The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience. By Simeon Zahl. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 272 pp.

In this much-needed corrective, Zahl challenges the silence in mainstream Protestant theology surrounding "experience," both as method and as data. In the process he invokes the unlikeliest of allies—Luther and Melanchthon. The irony is not lost on Zahl. Although Luther's initial reform was rooted in his spiritual experience, he got spooked first by Karlstadt and later by other spiritualists, who pitted direct experience of the Spirit against scripture. Inherited Lutheran anxiety about experience got a fresh boost in Karl Barth's tirade against it for equally understandable reasons.

Zahl demonstrates in detail how mainstream Protestant articulations of the "ontological" change in believers continue to dodge the issue, hiding a refusal to describe "experienced" effects of faith under the cover of, for example, "participation." "Perhaps the chief contemporary theological target in this book is a certain kind of *complacency with theological abstraction* that is often apparent in discussions of the Spirit" (70). The vacuum left in Protestant theology has been filled, in part, by neo-Thomist accounts of cooperation and habituation. While Zahl appreciates their willingness to speak of experience at all, the underlying soteriology and its religious optimism leave him unconvinced. Indeed, the very Reformation Protestants who reject Roman Catholic accounts of soteriology and sanctification often do so on experiential grounds! Experience, Zahl insists, shapes the very kind of theologians we become.

What this suggests, at a minimum, is that Protestant theology in the tradition of the magisterial Reformation can continue no longer in its refusal to engage the topic of experience. Zahl further exposes this methodological lacuna as both a missional and a pneumatological deficit. After deftly diagnosing the issue, Zahl spends the remainder of his work sketching out a theological account of experience in keeping with Reformation doctrines of grace, faith, and sin.

One of the tools he invokes to this end is affect theory, which examines the interplay of reason, emotion, and bodiliness, with particular interest in "intransigence"—the ways in which our minds and bodies do not feel as we would like them to, and the ways in

which human bodily experiences and problems persist over time apart from cultural change or verbal analysis. Zahl observes that affect theory can be described as an "unknowing rearticulation of the Lutheran doctrine of the bondage of the will under the guise of critique of the post-Enlightenment 'fantasy of sovereignty'" (153).

The other tool is cognitive psychology, which Zahl wields against accusations that, for instance, forensic justification as an external "legal fiction" has no impact on believers whatsoever. To the contrary, there is broad consensus that the ideas people hold bear very directly on their emotions. On the strength of this insight, Zahl gives the warmest appraisal in recent memory of Melanchthon's *Apology* and its profound appreciation of the interplay between *what is held to be true about God* (angry judge or forgiving mediator) and the *corresponding emotions* (terror or consolation). For Melanchthon, true ideas about God actually transform the believer's affections toward God. And this is a real-time, historical, individual change. If anyone is talking legal fiction, it is those who claim ontological change in the believer but refuse to see any practically recognizable effects.

Well aware of the dangers of overspecification, Zahl nevertheless challenges theologians to speak of the "practical recognizability" of the believer's experience of God the Spirit. Such elements will be temporally specific, embodied, affective, and recognized by believers themselves. Zahl explores these with Luther's law-gospel distinction and a range of Augustinian insights into desire, the limits of self-knowledge, and spiritual "mediocrity." Zahl's constructive account is particularly refreshing in its insistence on taking religious failure and non-transformation as seriously as spiritual success stories.

Zahl's achievement is not only to demonstrate beyond any question of a doubt the urgency of reconsidering experience in theology but also to chart out a path in deepest fidelity to the Lutheran Reformation's doctrine of grace.

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