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Spirit Baptism

A Response to My Reviewers

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I wish to thank the editors (Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse) for bringing these four reviews of my book, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* to my attention and for allowing me a brief response in order to clarify a few issues. I am also grateful to the reviewers for taking the time to read my book and to engage my theological vision.

Allow me to begin with a few preliminary remarks on my use of the category of Spirit baptism. First, as Andrew Gabriel explains, my use of this metaphor comes from the diverse emphasis on it that has characterized the classical Pentecostal movement. We took the metaphor from the Holiness Movement and popularized it, even placed it on the ecumenical table, but debates among us continued as to the implications of the metaphor for Christian initiation (including baptism) and the charismatic life of the churches. Second, the most brilliant among our ecumenical critics (especially, Protestant New Testament scholar, James Dunn, and Catholic scholars Kilian McDonnell and George Montague¹) have broad-

¹ James Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), and Kilian McDonnell and George Montague, *Christian Initiation and*

ened and intensified the diversity of options concerning the doctrine of Spirit baptism by responding to us with proposals nourished from the Scriptures and from their own ecclesiastical backgrounds. In my view, they have persuasively made the case in response to the burgeoning Pentecostal movement that the metaphor of Spirit baptism and its connection to the lavish charismatic life of the church has deep roots in the tradition, both throughout the New Testament and in the first eight centuries of church. Though they understandably criticized the tendency among most Pentecostals to focus Spirit baptism too narrowly on an experience of empowerment, they were also willing to show that the movement has reconnected with a relatively neglected aspect of our common heritage. Kilian McDonnell and George Montague, for example, conclude:

The energizing power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting itself in a variety of charisms, is not religious fluff. Nor is it—as viewed by many today—an optional spirituality in the church...The baptism in the Holy Spirit does not belong to private piety but, as we have demonstrated, to the public, official liturgy of the church...Indeed, the baptism in the Spirit is normative.”²

Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991, 94).

² Kilian McDonnell and George Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 373.

So I turned to the New Testament to explore a metaphor that was not only important to my Pentecostal heritage but also to an increasingly global conversation that had come to involve creative voices from other traditions. My goal was to expand the theological horizons for Pentecostals but also to reveal the ecumenical potential of a typically Pentecostal metaphor. Constance Price's willingness to look appreciatively through a lens that was relatively unfamiliar to her was exactly the kind of ecumenical response I had hoped my book would inspire. She joins several Catholic voices that have responded to my book just as positively.³ Though my book is obviously situated within Pentecostalism (and communities of faith outside of Pentecostalism that have come to cherish similar spiritual accents or experiences), it was my hope that ecumenical partners could be blessed by it as well.

As to substance, the most basic theological move that I make in the book is to define Spirit baptism fundamentally as the self-impartment of the Triune God. Constance Price is therefore spot on in her observation that my basic intention was an "expansion of the understanding of Spirit baptism as a Trinitarian act, understood eschatologically as the outpouring of divine love" (134). Spirit baptism occurred as Jesus received the Spirit from

³ See for example H. Gasper, "Schritte zu einer Pneumatologie der Pfingstbewegung," *Una Sancta: Zeitschrift für ökumenische Begegnung* 1 (2009): 41-53; Ralph Del Colle, "Wither Pentecostal Theology: Why Is a Catholic Interested?" *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 31:1 (2009): 35-46; Peter Hocken, "Baptism in the Spirit: A Biblical Understanding," online: <http://www.ccr.org.uk/archive/gn0709/g08.htm>

his heavenly Father and poured it forth to give birth to the church and to fulfill the Kingdom or reign of God in history (e.g., Acts 1:2-8; 2:33). Within this larger framework, I also seek to look at Christology through the lens of Spirit baptism. I ask the question as to what would happen if we view Jesus' person and mission through the lens of his unique role in imparting the Spirit, accenting (among other things) his descent into godless flesh as the man of the Spirit (through incarnation, baptism, and the cross) in order to bring all flesh into the realm of the Spirit (through his resurrection and the event of Pentecost).⁴ Most fully, the divine self-impartation thus involves the eschatological expanse and freedom of the divine love or *koinonia* granted through the outpouring of the Spirit. In general, I regard Spirit baptism as a helpful lens for viewing life within the "wide open spaces" (Moltmann) of God's self-impartation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My reason for viewing Spirit baptism so expansively was not simply to subsume all views of Spirit baptism beneath a single idea or definition. My reason was primarily exegetical. I noticed that in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 3:1-2, 11-12; Acts 1:3-8), Spirit baptism is used as a term for understanding the inauguration and fulfillment of the Kingdom of God in history. I try to follow that idea from its dogmatic foundations through to its lar-

⁴ I elaborate on this point further in my most recent book, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God*, Eerdmans, 2010.

ger eschatological implications. The fact that all four Gospels and Acts, the narrative foundation of the New Testament canon, introduce Christ as the Spirit Baptizer implies that Spirit baptism functions as a “root metaphor” for Jesus’ eschatological impartation of the Spirit. If a reviewer feels that the reality of Spirit baptism is not as expansive as I have made it, that response would naturally need to engage my exegetical arguments, especially concerning those elements in texts on Spirit baptism that define the metaphor in eschatological language and as a way of understanding the inauguration and fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. I am certainly open to participate in such a discussion.

