

## BOOK REVIEW

Simeon Zahl

### *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020

Much Protestant theology has a chronic heart problem. From the later Luther up through Barth, Torrance, and Kathryn Tanner, it has suffered from a diminished role for personal experience in theologizing. Fearing fanaticism, subjectivism, and anthropocentrism, Protestant theologians have swung to the opposite extreme of building cerebral systems of doctrine that never touch people's lived and felt realities. This condition could prove terminal as it alienates post-Christendom Westerners from Christianity. So runs Cambridge theologian Simeon Zahl's diagnosis. His prescription is to rehabilitate the role of experience in theology by 1) norming Christian experience by the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; 2) retrieving Augustine's and the early Reformers' insights into the emotional effects associated with soteriological doctrine; and 3) drawing social-scientific "affect theory" into dialogue with theology to produce an "affective Augustinianism."

Affect theory requires some introduction as an account of what it means to be human. To its right stands essentialism's supposition of a monolithic, unvarying human nature. On its left lies social constructivism's kaleidoscopic view of endlessly diverse and malleable human identity. Affect theory locates continuity among humans across time and space in the *affects*—durable structures of emotion formed in our bodies by evolutionary pressures. Yet individuals and societies may *organize* and *interpret* these affects in various ways, thus allowing for real but not infinite diversity. Like children's alphabetical building blocks, the affects may be arranged and rearranged to spell different words and construct different shapes. Zahl finds affect theory highly congenial to Augustinian and Lutheran theology.

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After surveying all the above in his introduction, Zahl offers two methodological chapters, three chapters applying his method to soteriology, and a conclusion that combines retrospect and prospect. Chapter 1 traces the troubled yet inescapable role of experience in the history and practice of theology. Zahl presents evidence for the use of experience as a resource for theological reflection in the apostolic church, Augustine, the early Luther, Karlstadt, the Pietists and revivalists, and Schleiermacher. Yet the excesses associated with this openness to experience led to its rejection by the later Luther, Protestant Scholastics, Enlightenment rationalists, and Barth. Zahl detects a false dilemma afoot, as if the only choices were either to make experience theology's basis or to abandon it entirely. Instead, experience is simply the context in which all doctrine is worked out and lived out.

Chapter 2 aims to avoid the excesses of fanaticism and subjectivism on the one hand and, on the other, the "*complacency with theological abstractions*" (70; italics his) demonstrated by Torrance and Tanner. Zahl finds his golden mean by employing pneumatology to regulate theological resourcing of experience. This means privileging particularly Christian, biblically patterned experiences of the Holy Spirit over allegedly universal, generic "religious experience." Zahl also prioritizes common Christian experiences of the affective effects of the Spirit (e.g. love, joy, peace) over uncommon experiences (e.g. charismata, mystical ecstasies). With these filters in place, he intends to reconnect doctrine to experience by identifying "*practically recognizable*" ways that the Spirit influences Christians (69; italics his).

Chapter 3 begins the soteriological application of this method by retrieving the Reformation doctrine of forensic justification. Zahl decries recent trends among Protestants to dismiss this doctrine as an emotionally unappealing piece of "legal fiction" and to flirt instead with *theosis* and "participation." He weighs Torrance's and Tanner's participationist soteriologies and finds them just as wanting in practical, affective import as the forensic soteriology they supposedly supplant. By contrast, Neo-Thomistic participationism does speak clearly about its experiential implications, but Zahl finds unbelievable its doctrine of "instantaneous implantation of new moral powers" (8) and its optimism about progressive sanctification. Instead he returns to Melancthon's doctrine of justification. Melancthon writes movingly of how faith in the objective reality of our justification brings subjective relief from

dread of God's wrath. Melanchthon also holds together justification with Spirit-wrought regeneration, which produces the practical effects of love for God and mortification of sin. Yet Christians will continue to struggle with lifelong sin—no Neo-Thomistic optimism here! Lastly, insofar as Melanchthon's doctrine of justification includes affective changes, it overlaps with ancient Christian theologies of *theosis* (though not Torrance's and Tanner's overly-objectified versions).

Chapter 4 sets forensic justification in the context of Luther's law-and-gospel dialectic in conversion and asks after its contemporary relevance. The Reformers could assume a lively sense of sin and guilt before God in their audience; not so in today's secular environment. The doctrine of original sin thus has become implausible and, with it, the gospel of justification by faith. Here affect theory comes to Luther's aid. Secular people still experience feelings of unworthiness, rejection, and fear of death, along with yearnings for peace and justice. They still are prone to self-deception and an inability to do what they know is right. All the affects still are the same even though their interpretation has changed. The Christian task is to reframe these affects within the doctrines of sin and grace that reveal their true significance. That significance is, for Luther, that negative affects signal the Holy Spirit's use of God's law to convict us of sin and drive us to Christ. The Spirit then uses the gospel to replace negative affects with positive ones.

