

*Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* by Simon Chan. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998. Paper, 300 pp., including appendices. ISBN: 0-8308-1542-2. US\$19.99.

The title of Simon Chan's book, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life*, may lead one to assume that it follows after the recent interest in spiritual formation popularized by writers like Dallas Willard and Richard Foster. However, the book goes beyond the approach taken by authors like Willard and Foster. It discusses spiritual theology as a systematic discipline covering not only the practical side of Christian spiritual formation but the theological bases for Christian spirituality as well.

This is an ambitious book that goes for an all-embracing spirituality that is at once both theology and praxis, both eastern and western, both material and spiritual, both Evangelical and Catholic, both ascetic and charismatic, both individual and communal, etc. He also tries hard not to fall into the trap of reductionism, avoiding the "nothing but" approach (p. 57). However, although Chan makes an effort to bring a balanced understanding to Christian spirituality, Chan's Asian and Evangelical-Pentecostal heritage comes across quite clearly in this book. He hints at a personal agenda for this book, and, that is to argue for a continuing rightful place for Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality within the larger Christian spiritual tradition:

The point I wish to make here is that Pentecostal spirituality is not just a twentieth-century reality that has to be reckoned with because it has become so widespread. Rather, it encapsulates an essential component of the Christian tradition that the mainstream largely ignored in the past. It must take its place as an essential part of a comprehensive spiritual theology. But, Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality, if it is to have long-term viability, must be incorporated into the larger Christian tradition. An enthusiastic spirituality that is developed in isolation from an ascetical spirituality cannot be sustainable for long, nor can it have universal applicability. This explains why Quakerism, the most consistent outworking of enthusiasm, appeals only to a limited group of people. It may also explain why the charismatic dimension tends to be only a passing phase in the spiritual journey of some Christians who began their Christian life as Pentecostals. Ideally, then, there should be no distinction between charismatic and noncharismatic Christians; every Christian should be both a charismatic and an ascetic (p. 39).

The book is divided into two parts: A "theoretical" first part followed by a more "practical" second part. The first part considers some

of the major theological categories that Chan considers to be foundational to a working understanding of the Christian's spiritual life: God, man, salvation and community. The second part consists of Chan's suggestions of spiritual exercises to actualize the conceptual aspects of Christian spirituality described in Part 1.

Chan sees spirituality as ultimately dependent on theology. While he admits to a dialectic relationship between theology and spirituality, theology clearly has priority in his framework (p. 94). For him, a spirituality that is not founded in theology is religious routine and therefore he believes that "we need a theology to help us in 'redeeming the routine' so that every aspect of ordinary is fully integrated with faith" (p. 141). Therefore, for Chan, "the primary focus should be on the growth of the theological virtues and only derivatively on the cardinal virtues" (94). Thus, it is only right that he focuses the first half of his book on the theological issues that are foundational to Christian spirituality. While he claims to have chosen four major theological categories (God, man, salvation, and community) to bear upon his discussion in Part 2, it is his Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology that have the largest role in Chan's spiritual theology.

In his suggestions for the practical outworking of the Christian life in Part 2, Chan calls for an ascetic approach to a Christian "rule of life" (ch. 10). By that, he does not mean a rigid, legalistic and unvarying regimentation for every Christian. Chan allows for both personal and communal rules as well as "breaks and relaxation" (p. 197), while keeping the rules. Indeed, he sees "a rule with a place for the exceptional" as a "larger rule" (p. 197). He remains true to the "charismatic dimension that is open to surprises from God" (p. 9). For Chan, the gradual spiritual growth promoted by the Christian rule of life "does not preclude the surprising action of God...whereby some saints are catapulted several steps upward without much effort on their part." (p. 239) Despite that, he insists that "no spiritual theology can be successfully implemented without an ascetism of small steps" (p. 239).

The book has a rather wide coverage with extensive footnoting and very helpful indexes of persons and subjects. Chan quotes liberally from a variety of theologians of early and recent church history although he could perhaps do more with biblical quotations to support his arguments. Even so, Chan's thoughts are in many ways seminal and provocative. His seminal thoughts would no doubt benefit from a more expansive treatment than what a 300-page book can afford. He is cautious with his words, often opting for precise theological jargon. It is the kind of book

where one has to slowly read every word. Perhaps it will take a few more readings before the full impact of his thoughts become apparent.

The Pentecostal reader will be challenged with Chan's critique of Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality as being in danger of becoming "truncated" because of its understanding of the *ordo salutis* as distinct stages rather than as simultaneous, ongoing processes (p. 88). The Pentecostal experience should not stand in the way of the Pentecostal Christian looking beyond their self-defined identities. This book is particularly helpful for the Pentecostal Christian (or for the matter, any Christian) who seeks a broader understanding of his or her role in the larger church. It can provide an overall understanding of the all the major spiritual traditions within Christendom. Quoting freely from Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and desiring to highlight the positive elements of these ancient traditions, Chan may easily be criticized by his own Evangelical-Pentecostal brothers and sisters as having moved too far away from the free church traditions. However, Chan is right in that Pentecostals, in their own traditioning process, can learn from the Catholic and Orthodox spiritual traditions. In fact, Chan reminds the reader that Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality did not spring out from a twentieth-century vacuum but has its roots in the various Christian spiritual traditions; including the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

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