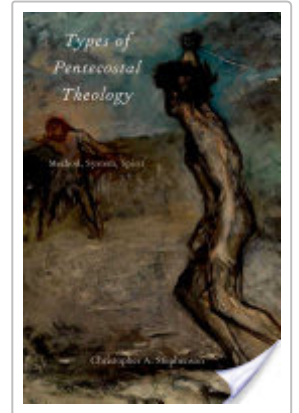


Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit (book review)

Books | 5/9/2018 @ 16:00

Christopher A. Stephenson, *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*, Academy series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).



This is a slightly revised form of the author's dissertation defended in 2009 at Marquette University. The book needs to be bought, but the original dissertation is available [here](#) for free. Stephenson is voice from the current young wave in Pentecostal scholarship, which tries to combat its perplexity about the polymorphous nature of Pentecostal theological method with attempts to organize it. Thus we should not be surprised that one of Stephenson's "classmates" in the PhD course was L. William Oliverio who has done good job in [his typological account of Pentecostal hermeneutics](#)

Note: The abstract of the book below is a little bit too long. I wanted to capture some important details for my personal needs. You can skip it and jump straight to the book's assessment at the bottom.

Stephenson classifies Pentecostal systematic theology into four categories and discusses each of them in one chapter. Chapter 1 is devoted to "Bible doctrines method" of Pearlman, E. S. Williams and Arrington. Chapter 2 addresses Land's and Chan's approaches which are driven by the overlap between theology and spirituality. Chapter 3 discusses Macchia's theology, whose starting point is the kingdom of God. Chapter 4 considers Yong's method of making pneumatology the starting point for philosophical and fundamental theology. In each chapter distinctives are underlined and respective literature surveyed. The last chapter consists of his own creative proposal.

First chapter (11–27) is dedicated to the "Bible doctrines approach" represented mainly by Myer Pearlman, E. S. Williams and French Arrington. These theologians "take the material for their systematic theologies almost exclusively from the Bible," for systematic theology is but a little more than "topical organization of the Bible's contents" (11).

Pearlman's famous *Knowing the Doctrines of the Bible* (400 pages) was written to give basic doctrinal instruction to second generation Pentecostals. Pearlman's references often point to David S. Clarke, A. J. Gordon, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Pearlman contended that theology and religion are both equally necessary for Christian life and neither of them should be neglected. **E. S. Williams** is one of the most famous Pentecostal leader. His three-volume *Systematic Theology* (800 pages) was first written for his use in the classroom, when he taught at Central Bible College. Much more often than Pearlman does Williams quote significant voices from Christian history. He quotes Church fathers, the reformers, and proponents of major theological traditions in order to show his students "not the theological thought of one school of interpreters only, but a general view; also that they might know the various doctrinal positions, and the reasons why they are believed" (14). Williams sometimes merely repeats these other perspectives, sometimes he synthesizes his own position.

French L. Arrington is an accomplished scholar in biblical languages. His *Christian Doctrine* is more sophisticated than works of the previous two proponents. Arrington goes further than they when he states that Pentecostals have a distinctive "decidedly Pentecostal" perspective to offer on all doctrine.

Pearlman, Williams and Arrington assume very close relationship between scripture and systematic theology. The Bible is like "a field of data". Their bible reading requires either harmonization (e.g. Pearlman's treatment of Ex 24:9f and J 1:18) or assumption of some critical solution yet to be discovered. Pearlman simply holds that the Bible does not give rise to Christian doctrines, but simply contains them. Dogmas are therefore mere formulations of biblical doctrines.

Scripture is seen as the primary authoritative guide to the knowledge about God. It is obviously divinely inspired, understanding of it is conditioned by illumination. Prophets for example might have been inspired to prophecy, but not illuminated to understand (19). According to Arrington, inspiration is "that which guarantees the preservation of the truth of revelation" (20).

None of the three proponents would claim that Bible is the only source of theological knowledge. Pearlman discusses approvingly philosophical evidence for the existence of God and speaks of experience as the formative factor in formation of Christian doctrine. Williams speaks about intuition, tradition, and reason. Arrington describes pentecostal biblical interpretation as “pneumatic”, which means that the Spirit deepens insight and makes it alive for the respective reader.

Stephenson argues that this Pentecostal “Bible doctrines method” is somewhat similar to theological thought of the nineteenth century Reformed theologian Charles Hodge. This is especially apparent in Pearlman.

