

Pentecostal Identity, Beliefs, and Praxis

A Review Essay

Caleb Courtney
Independent Scholar, Sarnia, Ontario
caleb@calebcourtney.com

Corneliu Constantineanu and Christopher J. Scobie, eds., *Pentecostals in the 21st Century: Identity, Beliefs, Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018). x + 265 pp. \$33 paper. ISBN 9781532616716.

Slovenian Pentecostal scholar Christopher J. Scobie wanted a distinctly Pentecostal textbook to train the growing community of Pentecostal students in his country. To this end, he commissioned several English-speaking Pentecostal scholars to write chapters that would be translated into Slovenian. The result was a co-edited volume with Romanian Pentecostal scholar Corneliu Constantineanu entitled *Binkoštniki v 21. stoletju: identiteta, verovanje, praksa* (PODVIG d.o.o., 2016). The present English volume is a compilation of the original English essays, published under the title *Pentecostals in the 21st Century: Identity, Beliefs, Praxis* (Wipf and Stock, 2018).

The collection includes contributions from the two editors in the form of a combined introduction and summary of the book as might be expected, plus an additional chapter each. Other contributors include Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Finland), Jean-Daniel Plüss (Switzerland), Edmund J. Rybarczyk (USA), Glenn Balfour (UK), Frank D. Macchia (USA), Keith Warrington (UK), Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. (USA), Amos Yong (USA), Wonsuk Ma (USA), and two Canadian Pentecostal scholars, Roger Stronstad and Van Johnson.

In *Pentecostals in the 21st Century*, the authors cover a wide variety of topics, including, as advertised, Pentecostal identity, beliefs, and praxis. One major benefit is that several of these scholars have written much more on the same subjects elsewhere, and here have distilled their expertise into a chapter-sized précis. In a unique chapter by Constantineanu, the reader learns about the development of

Pentecostalism and Pentecostal theological education in Romania, encountering some interesting non-English resources there.

Although all of the authors' contributions have value, in this review I focus solely on the contributions of the two Canadians. Stronstad and Johnson have previously appeared independently alongside one another in a couple of published works. In *The Full-Life Bible Commentary to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1999), subsequently republished as the *Life in the Spirit Commentary to the New Testament* (Harrison House, 2017), Johnson wrote a commentary on Romans while Stronstad wrote one on 1 & 2 Peter and Jude. Stronstad was an editor of that volume. In a small denominational book entitled *Authentically Pentecostal* (Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, 2010), Stronstad wrote a chapter on "Christ, Our Baptizer," while Johnson wrote a chapter on "Christ, Our Coming King." Johnson was an editor of that book. I also know for certain that the two scholars once co-taught a seminary course based on Stronstad's landmark book, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Hendrickson, 1984; Baker, 2012), because I was in that class!

Stronstad, the retired Academic Dean of Summit Pacific College (Abbotsford, BC), has been long known for his careful and methodical scholarship of Luke-Acts and his solid academic defense of a Pentecostal reading of these books, although he recently veered a few pages to the left and published a small commentary on Mark (CPT Press, 2018). His contribution in this volume, a chapter entitled "Some Aspects of Hermeneutics in the Pentecostal Tradition," is an overview of hermeneutics with specific attention to Luke-Acts.

Stronstad begins by outlining the human, divine, and ethical dimensions of interpretation. He then effectively reiterates the claim—one that resonates with Pentecostals—that Luke is not simply a historian, but is also a theologian. He also characterizes Luke as "a skilled teacher *par excellence*" (54). Using a couple of examples, Stronstad outlines how Luke uses Old Testament terminology and typology, and something called "charismatic exegesis," to teach that the coming of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Perhaps the most compelling of Stronstad's work over the past decades has been illuminating with great clarity the narrative strategies and patterns that Luke uses in his two volumes, and demonstrating the significance that these patterns have for Luke's theological message. Here again, Stronstad gives compelling examples of how Luke uses programmatic episodes, bracketing/inclusion, prophecy-fulfillment, and parallelism to communicate meaning. As might be expected by readers familiar with Stronstad's work, there are several helpful tables with explicit examples, particularly of the parallels between Luke and Acts.

Finally, Stronstad establishes that for Luke the "baptism in the Holy Spirit" is an experience that follows conversion (i.e., not a metaphor for conversion-initiation as some Evangelicals might argue) particularly because he explicitly indicates the antecedent spiritual state of those who experienced this baptism. In Stronstad's words, "no one experiences being 'filled with the Spirit' or being 'baptized in the Spirit' who is not already in right standing before God" (54). Stronstad accompanies his explanation with a helpful table indicating Luke's descriptions of the antecedent and subsequent spiritual states of Elizabeth, Zacharias, Simeon, 120 brethren, 5000 disciples, Samaritans, Paul, Cornelius' house church, and the Ephesian twelve.

