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BOOK REVIEW

Peter Ross. *Pneumatology and Union: John Calvin and the Pentecostals*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019. xi + 266 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5326-5051-2. \$32.00.

Expressing in his introduction that the “aim in pursuing this work was to show that Pentecostalism could access the long history of Christian thought that would be beneficial to it as it seeks to develop its own theology” (ix), Ross advances such a vision by engaging a theologian whose potential has long been overlooked by the movement despite his unrelenting emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Over 6 substantial chapters, the author engages John Calvin’s doctrines of Union with Christ, Assurance of Faith, the Providence of God, and Justification, bringing each into conversation with Pentecostal theology. As a doctoral thesis turned academic monograph, Ross’ volume is not a light read; nevertheless, the author notes that his interest in the topic developed from his pastoral conviction that Pentecostalism “had a pressing need to deepen its theology in order to remain strong and healthy for the future” (ix). Indeed, although Ross transitioned from his original location as a Pentecostal pastor to his current role as an Anglican priest over the course of this project, he maintains the volume “does make a useful contribution to the development of a global Pentecostal theology,” (ix) no small feat for so diverse a movement.

The first chapter, “Pneumatology and Union: John Calvin,” explores Calvin’s understanding of the Christian’s union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Ross highlights the foundational importance of pneumatology for the reformer’s theology by explaining that “Any illumination believers have about God is a work of the Spirit; any faith believers have is a work of the Spirit; anything good in believers is the result of the work of the

Spirit” (2). While Pentecostals may have traditionally focused on one’s subjective experience of the Holy Spirit, the author’s observation that the Spirit “is an active influence in every part of the believer’s life” (3) for Calvin points to his ability to aid in the development of a pneumatology proper. Although the Spirit’s work “must be self-effacing,” one might observe his operations—“teaching, directing, correcting, and regenerating”—through their effects on the believer’s daily walk (3). Two potential areas for further conversation—both of which Ross briefly includes—come to mind through a reading of this chapter: the Spirit’s work in biblical interpretation and the sacraments. The former has become a recurring topic of conversation among Pentecostals who insist the movement requires a hermeneutic beyond the bare literalism represented by fundamentalism. It seems Calvin’s insistence on the unity of Word and Spirit offers valuable insight here, as Ross explains that “despite its divine origins,” for Calvin, “Scripture is dead in and of itself—if left to itself it is a collection of words which does not bring life, which teaches nothing” (6). Regarding the Lord’s Supper, Ross’ work makes one wonder whether Calvin’s meditating position—neither embracing a carnal presence of Christ in the sacrament yet rejecting bare memorialism—might help Pentecostals develop their eucharistic theology as well. As with the interpretation of Scripture, God strengthens believers through the sacraments “only by the activity of the Spirit” (10).

Ross devotes the second chapter to the Pentecostal understanding of Pneumatology and Union, eventually summarizing that “While the union between the believer and Christ is not a focus to any great extent in Pentecostal doctrine, its existence is certain and often simply assumed” (106). He correctly observes that while there is a broad consensus among adherents regarding the outpouring of the Spirit as a tangible Christian experience, “once they turn to explaining what that means doctrinally, a broad diversity of views arises” (49). Perhaps this comes in part from the movement’s lacking one strong, central figure like Calvin; throughout its history, Pentecostalism has boasted a diverse array of leading figures, theological backgrounds, and competing assumptions rather than the doctrinal coherence

characteristic of many confessional traditions. Ross also emphasizes how central the doctrine of Holy Spirit baptism has historically been for Pentecostal pneumatology, noting how some Pentecostal theological works have devoted more space to discussing the baptism than the Spirit's very person and work. He subsequently discusses the Spirit's activity in the early church at length, explaining the biblical case for the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism by pointing to "three instances in Acts where it is arguable that the early Pentecostal experience of Spirit baptism following conversion is paralleled, and perhaps as many as five" (69). His explanation of Pentecostal hermeneutics on this point might prove helpful to non-Pentecostal readers who are unfamiliar with the differences between standard evangelical and Pentecostal hermeneutics which underly the latter's distinctive position. Ross explains that "Pentecostals would say that to assign a priority to didactic texts"—like the letters of Paul—"on the ground that they set out to teach doctrine or practice while giving a lesser place to narrative texts is arbitrary and ignores Paul's own injunction that all Scripture is useful for teaching" (70).

Chapter 3 is given to discussing "The Assurance of Faith," with Ross engaging the works of Victor Shepherd and Randall Zachman extensively as secondary sources on Calvin's position. Given the vehemence with which he attacked the Anabaptists and Libertines of his day, the subjectivity inherent in the traditional Pentecostal understanding of assurance would undoubtedly make the reformer uncomfortable. As Ross explains, "Pentecostalism feels it can legitimately claim that its adherents know God because they have met God, not face to face, but in a way where he was ecstatically present with them" (111). While Pentecostals have long identified assurance of salvation as a key blessing of Spirit baptism, Calvin himself "would consider as spurious any claim that the Spirit has done something apparently separate from Scripture, even if consistent with it" (134). In this brief statement, Ross identifies perhaps the most formidable impasse for Pentecostal engagement with the reformer. Although classical Pentecostals have long stressed their commitment to Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts precisely because of their desire