Whether Pearlman read Hodge himself or other sources ultimately dependent on Hodge, it seems clear that Hodge's inductive method influenced Pearlman. At times, even the word choice is so similar that one wonders if Pearlman had Hodge's first volume in front of him and summarized portions of it. Given Pearlman's tendency not to document his sources thoroughly, the lack of any mention to Hodge by name by no means excludes the possibility that his volume served as a template for Pearlman's opening considerations of the nature of theology. (23)

The Bible doctrines method offers little space for theological development. “Deductive reasoning is rare, and there is little speculation beyond the bounds of what scripture seems to state plainly,” Stephenson writes (25). Theology has little chance to engage contemporary philosophy or to acknowledge any theological development or even theological situatedness of its own proponents. Readings of Scripture are preferably flat and equalized with all other statements in the Bible. One of the most detrimental effects is, according to Stephenson, absence of any special treatment of eschatology and pneumatology, two of the strongest theological strands in Pentecostal tradition. Experience supposed to be formed by the scriptural doctrines, but prohibited from influencing their development. In other words, pentecostal spirituality is not allowed to inform theology in any meaningful way (esp. Pearlman and Williams, 26)

Second chapter (28–58) describes systematic theologies that give prominence to the relationship between theology and spirituality. Stephenson gives special attention here to approaches of Stephen J. Land and Simon K. H. Chan. The first one mentioned describes pentecostal theology *as* spirituality itself, the second one links spirituality to systematic and liturgical theology (28).

Steven J. Land is professor of Pentecostal theology at Pentecostal Theological Seminary, Cleveland, TN. His *Pentecostal Spirituality* (1993) includes introduction to Pentecostal spirituality *as* theology, explanation of its strong connection to eschatology and pneumatology and constructive proposals for its advancement. (Land adheres to the already-not-yet eschatology while shunning dispensational speculations.) This book is, in fact, a “mild apology for pentecostal theology” (29). Land argues that Pentecostalism as a Christian tradition in its own right, which traces its origins through John Wesley back to both Eastern and Western sources of early Christianity. Land draws strongly on the first decade of pentecostal movement, which he sees as “the heart rather than the infancy of pentecostal spirituality and theology” (30). According to Land, one's spirituality consists of “the triadic relationship among one's beliefs, practices, and affections” and integrates orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and ortopathy (31). Land therefore wants to overcome the false dichotomy between spirituality and theology. Pentecostal theology is this being described as having little concern with speculation and second-order reflection and much greater concern with expression of faith in folk-religion style of its beginnings.

Affections “have their end in God (objective), involve relationships with God and fellow Christians (relational), and characterize the Christian life (dispositional)” (32). Affections are evoked by prayer, which is therefore necessary for theological process. Prayer can be with intelligible words, without words (Romans 8) and with unintelligible words. Central for Land's theological vision is passion for the Kingdom, which governs affections of gratitude, compassion, and courage.

The confession of the “soon coming King” encourages belief in other tenets of the Full Gospel. Eschatology is therefore complementary to pneumatology, which in turn is starting point of Pentecostal theology, because “the Holy Spirit makes pentecostal spirituality possible by giving coherence to beliefs, practices, and affections” (36) and Pentecostal theology is nothing else than spirituality itself. The Spirit thus has epistemological priority, but experience must not be the norm of theology and should be controlled by Scripture.

Land draws on social trinitarian accounts of perichoresis and “offers the social Trinity as a model that might accentuate the church's unity and diversity” (37). The church is described “eschatological trinitarian fellowship” which mirrors God, who is “eschatological trinitarian presence” (37).

Land's historical accounts are dependent mainly on Hollenweger, Dayton and Faupel. He is concerned with affluence, which has made Pentecostals socially accommodated. He wants to return to the apocalypticism and spirituality of the first decade pentecostalism. Land's notion of narrativity of early Pentecostal spirituality is somewhat continuous with Frei's description of pre-critical mindset.

