Holy Spirit and its workings, highlights the many tensions inherent in observations of and reflections on the Spirit. Is the Spirit personal or impersonal, is it a divine or a human power, is it cosmologically or anthropologically relevant, does it operate in creation or salvation? Or is it both in some of these cases or in all of them? These are only a few of the many questions that have to be settled. Different contexts of observation and experience, Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian conceptualizations, require nuanced answers. Dunn shows that from Old Testament witnesses onwards, “the Spirit” is in all cases connected with deep experiences, experiences of an awesome power. This awesome power can “rest” upon a single bearer of the Spirit, and it can be “poured out” upon many human beings.

With the notion of the exalted Jesus Christ “baptizing with the Spirit,” the New Testament coined a fresh image that strengthened the

hope for “a richer experience of God’s vitalizing presence and activity” on earth. Jesus, “who had been inspired by the Spirit, had now become a dispenser of the Spirit.” The early church witnessed to the fulfillment of this hope in its growth and mission within and beyond the realm of Judaism. Real spiritual experiences, ecstatic but not numinous, paved the way for the life and the spreading of the church. The real transformation in the image of Jesus Christ, becoming a member of the body of Christ was an experience of faith, and the resurrection as a “spiritual body,” a body enlivened by the Holy Spirit, became the focus of Christian hope. Both discontinuity and continuity between the pre-Easter Jesus and the resurrected Christ remained most important. With this orientation the early church was able to “discern the spirits” in the midst of ecstatic experiences. For a dialogue between, and a mutual challenge of, classical academic theology and the new Pentecostal/Charismatic theology, it is crucial to acknowledge the ecstatic experience of the divine power of the Spirit and to recognize the importance of discerning the spirits. The ability to again connect both dimensions, Dunn concludes, “may be the key to Christianity’s growth in the wider world and essential for its revitalization in the West.”

Is the Spirit a person or an impersonal power? This is one of the basic questions raised by James Dunn. Bernd Oberdorfer shows that the concept of person was introduced for the Spirit in the fourth century in order to clarify the understanding of God. He cautions that in those days “person does not simply mean individuality with self-consciousness.” The experience of Christians as a spiritual community and Christ’s order, according to Matthew 28:19, to “baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” recited in each baptism, forced Christian theology to develop a Trinitarian understanding of God and to seek an understanding of the Spirit’s divine identity. Oberdorfer examines the most important steps in the history of theological thought that rose to these challenges. Drawing on insights of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Michael Welker, he comes to the conclusion that the Spirit should be understood in a complementary way as both a complex public person and the “dynamical ‘field of power’ (*Kraftfeld*) of the divinity.” In these complementary perspectives a confusion of personhood with human personhood and the notion of a ubiquitous spirit without intentional structure can be avoided. The Spirit becomes present “where it wills” — and also in the perspective of being a field of power.

Offering “Trinitarian Prolegomena for a Pneumatological Theology

of Religions,” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen ponders whether and in what way we can “speak of the presence of the Spirit in the world and among religions.” He criticizes positions which try “to affirm a typically modernist idea of a ‘rough parity’ of all religions.” Christian theology should honestly acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity is its structuring principle. He refers to three major Catholic voices — Raimundo Panikkar, Gavin D’Costa, and Jacques Dupuis — and to the Evangelical Mark Heim, who proposed an openly Trinitarian and pneumatological approach for inter-religious encounters. Such an approach, he argues, permits us to establish a relation that affirms one’s own faith-identity and yet remains open to mutual learning because of necessarily differentiated views of the Divine and the complex identity of the Spirit. Not a single idea or principle has to be defended, but rather we can explore a mutuality in our respect for the living God.

Further possibilities for interconfessional and even interreligious common grounds in the pneumatologically oriented discourse come into view when topics in the doctrine of creation are treated from a pneumatological perspective. Lyle Dabney ponders whether the Spirit — when Genesis 1 witnesses to the “Spirit moving over the face of the waters” — is “the breath of God that gives breath to all creation, which is the possibility of God for the world and the possibility of the world for God, a relationship that even permits the speaking . . . and the hearing” of the divine Word and the human words. Dabney sees the Spirit as the divine power which enables creatures to bend their lives to a common purpose and yet live in distinct social existences. The Spirit ennobles creatures to an emergent co-creativity: “For in the Spirit and through the Word God brings us into being as God’s own image in the world, a being which is itself a bearer of God’s Word in the Spirit. . . . As creatures of Word and Spirit, therefore, we are made to take part in God’s speaking of the Word of creation in the Spirit.”

Having insisted on the ecstatic character of the experience of the Spirit (James Dunn) on the one hand and on the workings of the Spirit in very basic interactions in creation (Lyle Dabney) on the other, one must clarify a bifurcation or a polarization in the understanding of the workings of the Spirit. This task is fulfilled by Kathryn Tanner, who asks whether the Spirit works immediately “in exceptional events . . . upon the interior depth of individual persons,” or whether the Spirit works gradually in ordinary life — “historical process, mediation, publicity. . . .” Tanner ob-

serves a potentially dangerous “will to power” in appeals to the direct working of the Spirit on individual persons. Such appeals can serve as “an attack on religious authorities,” who can indeed be guided by more profound and truthful spiritual and theological insights or by a religiously coded self-righteousness and stubbornness.

