

Responses to “The Spirit and the Church” by Miroslav Volf and Maurice Lee

Clark Pinnock

Clark Pinnock is professor of Systematic Theology at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario.

Miroslav Volf’s voice has become part of today’s theological conversation, and we are all enriched. The theme of his paper is summarized in the sentence: “In the power of the Spirit which rested upon Jesus, as he announced and inaugurated the reign of God and which the resurrected and exalted Christ poured out on his followers so that they can continue his mission in the world, churches live as catholic communities of equal persons who give allegiance to Jesus Christ and seek to embody divine love. As such communities, churches image in a broken way, the Trinitarian life of God.” Volf offers us here a thrilling vision for holistic mission in the power of God.

I too have appreciated Heribert Mühlen, a German Roman Catholic charismatic theologian whom Volf mentions. He contends that the church is a continuation of the anointing of the Spirit, reminding us of John 20:21: “As the Father sent me, so send I you.” Just as the Father sent him in the power of the Spirit, so Jesus sends us in the power of the Spirit. Hendrikus Berkhof also catches this truth when he says that the first act of the risen Lord was to pour the Spirit out. Jesus did not lead a seminar about how the church should be structured but he poured the Spirit out instead. He wanted his disciples to receive Spirit-baptism so that he could be present in a new way through them.¹

I also appreciated the way Volf speaks about the Spirit outside of the church. “Anointed by the Spirit, the church is sent to go where the Spirit is always already to be found, preparing the way for the coming of the reign of God.” I love the idea that the Spirit is already in the world, preparing the way for the word about Jesus to be brought through evangelization. This is a helpful way of handling issues of pluralism and exclusivity – it upholds the particularity of the Jesus event within the cosmic presence of the Spirit which is preparing the world to receive him. As Pope John Paul II has emphasized in many speeches and documents, we can respect the work of the Spirit of truth in the religions of non-Christians.²

Volf's paper prompts me to address the issue of practice. He gives us a wonderful picture of the church in the power of the Spirit, but alongside that we have the realities of our experience of being actual churches. How often we forget the vision, neglect the power, and deny Christ. The taunt in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* often applies to us: "You will have to sing better songs if I am to believe in your Redeemer." What a gap there often is between theology and experience. The apostles were uneducated and ordinary men, but they had the anointing that we desperately need. We must ask God for the Holy Spirit as Jesus invites us to: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13) How badly the church needs to ask for the Holy Spirit and his gifts: the care of bodies, ministries of healing, the hearing of prophecy and words of direction, and deliverances from the powers of darkness. We need to be open to the Holy Spirit in an unrestricted way. Volf challenges me actually to experience the Spirit which we have tasted and can taste again.

Jürgen Moltmann has this word about how the church can appropriate the power of the Spirit: "The essential impediment to the charismatic experience of our potentialities for living is to be found in our passive sins, not our active ones. For the hindrance is not our despairing attempt to be ourselves but our despairing attempt not to be ourselves, so that out of fear of life and fear of death we fall short of what our own lives could be. The charismata of the Spirit are present wherever faith in God drives out these fears of life and wherever the hope of resurrection overcomes the fear of death."³ I believe that Volf in the sub-text of his paper challenges us to see this appropriation happen in our congregations. Come Creator Spirit.

Notes

¹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1964), ch. 2.

² On papal teaching after Vatican II, see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), ch 11.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 188.