The second theological move that I make is ecclesiological. As I note on pages 61ff and 155ff, Spirit baptism *constitutes the church* in the outpouring of the Spirit. I view the competition of understandings concerning Spirit baptism (regenerative, sacramental, charismatic) as unfortunate in that each option tends to subordinate Spirit baptism to a particular understanding of the nature and function of the church. My response is that Spirit baptism in its essential connection to the Kingdom of God cannot be adequately contained within any of the three options. Spirit baptism constitutes the church in the *koinonia* of God as Father, Son, and Spirit and transcends the church in its fulfillment in the new creation. What lies behind the church is thus not a particular experience but rather the divine self-giving and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. Making a particular experience of the Spirit the determining factor in defining Spirit baptism would be to

reduce Spirit baptism to regeneration or empowerment, a possibility that I have on one level written my entire book to resist. I do not wed pneumatology to a particular experience, so that granting the Spirit priority in relation to the church causes me to interpret all of the realities of the church as arising from my own cherished (and provincial) understanding of this experience! Reading my entire book through this lens, as Jane Barter Moulaison does, misses the mark of my central intention. It's a provocative error that allows me to clarify the true motive at the heart of the book, but it is a fatal error in terms of appreciating what it is that I am really trying to do. As the special gift of divine *koinonia* granted in the divine self-giving, the church (its doctrines and other core practices) therefore does indeed cradle our experiences of God, just as our ongoing experiences help to shape doctrines and other practices in return (note, e.g., 52 to 55).⁵

My third theological move is experiential. As Price notes rightly, I also define Spirit baptism as "a participation in the charity of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (137). This participation involves a variety of practices and experiences. The value of the Spirit baptism metaphor for me is that it brings together so wonderfully the dogmatic foundations of the self-impartation of God in the eschatological gift of divine love or *koinonia*

⁵ In his review of my book, Anglican theologian, Mark Cartledge, has thus noted that my theological method may be termed postliberal. His review was given as part of a panel of reviews at a plenary session of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Lee University, Cleveland, TN, March, 2007.

and the practical/experiential dimension of life in the Spirit. The experiences of Spirit baptism of which I speak, therefore, do not arise from some esoteric illumination accessible only to privileged initiates. By defining Spirit baptism as essentially the eschatological gift of divine love or *koinonia*, I grant it broad accessibility as well as theological guidance, and I create breathing room for an expansively diverse understanding of it in terms of practical and experiential implications. I do not try in my book to impose Pentecostal spirituality on the churches. I make that abundantly clear (e.g., 149-151), recognizing that Pentecostal spirituality has been mediated by historical and cultural factors (151) and that “no single grid of New Testament gifts is to be imposed on the churches as all-encompassing” (149). I do try in part to help other communities gain an appreciation for those gifts and experiences that have flourished among Pentecostals (which is already happening quite a lot in some places of the globe), but my larger goal is for ecclesial families to influence each other and for them all to detect overlap as well as analogies in terms of how they understand the experience of the Christian life. One Episcopalian response to an early paper that I gave capturing the essence of my book, for example, noted overlap between the Pentecostal accent on the *charismageist* and her work for her church on a theology of confirmation, which accented an understanding of the presence of the Spirit in a person’s life as empowerment for Christian vocation.

Moreover, my trajectory of Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal accents when it comes to Spirit baptism is

not intended as “progressive” and my discussion of options not meant to be exhaustive. Here again, Constance Price understands me best by noting that in my book the Spirit cannot be divided up into separate bestowals that can be ranked within some kind of hierarchy of options. There is according to my book one gift of the Spirit that is “released” in life practice and experience in a variety of ways. Within this context I can appreciate Schweitzer’s suggestion concerning the role of the Spirit in re-contextualizing Christ afresh in new historical contexts. I note in line with this that the gifts and insights of the Spirit vary according to the contextual needs of the churches (149).

I would like to close with a fitting quote from Clark Pinnock that captures the spirit of my book fairly well I think:

As well as receiving the sacraments from the Spirit, we need to cultivate openness to the gifts of the Spirit. The Spirit is present beyond liturgy in a wider circle. There is a flowing that manifests itself as power to bear witness, heal the sick, prophesy, praise God enthusiastically, perform miracles and more. There is a liberty to celebrate, an ability to dream and see visions, a release of Easter life. There are impulses of power in the move of the Spirit to transform and commission disciples to become instruments of the mission.⁶

⁶ Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downer’s Grove, IL: 1996), 129.