BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by: Herman Allen, Roehampton University, UK. Email: herman@malfordlodge.co.uk

This is a fascinating book written by Pamela Engelbert a Pentecostal insider because it sets out to explore the Achilles heel of Pentecostalism, namely the tension between a theology of victory and the experience of suffering and ill-health. It is an academic book that is careful to draw upon the work of Pentecostal scholars but then centres around empirical research involving eight Classical Pentecostal participants who suffered significantly without relief or cure. The book does not deny that Pentecostal ideology and expectation is for God’s miraculous intervention and deliverance. However, where that is not forthcoming, Engelbert seeks to expand the understanding of divine intervention to include God being present to the sufferer in the apparent absence (ongoing suffering). Thus Engelbert states, “[W]hile healing may not occur in the physical body (a cure) for the person, I believe in the continuing work of the Spirit to generate ongoing healing in other ways, transforming the person to be more complete in order to be the human being that God planned from before the beginning of time” (p. 13). That sentiment goes for other types of suffering and is the essence of the book, which is in no way an attempt to dismantle Pentecostal theology around suffering and healing, merely to reshape it to be more nuanced at the margins to aid in the care of the sufferer.

The author delves into the roots of Pentecostalism to underscore the systematic nature of the embedded expectation of Pentecostals towards suffering and healing. The voices of the participants bring this to life, before taking us through the incongruity between what they believed and what seemed to be their “redemptionless” suffering. Each seemingly has to find their way towards meaning, often unaided by unhelpful responses ranging from ignoring the situation to attributing it to Satan and his demons. The new meanings they find are the presence of God in their predicament and a new type of faith; a faith that is forced to let go of certainty, and one that could be better defined as courage in mystery or strength in uncertainty.

Engelbert gives theological and biblical underpinning to the experience of the participants in order to expand the meaning of divine intervention. She does this partly by examining the gospel of John to demonstrate that a sub-text of absence runs throughout the text, even though Jesus was also evidently present.
A prominent example given is that of Lazarus in John 11, where the absence of Jesus led to Lazarus’s death, and where the grief of Mary and Martha was compounded by unmet expectations. Engelbert uses this to illustrate the tension of a God who can heal but chooses not to for some mysterious and ambiguous reason. Nevertheless, the assertion is that God is present in the apparent absence. The author employs “Christopraxis” as the criterion for the development of a Pentecostal theological praxis of suffering and healing; where Christopraxis is a reflection on the experience/action of Jesus in light of both Scripture and the workings of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Christopraxis is intended to go beyond imitating Christ to joining in with Christ and participating in his ministry through the Spirit. “In the language of Christopraxis, Jesus intensely came and ministered to the participants while they were in the middle of their nothingness” (p. 90). The book then goes on to seek to translate what that looks like by using a Pentecostal methodology of experience and Scripture both to affirm God’s presence in apparent absence and to arrive at new approaches of care to the suffering, which is then narrowed to the most important and specific praxis: empathy.

The book intentionally or otherwise goes through a pastoral cycle of experience, analysis, reflection and action, which provides valuable insight and application as far as the Pentecostal praxis of suffering and healing is concerned. However, it does it in a non-confrontational way that tinkers around the margins of Pentecostal theology without addressing some of the big structural anomalies firmly embedded within Pentecostal structures. For example, the climax of the book is Chapter 6, on the theme of empathy. This chapter could have been inserted into any book on pastoral care. There is nothing particularly Pentecostal about the praxis it espouses. Its theology of action could standalone from any particular association with Pentecostalism. This is probably a positive outcome in that it can be brought under the wider tent of a Christian praxis toward suffering and healing. However, for it to be impactful within a Pentecostal setting it would need to triangulate with other practices that set expectations. For example, Engelbert states, “In empathy, however, there is an absence of a power over, and there is, instead, the presence of a power with the one suffering” (p. 155). For that thinking to be effective it would need to be extrapolated wider to confront the Pentecostal theology of power. The theology of power when properly addressed will produce the by-product of empathy and an understanding that power with and not power over is the predominant way that God encounters his people today. Without that kind of fundamental challenge to Pentecostal theology, it is difficult to imagine how this Pentecostal praxis towards suffering can be sustained within hardened Pentecostal settings. Nevertheless, within its limited scope of a qualitative study, this book presents a good argument for the Pentecostal praxis of suffering and healing that contributes to the necessary reimagining of Pentecostal theology in the twenty-first century.