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BOOK REVIEW

Christopher J. Holmes. *The Holy Spirit*. New Studies in Dogmatics. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015. 218 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0310491705. \$24.99.

The Holy Spirit is part of the New Studies in Dogmatics series, which treats various topics in dogmatic theology. These volumes seek to fill the gap between introductory theology textbooks and advanced monographs. Dogmatic Theology is understood as “a conceptual representation of scriptural teaching about God in relation to all things” (15). The series sees the way forward as “a program of renewal through retrieval” (15). This retrieval intends to be rooted in Scripture and inclusive of all the greatest figures and developments throughout the Christian tradition. By so mining the riches of the past, authors from a broad range of evangelical backgrounds seek to produce faithful and edifying advances in constructive theology.

This book responds to a growing trend in theology that is suspicious of what could be called classical formulations of the Holy Spirit. That trend is critical of the Christian tradition for placing too high an emphasis on the immanent life of God—God in himself—and not giving enough consideration to the character of the Spirit as revealed in Scripture. Holmes points out that here many modern theologians defer to Luther, who was adamant that theology should look only to the cross for its knowledge of God and not speculate about his eternal being.

Though there are many examples of theologians with this sensibility, Holmes considers the work of Sarah Coakley, a contemporary and highly regarded Anglican theologian. Coakley says that too often theologians “*assume* the hypostatization of the Spirit,” and one senses “a slightly desperate search for something distinct for the Spirit to do” (34, emphasis original). As opposed

to working from a classical doctrine of the Trinity to an understanding of the Spirit, Coakley argues for a “Spirit-leading approach to the Trinity” that is rooted in Rom 8:9–30 (33). Her thesis centers around the Spirit as the active means of incorporation into the life of God. It is in the salvific work of the Spirit that one can best see his character.

Holmes argues that these contemporary approaches to the Trinity place an unnatural barrier between the inner life of God and his activity in the world, that is, his immanent and economic life. Contemplation of God in himself is not simply irreverent speculation, as Luther would insist. Rather, Holmes argues that Jesus’ speech and activities intend to reveal the inner life of God, as this knowledge is essential to the way we view reality. He sees the theological and metaphysical elements of doctrine being naturally tied to the spiritual life and the Bible. Holmes states that:

In God essence and existence are one. This is what it means to speak of God as one who lives from himself. God does not need anyone or anything outside of God in order to be God. Explanation of this life that is utterly complete in itself requires first principles. First principles describe the reality that God is, that this life exists from itself. Without talk of first principles, we miss out on understanding the rationale for why the Son is sent and the Father is the one who sends. Scripture’s content is metaphysical (21–22).

In light of these issues, Holmes’ core argument is that we cannot correctly understand the redemptive activity of the Spirit without sufficient knowledge of “what *qualifies* the Spirit to do what the Spirit does” (39, italics original).

Holmes uses three theologians, Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth, who while differing in some ways, all contribute to an understanding of how God’s activity illuminates his inner life. His discussion of Augustine focuses on the story of Nicodemus. Holmes gives a detailed account of how Augustine draws out the implicit doctrinal beliefs at work in Jesus’ teaching and then develops terminology for them. The only-begotten Son and the Spirit, without whom no one can see God or his works, are essentially linked with the God of all that is. From this basic

insight in John 3, Augustine articulates the nature of God and the Trinity. He sees in this text that the Son and Spirit are inseparably one with God, who himself is not dependent on or derived from any other source. Thus God is not only a being unto himself, but Being itself. The Son and Spirit share this “nature,” while also being distinct agents or persons that all live harmoniously in eternity.

Aquinas develops his understanding in a similar way to Augustine, but roots his reflection in two other passages within the Gospel of John. The first is in the Vulgate of John 7:28–39, when Jesus says on the last day of the Feast of Booths, “‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive” (83). Aquinas unfolds how this redemptive (economic) work—the spiritual outpouring and vitality of the Spirit in believers—is the natural outworking of eternal realities.

The second passage is when Jesus tells the disciples that when he leaves, he will send “another Advocate,” namely the Spirit (John 14:16). The first passage assures the divinity of the Spirit by making him one with the living waters of God. The second passage assures the integrity of the Spirit’s person or hypostasis by distinguishing him as the Advocate that is one with, but still *other* than, the Father and Son.

With these two aspects of the Spirit secured, Aquinas develops a rich understanding of the Spirit as the Gift of God, which complements Christ as the Word of God. Because of the Spirit’s greatness, even sweetness, and that he is what Jesus *gives* his disciples in order to unite them with his life of love, the Spirit is seen as God’s Gift of Love. In keeping with the discussion so far, this does not remain an earthly activity only, but is the Spirit’s eternal identity.

The third major theologian that Holmes engages is Karl Barth. Though Barth is resistant to metaphysical speculation in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas, he nevertheless takes the concerns of metaphysics seriously. He seeks to offer a dogmatic teaching that satisfies the deepest questions of philosophy and mysticism. Barth’s central contribution to this discussion is in the way he clarifies how the Spirit shows himself to be God in

his work of revealing and saving. Barth says that the Spirit is “not the invisible, noble spirit part of the human, but rather the absolute God who turns to and communicates to the human, the Spirit who is the God of the human, God in the act of his being [*Gottseins*] in coming to the human” (137). Holmes says that “the Spirit remains God in all that the Spirit does, never becoming our Spirit but rather remaining the Spirit of the Father and Son” (163).

Holmes then connects Barth’s discussion of the Spirit’s divinity with the metaphysical work of Augustine and Aquinas. These three voices each seek to demonstrate that God’s economic activity is rooted in the nature of his eternal life. Thus for Holmes, they help us see that one aspect of God cannot be understood without the other, and that contemporary theology will need to supplement its economic preference for a bigger theological picture. After discussing these three, the book ends with a section that offers theological reflection on regenerated sight, the church and tradition, and contemplation.

The Holy Spirit is a very helpful and sober work of theology that succeeds in filling the gap between introductory textbooks and monographs. It has the clarity and forthrightness of a monograph but proceeds slowly and respects that the reader may not be familiar with much of the content. As a result, the depth and insights are readily available but in a welcoming way. Holmes strikes this balance well by carefully engaging classical figures, while also putting what he says in the context of contemporary voices. The result is that readers will feel that they have learned something about the tradition and have gained a sense of the current landscape of theology.

One of the book’s great qualities is how it integrates the metaphysical and dogmatic forms of theology. As Holmes mentions at the outset, these two streams have not always been reconciled to one another, and have sometimes been outright hostile. But Holmes seems to work from a holistic, integrative theological vision that is ever working toward harmony and balance with the insights that present themselves over time. This vision is seen most practically in the final chapter, which makes a case for retrieving contemplation as a deep mode of *being* for the whole

person.

One of the difficulties of this book, which is true of Trinitarian theology generally, is that the material does get dense and the lines of argumentation subtle. Parts of the book will require further reflection and perhaps rereading by those who are not familiar with the discussions. Holmes does an excellent job of walking newcomers through the terrain, but however well done that is, the terrain itself is at times inherently difficult.

I warmly recommend this book to anyone—pastor, student, professor, or lay reader—who wants to go deeper with and gain greater clarity about the Spirit. This book is perhaps most helpful in addressing the question, “why do we believe what we believe about the Spirit?”

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