

BOOK REVIEW

ROBECK, John Mark. *Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Praxis: A Case Study*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021. 182pp. Hbk. ISBN: 9781978710382. £79.

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In *Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Praxis: A Case Study* (2021), John Mark Robeck explains the interconnectedness of Pentecostal theology and liberation theology and how both offer hope to the needy in El Salvador. This book derives from his doctoral dissertation based on a qualitative case study combining empirical and theoretical approaches. A North American scholar, Robeck is also an ordained Assemblies of God minister and a missionary who worked with ENLACE in El Salvador. ENLACE is an international, Christian NGO operating in the USA, South Asia, and Central America.

Robeck asks, “How is a developing Pentecostal theology of praxis distinguished from that of the theology of liberation (p. 9)?” To him, a Pentecostal theology of praxis is “a dialectic of concrete reality and theological reflection” (p. 144). This book clarifies this and focuses on how a Pentecostal theology of praxis differs from and extends further both social engagement and liberation theology.

In his book, Robeck selects three churches among the seventy-five that partnered with ENLACE in community development projects. From his account, the NGO engages with local churches in line with what the latter have been doing to facilitate social services. As his case studies, the three pastors and their respective churches within San Martín, a municipality in the San Salvador region, are all affiliated with the Asamblea de Iglesias Cristianas (AIC, Assembly of Christian Churches).

The book considers the humanitarian, theological, and socio-economic issues of El Salvador. The introduction provides an extensive literature review of scholarly works on liberation theology and its rejection by Vatican II and Pentecostalism in Latin America. Robeck explains how the Pentecostals have replaced the phrase “the preferential option for the poor” with “the preferential option of the poor” to let the poor take responsibility for their predicament.

Chapter 1 discusses the similarities and differences between Pentecostal theology and the theology of liberation and includes a discussion about the materiality of salvation. Here the author draws upon the works of Miroslav Volf and Douglas Petersen. While liberation theology prioritizes the social circumstances of the needy, the Pentecostal theology of praxis focuses more on spiritual and physical features. As Robeck explains, by focusing on the materiality of salvation,

Pentecostals have shifted from their classical beliefs in the better life after death towards enjoyment of life in this current physical realm.

In chapter 2, Robeck traces the historical development of Pentecostalism in El Salvador. Especially noteworthy are his corrections of erroneous references in the historical accounts of Pentecostalism and the exact arrivals of the first Pentecostal missionaries. Schism played a prominent role in the growth of diverse Protestant and Pentecostal churches. This coincided with El Salvador's espousal of a more liberal democracy and the dire need of the locals to liberate themselves from the centrality of the Roman Catholic Church, whose dominance was felt not only in religion but also in socio-economic and political spheres. From Robeck's historical narrative, it was as if El Salvadorians embraced Pentecostalism as their gateway to liberalism. The chapter gives a glimpse of altruism through various social engagement initiatives started by earlier Protestant missionaries in El Salvador. They worked with two primary and equal intentions – to ensure the mission's growth and benefit the indigenes. Thus, they built orphanages and schools. To get closer to and form connections with the local community, they learned their languages and used local people rather than foreigners in their mission duties.

Chapter 3, entitled "Three AIC Congregations Partnering with ENLACE", is the significant part of the book as it genuinely exemplifies what constitutes a theology of praxis. Robeck presents empirical research on the three churches and their pastors employing a narrative approach. The churches are AIC in La Loma, pastored by Felix Amaya; Tabernáculo Bíblico Salem El Espino, pastored by Santos Carpio; and El Buen Samaritano in Las Delicias, pastored by Miguel Duran. All three pastors had an inadequate education, came from an impoverished background and a large family, and struggled with losses, disability, and rejection to rise above their poverty. One compelling feature in these stories is that, despite their achievements, these three pastors demonstrate a genuine humility and a lack of the mega-charisma often seen among Pentecostal leaders.

Chiefly, this chapter offers a window into the contributions of these three churches to the amelioration of their neighbourhoods via various charitable initiatives in partnership with ENLACE, demonstrating how the pastors and their communities all took responsibility for their lives. The community engagements encompassed road renovation, pipe-borne water, educational infrastructures, and small-scale agricultural and livestock projects that service the wider community and not just the church and its members. Such accomplishments helped to propel the rapid growth of the memberships of the three churches.

In chapter 4, Robeck highlights various methods used by the three pastors to express their theology of praxis. He identifies two dominant themes from his data analysis – sermons and songs – which focus on using Christ's work to justify their actions. They demonstrate that a Pentecostal theology of praxis is not solely limited to community social engagement; it also encompasses the theoretical application of scriptural values and teachings through sermons and songs as channels of dogmatic communication to members. Robeck's analysis shows the appropriation of songs for evangelism and as a constant reminder to members of God's ever-present support.

Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Praxis is the first introduction to a Pentecostal theology of praxis. It reinforces how Pentecostal socio-religious services to the community need to be when serving others. By distinguishing between liberation theology and the meaning of social engagement, Robeck offers a profound opening into the Pentecostal theology of praxis. Because Pentecostalism is primarily regarded as especially attractive to the marginalized of society, Robeck's framework for a Pentecostal theology of praxis espouses the movement as holistically active towards improving people's lives. It is one thing to teach the gospel and another to deploy the practicalities of the gospel via concrete actions benefitting both members and non-members. Robeck attempts to distinguish between liberation theology and the Pentecostal theology of praxis. The stories of the three churches depict a distinct sense of collective efforts towards the emancipation of ordinary people. Moreover, by taking a theoretical perspective, the author shows that a Pentecostal theology of praxis involves more than the physical aspect of empowerment. The people's transformation extends further through sermons and songs from these churches, all working to improve their lives. However, Robeck himself acknowledges not all AIC affiliated churches are involved in praxis.

I observed two main weaknesses in *Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Praxis*. First, although religion has played a significant role in El Salvador's development, Robeck fails to delve deeply into the country's broader history that might better weave together the story. Second, the author mentions ENLACE's partnership with the three churches, but does not clarify its contributions to their social engagement activities.

Overall, I recommend *Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Praxis* to anyone engaged in Pentecostal practical theology. Though scholars of Latin American Pentecostalism will benefit more from this book, given its geographical orientation, it will also be of interest to academics and students studying Pentecostalism globally.