Tanner warns against strong appeals to the direct and immediate working of the Spirit. They can easily turn into an indirect “attack on the authority of all communally or socially validated forms of intellectual, religious, or moral achievement that take their rise from long, slow processes of training and learning.” Here the Spirit as patient “teacher,” guiding the community into a common and shared cognition of truth, comes into view. The acknowledgment of the Spirit’s workings in patient processes and institutionalized forms does not question the “appreciation for the surprise of the new.” It only questions a notion that sees a spirit as outdoing all other authorities by mere appeals to its immediate presence in the interior of individual lives. It pleads for shared experiences of the Spirit, which do not dismiss the need for a common discernment of the spirits.

Part II

Frank Macchia shows that “a crisis experience called the ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’” became the hallmark of the Pentecostal movement. The interpretations of this experience, however, differ between the different strands of this movement. This constellation, Macchia argues, creates dynamics that challenge Pentecostals to develop and expand their own understanding of Spirit baptism and at the same time contribute to an ecumenical pneumatology, which would be seminal for other church families. He warns against “the displacement of Spirit baptism, the ‘crown jewel’ of Christian experience.” The experience of empowerment for witness takes on different forms, the new beginnings of Christian life will be seen in more or less spectacular and dramatic ways, but the concentration on the initiation of Christian life by the Spirit and its workings should not be lost. The concentration on this charismatic event, however, should not blur or even dismiss the Spirit’s sanctifying and soteriological work within human lives, which cannot be separated from God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, the Spirit Baptizer.

Macchia assumes that the emphasis on the spectacular spiritual power

and the often strong connection of Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues may have led to a narrow understanding of sanctification and to an abstraction from the biblical insight that the Spirit transforms in sanctification into the image of Christ. He proposes an ecumenical discourse on ecclesiological, Trinitarian, and eschatological issues in which the “baptizing in the Spirit” should play a major role: “Spirit baptism points to redemption through Christ as substantially pneumatological and eschatological.”

The complex history of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement and the reasons “why the revival flourished” are dealt with in the chapter presented by Grant Wacker. He argues that the Pentecostal movement was able to “hold two seemingly incompatible impulses in productive tension”: the ecstatic experience of an otherworldly power and a this-worldly practicality. Pentecostal spirituality and church practice responded to the longing to be touched by God and to fascination by the experience of the numinous. Moreover, it encouraged entrepreneurship in organizing successful worships and in engaging the media and politics by impressive religious rhetoric. Wacker recalls powerful lives and careers in the service of the movement, “gifted with many of those elusive talents that (make) a person truly and inexplicably charismatic.” He identifies the “working DNA” of successful religious movements in their combination of “untidiness, distinctiveness, and normalcy,” in their attempt “to make the fragile, flickering candle of life burn a bit brighter and a bit longer.”

Whereas Grant Wacker reflects on the history and the success story of the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement, Margaret Poloma analyzes the current situation and elements of decision and crisis. She focuses on the Assemblies of God, the second largest Pentecostal denomination in the U.S. and — with a membership of over 50,000,000 globally — the largest single Pentecostal body. This chapter diagnoses a tension between the need for periodic revivals in order to strengthen Pentecostal identity and the tendency particularly among white American Pentecostals to downplay or even tame revivals in order to seek acceptance by post-Enlightenment Evangelical and secular communities. What Tanner regards as an evolutionary progress and maturation in religious life — that is, downplaying or even avoiding “controversial issues that come with ‘dynamic filling’ and ‘empowerment’” — is seen as a potential crisis by Poloma. The appeal to a “transforming experience with God” (J. D. Johns) and the embrace of a worldview that welcomes such experience are crucial to sustain the core identity of the Pentecostal movement. Subtle yet mighty tensions between

Pentecostal, Fundamentalist, and Evangelical worldviews, which usually escape general public and academic attention, have to be observed and reflected more thoroughly. Margaret Poloma asks whether we have to face an “erosion of a distinct Pentecostal identity” or whether this identity and its attraction will migrate to “immigrant churches” that do not fear a pre-modern worldview, but are open to “signs and wonders from on high.”