Johnson, the Dean of Master's Pentecostal Seminary (Toronto, ON), is a respected scholar and a trusted scholar-practitioner within his denomination, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). He is well-suited to write on the subject of apocalyptic eschatology because the Christian understanding of the "last things" must be mediated by an understanding of the genre of Jewish apocalyptic literature, something Johnson studied extensively for his 1997 doctoral thesis, *The Development of Sheol* (Wycliffe College, Toronto). Johnson has written about eschatology since the 1990s, is currently assisting his denomination in their re-articulation of their beliefs on eschatology, and has at least a couple of forthcoming items on the topic, including an article expected to appear in the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* generated from the Reformed-Pentecostal Dialogue in Accra, Ghana in 2018.

Johnson outlines his chapter, "Fulfillment of God's Promise in the Soon-to-Return King," under several headings: (1) apocalyptic

eschatology, (2) Pentecostal visions of the eschatological age, (3) the Pentecostal movement and its eschatological ethos (including Spirit baptism, the gifts of the Spirit, witness, holiness, otherworldly values, and inclusivity), (4) future events and eschatological systems (including premillennialism, postmillennialism, and the rapture), and (5) genre apocalypse and the book of Revelation, followed by (6) a conclusion. Perhaps somewhat provocatively, but also sincerely, Johnson promises at the outset of the chapter to give some attention to “how the book of Revelation might be redeemed from centuries of misunderstanding so that its message might be heard again” (182).

Particularly helpful to the Pentecostal student or layperson is Johnson’s description of apocalyptic literature. Pentecostals prefer a literal reading of Scripture. However, apocalyptic literature was always meant to be symbolic, not literal, “stirring the imagination,” and “transforming the worldview of its hearers” (198). The goal was not precision or clarity, but rather to “stir the heart and motivate action” (198). For the faithful, the book of Revelation is intended to give assurance that “their sufferings and endurance are not in vain,” and that God “will reward the righteous”; for the unbelieving, it warns that “he will judge the wicked” (199).

Johnson writes with a clear understanding of Pentecostals as a self-viewed restorationist movement. He illustrates how dispensationalism served these previous generations by confirming the idea that they were living in the last days, although “it is a bit ironic because the system itself rules out the existence of a modern-day Pentecostal movement” (188). Johnson dedicates a paragraph to one of Pentecostals’ most dearly-beloved dispensational ideas, the rapture, highlighting in a footnote that it is fair to say that the Thessalonians to whom Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 might have understood this idea much differently than Pentecostals do today. Johnson clarifies that “the conviction that Jesus will return before the world enjoys a golden millennium both predates the emergence of dispensationalism and may be preached without it” (199). He worries, however, that if this 19th century eschatological scheme (and with it the idea of a “rapture”) is rejected, Pentecostals might stop preaching and anticipating the return of Jesus.

Johnson identifies another modern problem: the delay of the second coming of Christ and the upward socio-economic movement of many Pentecostals lends itself to “a waning interest in the soon return of Jesus” (200). According to Johnson, the Pentecostal movement, a movement that was built on the imminent of return of Jesus, can undergo many adaptations (implied here is the addition of a pre-tribulation rapture in the early 1800s, or the removal of this idea in the present day), but it should never lose its premillennial disposition. That is, Pentecostals should be compelled by the return of Jesus until he comes.

Johnson uses words carefully, sometimes leaving more to the subtext than saying it outrightly. He discusses three types of eschatology: postmillennial, premillennial with two second comings (a “rapture,” then another second coming at the end of the tribulation), and premillennial with one second coming (at the end of the tribulation). He implicitly espouses the latter, though he never directly says so. This is understandable, as Johnson writes from within a PAOC tradition that has favoured dispensationalism and a pre-tribulation rapture throughout its history and currently enumerates this among their “fundamental and essential truths.” Johnson handles this potentially incendiary topic (pun intended) with the grace of an experienced teacher.

To summarize, Stronstad and Johnson are representative of a high quality of mature scholarship in Canada. Rooted firmly within the classical Pentecostal tradition, they provide tools to moderate the overwhelming flow of information from a Pentecostal—and thoroughly biblical—perspective. Stronstad’s chapter is consistent with the disciplined and steady approach and meticulous attention to detail we have seen in his previous Lukan scholarship. Johnson’s chapter outlines several key Pentecostal inclinations and practices, and gives some excellent context on how these have been shaped by eschatological beliefs.

Overall, this collection of essays will be welcomed by students of Pentecostalism, as well as clergy and laypersons in classical Pentecostal church traditions. There is an excellent array of accessible topics for contemplation, discussion, and further study. The entire book, or selections from it, could form the basis of an academically-inclined church small group study or Sunday school class. In addition to its

usefulness as a textbook first in Slovenian, and now English, it is currently being translated into Romanian so that it might be used as part of a post-graduate program in Pentecostalism in Romania. *Pentecostals in the 21st Century* is a valuable part of any library that aims to include current scholarship in Pentecostal studies.