

REVIEW ESSAY

Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

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This book represents a thoroughgoing commitment on the part of a Pentecostal theologian, Frank Macchia, to the ecumenical project. Specifically, Macchia seeks to offer an account of the Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit baptism in ways that are ecumenically in keeping with catholic pneumatology. He does this in two respects: one by reinterpreting what he calls “the central distinctive”—that is *Spirit baptism*—in ways that situate it within larger conversations in Trinitarian theology from the Fathers onward, and second, by interpreting non-Pentecostal pneumatologies in ways that seek to demonstrate the centrality of Spirit baptism. Macchia thus finds significant evidence for the doctrine of Spirit baptism, not only in scriptures, but also in the tradition with its emphasis upon charismatic experience toward mission.

Macchia’s ambitions for reconciliation are many: he wishes to offer an apologetic that will convince contemporary Pentecostal theologians who have perhaps evolved from Spirit baptism as its central distinctive of its abiding significance. He also wishes to convince his ecumenical partners of the exegetical importance of Spirit baptism,

and thus wishes to offer more than the relish to his ecumenical conversations, but wants to instead contribute to the main course. This is an important endeavour, given the global impact that Pentecostalism is making. However, I have some concerns with the overall project, and these are ones that are formidable—for they arise from a difference in first principles.

I would argue that for Macchia, the first principle in his interpretation is the category of experience. Spirit baptism, according to Macchia, is fundamentally an experience, and it is an experience of direct encounter with the Spirit in which the individual is summoned and given her mission and task. This experience is unmediated by the church, and in fact, it is theologically prior, as Macchia argues, to what he calls baptism in the body of Christ. This bifurcation of baptism is supported through several texts, particularly in Luke-Acts, but I would argue his reading of these texts is shaped by a commitment to a particular experience. As Macchia writes: “Spirit baptism is experienced by individuals, not in isolation but in preparation for the *koinonia*” (168). Further, this experience of Spirit baptism has an even greater teleological thrust—as it is poured out on all flesh in its eschatological consummation. This eschatological tension, according to Macchia, ought to engender humility in our ecclesiologies, so that there is no terse identity ascribed to the church with the Kingdom of God. One cannot help but notice the linearity of this trajectory; it is also a linear development that characterizes the historical development of doctrine. According to Macchia, the catholic traditions demonstrate

the importance of tradition, the Reformation churches the centrality of the Word; and the Pentecostals, the importance of Spirit-filled mission. One cannot help but think that Macchia is tracing a progressive trajectory here. Yet what is obscured in this trajectory are some of the fundamentally dialectical dimensions of church history—and one in particular is worth emphasizing, and that is the difference that modernity makes. For Macchia, experience is a central category in a way in which it simply was not for pre-moderns.

The word, *experience*, appears on virtually every page, usually more than once. For Macchia, the Holy Spirit is known first and foremost as an experience of transformation for the individual believer. This, I would argue, is profoundly different from pre-modern pneumatologies, which understood the Spirit as ontologically and objectively given, in the church and, particularly, in the sacraments.

But the question then arises: what is experience? What is the nature of the experience of Spirit baptism? In his biographical prologue Macchia (11-18) describes a life-altering and highly emotion-filled moment of transformation. Because of the deeply experiential quality of this account, I can follow Macchia no longer—because I simply do not know what he is talking about; which is another way of saying that the experience of Spirit baptism is context-specific. For me, reading this book was a lot like reading about another religion—because there is nothing in my grammar or tradition that can make sense of it. It is

interesting, but I cannot be sure that I know what Macchia is speaking of when he speaks of Spirit baptism. So while Macchia can write about the significance of Spirit baptism, as long as I have not experienced it, his claims, although interesting, break down conversation. Those who have not experienced this cannot be argued into its relevance, they need instead to be *traditioned* into it; they need, instead to come under, not just the Spirit *qua* experience's authority, but under the authority of those who render the Spirit intelligible in such a way.

George Schnier analyses the problem of the appeal to experience in ways that are very helpful here:

Whether one examines the most rudimentary occurrences of experiences as interior or exterior awareness, in relatively isolated instances or in large collections of my life experience, one discovers a construction, dependent on a variety of operations and elements... At the very point at which I am able actually to appeal to experience, I have achieved a level of awareness in which I implicitly know that I am appealing to something that I have constructed, which is therefore revisable, and subject to a request for justification of some kind. Thus experience is neither given, nor unmediated, nor incorrigible, nor atomistic, it is constructed.¹

So while Macchia has salutary aims of ecumenical conversation, the conversation is in a way thwarted because it fails to recognize the situatedness of its claims within a distinct and not common history. Hence, his critiques of other Christian churches, although gentle, also miss the mark because the dynamic of charismatic power

¹ George P. Schnier, "The Appeal to Experience," in *Essays Catholic and Critical*, Philip Ziegler and Mark Husbands (eds.) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 118.

that he urges other Christians to embrace is not understood as a necessary criterion for faithfulness in the manner in which he takes for granted. As Macchia writes:

Pentecostals rightly look at the prevalence of benchwarmers in the church (including Pentecostal churches) and would encourage them to be baptized in the Spirit in dynamic praise and charismatic power for service toward others. (p. 79).

For other Christians, faithfulness is not primarily characterized by the intuition Macchia describes but by fidelity to tradition and scripture in ways that might actually make us wary of such terms as charismatic power and dynamic praise. Further, while Macchia threatens to homogenize the church's diversity under the category of experience, he similarly threatens the Spirit's agency. How do you encourage others to be baptized in the Spirit? Might such encouragement not signal, in spite of Macchia's insistence on the regenerative power of the Spirit, its domestication?

And so I would argue that the Holy Spirit is not best understood first as an experience, and secondarily as a doctrine, as Macchia seems to suggest; but rather, the other way around—it is the doctrine that shapes experience because doctrine affords us the language through which our experience is presented and moulded. Put differently, the idea that the Holy Spirit is primarily an individual experience is itself a doctrine that will shape experience, and it is this doctrine, this teaching, this claim to authority, that compromises rather thoroughly the ecumenical viability of Macchia's proposal.

Many other things can be said about this; particularly problematic for me as an Anglican is Macchia's emphasis upon the "ritual like character of sacraments." For Macchia, ritual is important because it fulfills a longing for an "alternative world" that nourishes imaginative visions. Again, the disruptive grace—that is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ—who is partaken in the sacraments is domesticated under an experiential explanation. Rituals help us to see the way things might be—it formulates "the common mind on the meaning of life and world" (p. 248). I would want to say against this, that eucharist presents us the world *as it is* because it enables us to participate in the uncommon body of our Lord—uncommon because it cannot be contained or imagined in a category as confining as our experience.

Similar things could be said about Macchia's phenomenology of liberation, which moves from spirit-filled persons to collectivities, thus transforming them into more just societies. Yet the powers that captivate and imprison us, and increasingly so, are structural dynamics that require structural, not merely individual, change. Without this analysis, I cannot see how the goals of liberation can be met by Macchia's proposal.

In sum, this book presents a worthy aim—to incorporate Pentecostal theology and practice more fully into ecumenical conversations is particularly urgent given Pentecostalism's global reach. However, I worry that like many ecumenical projects important distinctions are often passed over in Macchia's account. The chief distinction for me is the priority that he places upon a certain kind of

experience as normative for the church. Experience is notoriously difficult as a theological foundation for ecumenical conversation. In my view, baptism in the Spirit cannot hold the ecumenical promise that Macchia hopes largely because it has not been shared by many of us.