Part III

John Polkinghorne, particle physicist and Anglican priest, proposes an understanding of the Spirit and its workings that is not only compatible with biblical witnesses and insights but also with the account of the cosmic process and the evolution of terrestrial life given by contemporary natural sciences. The discovery of widespread intrinsic (!) unpredictability in nature in the twentieth century, the discovery of the “chaos theory,” and the study of the behavior of complex systems solicited new reflections on the interplay of “Chance and Necessity” (Monod) in cosmological and world-historical processes. Necessity in this context, however, is not any lawful regularity of the world as such: “the given physical fabric of the cosmos had to be ‘fine-tuned’ if there was to be any possibility of carbon-based life developing anywhere at all within it.” And “chance” is not a “cosmic lottery” of erratic instances but rather the contingent particularities which, in their interplay with fine-tuned necessity, make the evolutionary process fertile. Supporting Kathryn Tanner’s arguing for a bivalent working of the Spirit and drawing on theological observations of the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, Polkinghorne proposes an understanding of the secret and hidden presence of the Spirit in natural and historical processes. The hidden working of the Spirit in the world’s unfolding history through the input of pure information “would constitute a pneumatological account of continuous creation, divine participation in the evolving fruitfulness of the world, exercised with covert reticence within the open grain of nature.”

Coming from the Pentecostal tradition and deeply interested in an ecumenically and academically open Pentecostal theology, Amos Yong reconstructs the basic outlines of Philip Clayton’s complex theory of emergence, which he regards as a promising philosophical bridge theory between the sciences and theology. He sees, however, the need to supplement

this theory theologically. In a bold move, he wants to enrich this theory of emergence by insights gained from a pneumatological reading of the biblical creation accounts and the Psalms. Like Lyle Dabney he argues that God's creativity has to be understood as originating in the divine Word and Spirit and having not only ontological but also "epistemological and linguistic implications, thus providing for the possibility of thought . . . and of language." The creation narratives speak indeed of an emergent co-creativity of the creatures. Since they do not think in one-to-one correlations, but in one-to-many correlations (God and the cosmological, biological, cultural creatures), they are not afraid to blur the difference between the creative God and the co-creative creatures. Neither are they pressed towards an either-or in terms of "creation and evolution."

There are differences of intensity in this co-creativity that, in Yong's view, might be expressed theoretically with the help of Clayton's metaphysical theory of emergence. Yong sees the academic risks involved in his bringing together of ancient narratives and postmodern philosophical and interdisciplinary theorizing. He argues that overt theological problems with Clayton's metaphysics of emergence should invite us to take this risk. "A pneumatologically informed metaphysics . . . requires us to hold the immanent and transcendent aspects of divine presence and activity together, regardless of how tempted we are to privilege one over the other." With regard to pneumatology, he sees the potential to express both the purposeful person-character and the emergent field-character of the Spirit (cf. Oberdorfer).

The chapter written by Donald York, professor of astronomy and astrophysics, grew out of direct dialogue with his wife Anna, a pastor, and also of an indirect dialogue with their Pentecostal background. This contribution asks a question which is most important for "truth-seeking communities." What is at work when geniuses make discoveries that change the world of science forever, such as Galileo's insight that the earth moves around the sun (1610), or Kant's correct theory about the Milky Way (1755), even when the experimental demonstration occurs only centuries later (1838 and 1921)? What guides progress in truth-seeking communities and encourages us to make truth-claims, although full evidence is still lacking? How can we be so bold as to speak of our "worldviews" and, for instance, of true cosmological knowledge, when we have to admit "that we know only 5% of the universe and that 95% of it is 'dark', or a mystery, even to the greatest minds who are working on the problem"? Is a guiding and encour-

aging power at work that gives both the boldness and the patience in the individual and in the common search for truth? Donald and Anna York see the Spirit at work in this process and the Wisdom either identical with the Spirit or given by it. They describe the Wisdom with the help of Proverbs and other Wisdom traditions and identify its qualities as "knowledge, discernment, truth, and beneficial results."

Michael Welker, theologian and philosopher, contrasts the powerful concept of the spirit first proposed by Aristotle in book XII of his *Metaphysics* and the concept of the Spirit witnessed to by the biblical traditions. He shows that the philosophical concept which shaped occidental thinking in epistemology, anthropology, and diverse cultural and social theories is fundamentally different from the Holy Spirit in Jewish and Christian religious thinking. The philosophical spirit is self-referential and full of certainty. The Spirit of the biblical traditions, the "Spirit of truth," bears witness to Christ and to God the Creator and does not speak on its own authority (cf. John 15:26). This difference has far-reaching consequences.

Both in academic and religious processes an understanding of the working of the Spirit as a truth-revealing power is required. This understanding has to acknowledge the Spirit's empathetic and context-sensitive presence. It is also a poly-contextual and polyphonic presence. Emergent processes have to be grasped in order to appreciate the Spirit's working. A different excitement and awe from the excitement generated by individual and bodily mediated spectacular experiences come into view, an excitement that necessarily goes hand in hand with the need for the "discernment of the spirits." Although the ancient symbols of "pouring" and "Spirit baptism" are adequate for the power envisioned and its working, a new sensitivity for the hiddenness of the Spirit in creation, for its patient working as a comforting, guiding, teaching, and truth-revealing power, can and should be raised by a multidisciplinary inquiry. It is in "truth-seeking communities"¹ — both in academic and religious contexts — that the excitement resulting from the experience of the Spirit has to be complemented by the discernment of the spirits.

1. In other constellations of discourse about the Spirit, the working of the Spirit in justice- and healing-seeking communities would also come to the fore.