

RESPONSE TO ANDREW K. GABRIEL,
*THE LORD IS THE SPIRIT: THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE DIVINE
ATTRIBUTES*

JEROMEY Q. MARTINI

In *The Lord is the Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Divine Attributes*, Andrew Gabriel presents a fresh assessment of the doctrine of God. Gabriel's assessment is pneumatological in focus and Pentecostal in orientation. That is: although "the book aims to be a work in ecumenical theology in the sense that I [Gabriel] draw[s] on theologians from across the Christian traditions," Gabriel is upfront that "this book is, at least in part, a contribution to Pentecostal theology" (p. 5).

The book as a whole offers a serious critique of "classical theism," specifically on the attributes of God. Although "classical theism" as a category is both fairly recent and variously defined, Gabriel finds it a useful heuristic "for identifying a historically prevalent view of God among [Western] Christian theologians" (p. 12).

In the book, Gabriel criticizes the classical doctrine of God on two primary fronts. First, he observes that the Trinity is non-essential to most classical discussions of the divine attributes. Second, he observes that the Spirit is neglected in most classical discussions of the Trinity. In response, Gabriel argues first that the Trinity is essential to any discussion of the divine attributes. Second, he argues that the Spirit is essential to any discussion of the Trinity. Consequently, Gabriel offers a study of the divine attributes that is both essentially trinitarian and self-consciously pneumatological in its trinitarian approach.

This approach leads to three primary moves in the study. First, while being careful not to deny God's transcendence, Gabriel's pneumatological emphasis leads him to prioritize God's immanence. That is, on God's interaction with the world (p. 114) – on what God has done "in relation to us" (p. 119). Second, in relation to prioritizing God's immanence Gabriel likewise prioritizes economic over immanent conceptions of the Trinity. More specifically, he sees the economic Trinity (how the persons of the Trinity manifest in relationship with the world) as the appropriate conduit to access the immanent Trinity (how the persons of the Trinity relate internally). Finally, having established these

priorities, Gabriel re-assesses select and representative doctrines of the divine attributes, namely: divine impassibility (the doctrine of God's unaffected emotions); divine immutability (the doctrine of God's unchangeableness); and divine omnipotence (the doctrine of God's infinite power). He concludes that such an approach leads to a number of challenges to the divine attributes as classically conceived but that the purpose of such challenges is to sharpen, not blur, our understanding of God. "Hence," Gabriel concludes, "with this pneumatological vision of God, we can say that we have seen a glimpse of the glory of the Lord" (p. 206).

APPRECIATION

There is much to appreciate in Gabriel's study, so I am pleased to respond to his text. Because I was invited to respond in my capacity as a specialist in New Testament and Christian Origins, I will restrict my responses to areas related to my field.

Healthy Suspicion of Received Dogma

First, I appreciate Gabriel's healthy suspicion of received dogma. I acknowledge that neither all theological disciplines nor even all approaches to New Testament study would or could receive such a statement as complimentary. But although NT scholarship has extended into the areas of "Reception History" and with an increasing appreciation of *Wirkungsgeschichtliche* – the effect of a text's post-history on an interpreter – the (newer) History of Religions approach I here represent still maintains a *healthy* suspicion of passive acquiescence to patristic interpretation or dogma.

Following the seminal work of such scholars as Martin Hengel,¹ we have moved beyond the blanket suspicions of orthodoxy offered by 19th century Protestant liberalism and have eschewed any idealist vision of a "pure" version of 1st-century Judaism – or Christianity – unaffected by "hellenism." But we recognize still that *something* happened in the "parting of the ways" that shifted a movement dominated by adherence to Israel's God in the first century to the almost exclusively gentile group

¹ E.g., Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1974).

that comprises the “classical” or “orthodox” Christianity of the second and later centuries.²

Pneumatological Emphasis

Second, I can echo Gabriel’s lament over the lack of emphasis on pneumatology in theology as a similar lacuna in New Testament studies. Whereas many NT works are devoted to areas concerning Jesus, Christology, and atonement, until recently comparatively few have focused specifically on the New Testament’s “Spirit” language.

Focus on Divine Immanence

Similarly, third, Gabriel’s critique that systematic theology has tended to prioritize God’s transcendence over God’s immanence is a critique that, I think, could be equally levelled against biblical historians and those studying Christian origins. Scholars of Christian origins too often begin with questions of *doctrine*, as though the earliest believers first and dispassionately conceptualized their convictions about God and only then, derivatively, put those conceptualizations into practice. But in all reasonableness, the reverse is true. As NT scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has put it: “*something happened*” to the believers in the first century, and that “*something*” – that *experience* of something *they thought* was *God’s immanent presence* – needs to be taken into account if we are adequately to understand the birth and spread of Christianity.³

QUESTIONS

In addition to appreciation for Gabriel’s work, however, I offer three questions – all stemming from one – for his future consideration.

² So, importantly, James D. G. Dunn, *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135: The Second Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism (Durham, September 1989)* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1999).

³ E.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, Revised ed. (London: SCM, 1999), 93. Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 64-74.

Where's the Bible?

First, I ask Gabriel: "Where is the Bible in this theological work?" A survey of the bibliography shows no significant secondary sources from biblical scholars. In spite of this, in Gabriel's analysis of the divine attributes (chs 5-7) – particularly on the doctrine of impassibility – his argument makes a number of claims dependent on a close reading of Scripture. In particular, for re-assessing the doctrine of divine impassibility Gabriel depends heavily on the proof text of Eph 4:30, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit."

Interestingly, Markus Barth (Karl Barth's son) supports Gabriel's unsubstantiated reading of Ephesians, commenting: "Though an explicit reference to 'grieving' the Father is not found in [Eph.] 4:30, this text comes near an affirmation of patripassionism (the preaching of a suffering God). The God proclaimed in Ephesians is not an unmoved mover."⁴

Does "trinitarianism" answer the challenge of "philosophical theism"?

Second, I ask whether a "trinitarian" approach can effectively answer the proposed challenge of "philosophical theism." That is, can a "trinitarian" approach answer the challenge that "classical theism" is in large part a "philosophical theism" (p. 32) derived from Greek philosophical categories and, "On account of the lack of trinitarian reflection in classical theism, classical theism is in many respects secular" (p. 40)?

From a (my) NT perspective, post-Chalcedonian doctrine of the Trinity is no less influenced by Greek philosophical categories than are the categories for the divine attributes. That is to say: without the breadcrumbs left by the Greco-Roman philosophical categories Gabriel here implicitly questions, one is unlikely ever to arrive at either an "immanent" or an "economic" doctrine of the Trinity.

Does revising classical categories for the doctrine of God go far enough?

Finally, I question whether Gabriel's revisions go far enough. On one hand, Gabriel critiques the limits of classical theology in that: "The in-

⁴ Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, 2 vols., AB 34A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 2.548.

fluence of philosophy also appears in classical theism's focus on divine attributes that are, for the most part, foreign to the Scriptures. While God's holiness, patience, righteousness, and mercy are frequently described in the Scriptures, classical theism pays little attention to these attributes" (p. 34). But simply by critiquing and re-assessing the existing categories, Gabriel's work continues to be determined by them. How might *new* categories and concepts play out such as, for example, the materiality of the Spirit.⁵

In conclusion, Gabriel has offered a beneficial work for a revised understanding of the Holy Spirit in theology. And in that regard, it is perhaps the case that my final questions can be dismissed as the simple criticism that this is a fine work in systematic theology that simply is not a work in New Testament studies.

⁵ E.g., Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).