Starting with the Spirit
ed Stephen Pickard and Gordon Preece
(contributors: D Lyle Dabney, Victor Pfitzner, Gordon Watson, Gerard Kelly, Duncan Reid, Winifred Wing Han Lamb, Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, Denis Edwards)
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Reviewer: Rev Peter Lockhart

Starting with the Spirit is a collation of essays from the Australian Theological Forum’s conference ‘Tracking the Spirit in Tradition and Contemporary Thought’, which was held in Canberra in 1999. The contributors come from a variety of theological backgrounds and include scholars from both Australia and abroad. Starting with the Spirit is a worthwhile read for those who are interested not only in the study of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) but also future directions for the church.

It is not my intention to critique each of the essays contained within this volume; suffice it to say I found each of the papers to be well written, stimulating and challenging. Rather, I will focus on some of the major themes. The themes contained within the essays indicate that this volume should be valued not just as some sort of esoteric theological text but as an aid to the liturgical, pastoral and evangelical life of the church.

First, however, a comment on the title. As a minister in a congregational placement from the Uniting Church, the first thing that jumped out at me was the title of the book: Starting with the Spirit. How can we start with the Spirit when we must first know the Son and understand the cross? However, as I surveyed the essays I came to acknowledge that my initial response might be part of the wider problem. We in the West are too quick to dismiss the place of the Holy Spirit or, at the very least, subordinate or subsume its role into the work of the Father and/or of the Son. The Trinity becomes a duality plus the other one. This problem, prevalent in western theology, is a major theme that finds voice in many of the essays.

There can be no doubt that the Holy Spirit has been traditionally seen as the somewhat poorer relation of the Father and of the Son. As the editors so eloquently put it, ‘whether the glass has been seen as half empty or half full within the Western tradition, it has still been half a glass’. It is important to note that, while the temptation could have been to overcompensate and swing away from the first and second persons of the Trinity, the authors seem to maintain a balance. As the authors elucidate the issues associated with the ‘forgetting’ of the Spirit in the West, they provide a clearer picture of what it might mean to give a more equal footing to pneumatology without denigrating the Trinity.

In D Lyle Dabney’s series of four essays, which comprise the first major section of the book, the theme of the lack of an appropriate theology of the Spirit is addressed. He calls for a theology of the third article of the Nicene Creed. He identifies the problems that have developed in Roman Catholicism and Reformed traditions as they have emphasised the first and second persons of the Trinity respectively. Dabney’s own influences become more apparent as he gives priority and prior place to the Spirit and goes on in his second essay to develop a pneumatology of the cross. Dabney’s ‘Systematic Exposition’ provides the reader with much food for thought and ties well

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into the second and third parts of the book, which connect into tradition and contemporary issues.

While the major theme involves addressing the absence of an in-depth pneumatology, a second major theme, which at times is less obvious, is carried throughout. This second theme has far more to do with the question of the ability of the church to redefine itself in the face of the breakdown of Enlightenment philosophies, the rise of post-modernism and pluralism, and the accompanying break between western culture and the church. The question of whether the metanarrative of the gospel of Jesus Christ can be given a voice in a pluralistic age is vital. As Dabney reminds us, we live in an age ‘in which all claims to continuity or unity of reality or experience are dismissed and difference and discontinuity are emphasised’.²

A third theme, not surprisingly, is the role the Spirit plays in unity. In Dabney’s theology of the third article, the unity of the Spirit with the Son is explored, as is the Spirit’s sustaining presence in the creation. Watson emphasises the Eastern understanding of the connection between the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the creature and liturgy. Kelly adds to the theme as he links the Holy Spirit to the ecumenical endeavour, while Victorin-Vangerud and Edwards tie the Spirit to justice and ecology. Thus, carried throughout is the binding presence of the Spirit as it acts in concert with the Father and Son to create and re-create the creation.

Of all the essays in the collection, the one that sounded most discordant was ‘The Self in Postmodernity: Truth, Transcendence and the Promise of Dialogue’ by Winifred Wing Han Lamb. While this essay did seem the most out of place, Lamb raises the problem of the distance between a Christian outlook and a post-modern culture and mind that does not want to acknowledge metanarratives or the existence of the transcendent, let alone dialogue with those who attach themselves to such ideas. Thus, while Lamb’s paper seems to stray from the theme in some ways, in others she is bringing before theologians and Christians generally the problem of connection and proclamation in our modern age. In her essay and across the rest of the papers a question lingered in my mind: What do we do after Christendom?

Overall, the book resonates with its title, to start with Spirit. The reader is led into the possibilities of God and the possibilities of new approaches for the church. It is unfortunate, however, that unlike Doctrines and Dogma (the first volume in the ATF series ‘Task of Theology Today’), no contributor was found from the Eastern tradition. Gordon Watson’s essay does bring something of the Eastern Orthodox position as he appeals to St Basil in his examination of liturgy. Nonetheless, given that many of the authors do connect the issues in the West with the *filioque*, the book could have been enhanced significantly by the inclusion of a perspective from the Eastern tradition.

In congregational life we are seeing a trend to disregard denominational boundaries, people are seeking and focusing on experiences of God, vague discussions of spirits and spirituality are in vogue, while traditional liturgy is being challenged and in some churches being completely ignored. These are all big issues for the church, as are the problems of contextualising the Christian narrative in the Australian culture, which would rather ignore the transcendent. *Starting with the Spirit* may not have all the answers, but it does provide another starting point for those of us asking where to for the church in this third millennium.

² *Ibid.* p 10
Starting with the Spirit is a worthwhile addition to the collection of both the scholar and the parish minister, because it contains a range of perspectives on current issues for the church. The book is aimed at those who have some theological background, and the contributors reflect this in the choice of vocabulary. Nonetheless, I would argue that this book is certainly not just an esoteric exercising of minds seeking God but a genuine seeking of what it means for the church to be the people of God in a new age. In this way the book is pertinent to the wider church. I would recommend Starting with the Spirit as a book suitable to anyone seeking a greater depth of understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit and the directions for the church.