to remain consistent with Scripture, such a commitment recognizes an integral role for the Spirit's work outside of the written word. Nevertheless, for the Pentecostal, Ross explains, "faith is objectively based because it relies on God's activity in her but is subjectively experienced" (109), an articulation not unlike what Calvin suggests.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter is Chapter 4, on "Providence and Guidance." While one might expect a Pentecostal to launch into a scathing attack of Calvinist soteriology, Ross identifies "striking . . . similarities between the extent of the involvement of God in the believer's life for Pentecostals and Calvin" (138). This appears consistent with his earlier assertion that "it is probably not true to say that Pentecostals are Arminians, but it is true to say that most tend towards Arminianism" (55), borne out by the fact Pentecostal statements of faith grant precious little—if any—attention to election and predestination. Detailing the concepts of "willing permission," the nature of free will, and the question of primary and secondary causes, Ross proceeds to explain how Calvin's doctrine of providence differs from that of classical Arminianism. Countering a widespread misconception that the difference solely concerns the sovereignty of God, Ross teaches that the latter insists "God can do whatever he wants, but acts contrary to God's character are inconceivable" (150). Ross surely identifies a standard—and justifiable—Pentecostal concern with Calvin "concerning how it is that God controls all outcomes, yet humans have a genuine involvement through the exercise of their wills" (166). While Reformed scholasticism has historically fallen back on a compatibilist articulation of human freedom to explain this paradox, the author's brief allusion to Middle Knowledge, or Molinism, might well merit further exploration by Pentecostals who wish to affirm a high doctrine of providence yet reject the deeply troubling implications of Calvin's determinism. The former, Ross explains, "allows that God knows what any individual would do in any circumstances. This opens up an attractive view of reconciling a strong doctrine of divine providence with human freedom" (154). Beyond the well-worn debates of Calvinism and Arminianism, an even more integral difference between Calvin and the Pentecostals—as with

several other points—would regard the invisible nature of the Spirit’s work. Calvin’s “view on the secrecy of the Spirit’s work,” Ross explains, “means that he would not agree that the Spirit can be sought for guidance in the way Pentecostals claim” (138).

Ross’ fifth chapter explores justification, identifying Pentecostal systematician Frank Macchia as a crucial dialogue partner for Calvin. Given that, traditionally, “Pentecostals have largely borrowed evangelical theology, with its debt to Calvin, in constructing their own” (179), perhaps it is only natural that several other Pentecostal-Charismatic theologians he surveys hold a robustly forensic understanding of justification. Nevertheless, by engaging Macchia’s proposal, with its “departure from the traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant views” (184), Ross attempts to bring Calvin’s thought to bear squarely upon contemporary reflection in the movement. While some Calvin devotees might recoil at any attempt to modify the doctrine of justification, perhaps Macchia’s suggestion—as noted by Ross—“that Calvin involves the Spirit in justification through the role of forming the union between the believer and Christ” might encourage readers to critically analyze Calvin in his own words instead of through the lens of later Reformed scholasticism.

The author concludes his volume by summarizing how Calvin’s theology might exert a direct influence on the Pentecostal movement, granting special attention to what he terms “Spirit release”—an alternative label for what most Pentecostals would term Spirit baptism. Regarding the Acts passages which describe Spirit baptism, few readers would be surprised to hear that “Pentecostals view them as Christians prior to receiving” the experience (217). What is much more surprising, however, is the author’s subsequent claim—at least regarding Acts 19—that “so does Calvin, on the basis that the reference to the baptism of John refers to the person doing the baptism, not the baptismal context.” While no one could reasonably suggest that a cessationist like Calvin advocated the Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit baptism, particularly regarding the initial evidence of tongues, “Calvin does see Spirit release as recorded in Acts as different from the indwelling of the Spirit at conversion,” in Ross’ view

(225). It seems, then, that while any commonality regarding initial evidence is a non-starter, subsequence might be a different matter. On a separate but related note, the author considers how Calvin's context might have shaped his cessationist assumptions, claiming that, due to several factors "in the East the context was conducive to the continuation of Spirit release and the resulting gifts; in the West it was not" (228). However, while there may be substantial merit to Ross' claim that the context of Western Christendom helped embolden Calvin's cessationism, perhaps a more sustained discussion of his desire to discredit claims of miracles in Roman Catholic and Anabaptist circles would have been a welcome addition here.

Ross' contribution is particularly helpful in dispelling the stereotype of Calvin as a dour academic. Indeed, he explains that his choice of Calvin as a dialogue partner was due to the Genevan's pastoral concern for his readers and the way he speaks of the believer's intimacy with God, both concerns of any committed Pentecostal. As previously noted, this volume is not immediately accessible to the average layperson, or even college/seminary student. Nevertheless, as the only academic monograph to date exclusively focused on Pentecostal engagement with Calvin, it might well prove invaluable to Pentecostal-Charismatic scholars working in the field of Reformation studies. The same might be said of pastors, academics, and exceptional students and laypersons who sense their tradition has yet to fully appreciate the richness of its connection to the Reformation and its theology. Conversely, it may come as a surprising addition to Calvin scholarship for those in the Reformed tradition which more directly traces its origins to his thought. The notion of Pentecostal interaction with Calvin, and the suggestion that significant common ground already exists between them, could serve as a catalyst for further Reformed engagement with Pentecostalism, a dialogue which would undoubtedly serve both traditions well.

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