Chapter 5 applies Zahl's method to the doctrine of sanctification. Once more he critiques Torrance for dislocating doctrine from experience and Neo-Thomists for teaching infused virtue and progressive sanctification. Augustine pioneered a preferable perspective on sanctification: the Holy Spirit works providentially through the circumstances of the believer's life to stir up love for holiness and hatred of sin, yet Christians generally make little progress in sanctification and even the saintliest remain sinful. Zahl sees a close fit between Augustine's doctrine and affect theory. A combined "affective Augustinianism" yields four benefits: 1) Rather than forcing Christian experience into a one-size-fits-all pattern (say, a revivalistic conversion narrative) to determine if a person is saved or not, we may allow for the Spirit's freedom to grant diverse experiences or even to labor long at undetectable levels to prepare for sudden affective about-faces. 2) Against the current fashion for virtue ethics, we must accept that the affects are too sturdy to be radically

altered by habituation. Spiritual practices have their place but are not a panacea for our stubborn depravity. 3) As bodily realities, the affects link us to the whole human community across time and the material world in which it evolved. Thus, the Spirit's sanctifying activity upon our affects has social and political as well as personal implications. 4) The disappointing phenomenon of "Christian mediocrity" is easily explained: the affects lack plasticity. It is up to the sovereign Spirit of God, not us, when and how they change. If we feel sin's weight, we may interpret that as the Spirit's law-applying conviction so that, sooner or later, we may experience the joy of the gospel. But we need not fear that our justification is in jeopardy.

In his Conclusion, Zahl recaps his key points and urges further theological study of the emotions. He also recommends the application of his method to other areas related to pneumatology (such as charismata, prayer, the sacraments, and the Spirit-mediated relationship between the historical Jesus and Christians of every place and time), as well as to the hamartiological question of the relationship of sin to human biological and psychological structures. Finally, he positions "affective Augustinianism" as a third option for Protestants besides Thomistic progressive perfectionism and Barthian suspicion of subjectivity and the sciences. Zahl is especially hopeful that his approach will foster dialogue between modern academic theology and the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

Zahl's ambitious work deserves commendation on several fronts. He invites contemporary Protestants and post-Christians to rediscover the life-changing gospel in Reformation teaching. He safeguards against subjectivism by his normative use of Scripture and doctrine along with the ancillary use of the sciences. He cautions against an account of sanctification that depends more on Aristotle than the Paraclete. On these points, Zahl's project pairs well with Torrance's.

Zahl himself treats Torrance largely as a foil for his own proposals, recycling the standard canard that Torrance's theology lacks practicality—or, in Zahl's memorable phrase, that "Torrance's soteriology . . . functions as a kind of pneumatological Docetism: it has no real connection to bodies" (99). Torrance

scholars have answered this claim as it relates to *ethos*.<sup>1</sup> Zahl, though, is more concerned with *pathos*. Unfortunately, he neglects evidence from the very works of Torrance's that he cites. For instance, he repeatedly lifts abstract metaphysical quotes from *The Trinitarian Faith* and *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (see Zahl's pp. 71-72, 95-99, 184-85) but ignores *Trinitarian Faith's* Chapter 1: "Faith and Godliness," which foregrounds the affective necessity of reverence, as well as *Atonement's* experientially-rich epilogue. There is also a certain irony when Zahl borrows from Karen Kilby to accuse Torrance of such vagueness as to open the door to "all sorts of projection" (71-74): Kilby actually deplores theologians' saying *too much* lest projection occur, while Zahl objects to saying *too little*.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Zahl's "affective Augustinianism" rightly challenges us to attend to the experiential implications of doctrine. It also offers a fruitful avenue for further research. For instance, how might Zahl's affective account of sanctification shed light on Christ's atoning union with fallen human nature? On the other hand, might the radical healing of that nature by Christ as actualized in us by the Holy Spirit counteract Zahl's pessimism about the incorrigibility of the affects? Do Christ's miraculous incarnation and resurrection yield any basis for the "instantaneous implantation of new moral powers" that Zahl doubts—to say nothing of other new powers that his would-be Pentecostal and charismatic interlocutors embrace? Are all "worldly" emotions always already the Spirit's application of law and gospel, so that all that's needed is to *reinterpret* them in Christian terms, or does the Spirit specially supervene on human affects so as to *transpose* them into a qualitatively higher register?<sup>3</sup> Whatever doctrinal conclusions we reach on these matters, Zahl would have us reckon with how they touch our hearts.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Todd Speidell, *Fully Human in Christ: The Incarnation as the End of Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); E. Jerome Van Kuiken, "Not I, but Christ': Thomas F. Torrance on the Christian Life," in Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 243–57.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from p. 72. Zahl draws on Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (2000), pp. 439–43.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, "Transpositions," in his *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1949, 1976, 1980), 91–115.