Land's account of the basic tenor of pentecostal spirituality is a veritable historical instantiation of Frei's description of the pre-critical assumption that an overarching story unites the biblical texts and that one should conform one's self-understanding and worldview to that story rather than vice versa. (41)

Simon K. H. Chan is Earnest Lau Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. Chan argues in one of his books (2000) that in order to pass their values onto successive generations, Pentecostals must “engage in the integrative thinking of systematic theology and to develop a spiritual theology” (42). He wants “a traditional, normative liturgy in pentecostal churches” (41). Spiritual theology is both specific discipline which wants to understand processes of spiritual growth and also broadly a manner in which to undertake all theological reflection. Chan writes:

In a normative spirituality the line between dogma and devotion is no longer clearly drawn, and there is freedom of movement between the two. Theological reflection and prayer are no longer discrete activities but exist in a dynamic, ongoing relationship in which one activity enriches the other, stimulating the Christian to new insights and greater fervor. (43)

Pentecostals should, according to Chan, engage in systematic theology, for example by integration of pauline and lukan pneumatology. They also should, on the other hand develop spiritual theology “in which reflecting on God's nature and praying to God are indistinguishable acts” (44). There may be spiritualities focused on individual persons in the Trinity, but the ultimate goal must be fully trinitarian spirituality. In a similar fashion, believers must maintain their particularity and relationality. Asian context may benefit from hierarchical conception of the Trinity and from such definition of the Church that doesn't presume a liberal-democratic state.

Chan contends that Pentecostal spirituality must “give far more weight to regulation than to crisis experiences, although without excluding them altogether” (47). More attention must be given to the rule of life (*regula*) and to ongoing training (*askesis*). This relates to the idea of “traditioning”, which is necessary for passing Christian faith to successive generations. Traditioning is larger context of spiritual formation, which incorporates systematic theological orientation and spiritual direction. Failure to develop systematic theology and to interpret pentecostal beliefs result in failure in traditioning. It is “disparity between experience and explanation” (Chan, 49), which causes the problem.

For example, Chan takes a look at the baptism in the Holy Spirit and glossolalia. Pentecostals relied mainly on the Book of Acts to support their position, which might not be enough. But just as the Fathers extrapolated the doctrine of the Trinity from the canonical context, Pentecostals could allow this canonical witness to inform their pneumatology. Even if they declared absence of a definitive proof-text, what might help is “integrative thinking of systematic theology” (50). Chan attempts to situate these pentecostal doctrines in Christian spiritual tradition, which classically includes purgation, illumination, and union. Pentecostal version is not dissimilar, as it offers stages of conversion, sanctification, baptism in the Holy Spirit. Glossolalia may then be not a mere empirical proof, but a “most appropriate expression to signify the paradigm shift that baptism in the Holy Spirit entails” (51).

Stephenson takes issue with Chan's sidelining of the Spirit as functionally subordinated to the Father, as it might nullify his legitimacy as the starting point of theologizing. In the final summary Stephenson takes some further issues. Land “implies that pentecostal theology is nothing more than pentecostal spirituality” and Chan “sometimes mutes characteristically pentecostal perspectives by integrating them into the wider Christian spiritual tradition” (58). Stephenson plans to fix these issues in his own proposal.

Third chapter (59–81) is dedicated to Frank Macchia, professor of theology at Vanguard University of Southern California. Macchia's systematic theology is set against the background of the kingdom of God. Macchia suggests that pentecostals should emphasize not only the miraculous which is at work with individuals, but also God's interest in corporate realms of human life.

His theology of glossolalia is the most profound scholarly treatment of this topic to the date. Macchia contends that pentecostal primary emphasis was not on glossolalia per se, but on intensification of God's presence, which glossolalia

regularly accompanied. The theophany of Pentecost has its counterpart in Old Testament theophany at Sinai, which was too underlined by the symbols of fire and smoke. Pentecost is thus a truly eschatological theophany, a *kairos* event.

Glossolalia must be understood in wider context of Spiritual gifts (1Cor 12–14), which are given to a community, not an individual. It is a “mystery that cuts through differences of gender, class and culture to reveal a solidarity that is essential to our very being and that is revealed to us in God's own self-disclosure” (Macchia, 63). Glossolalia is also connected to a theology of the cross, because “it is Jesus' death and resurrection that makes Pentecost an *eschatological* theophany rather than merely one more theophany in a succession” (63). Now Pentecost points to remaking of all things, including bonds of social status. Glossolalia serves as initial evidence that the new creation is already present. Macchia also contends that since glossolalia realizes God's presence, it has rather sacramental than evidential value. “[G]lossolalia—as oral/aural speech frequently accompanied by visible demonstrations and reactions—has more of a sacramental than an evidential relationship to baptism in the Holy Spirit” (63–4). Pentecostals practically experience glossolalia, laying of hands and foot washing as sacraments, although they avoid that term.

Macchia calls for a theological reflection of the relationship between glossolalia and the spirit baptism. He decries polemical approach in defending the initial evidence doctrine. Instead he wants to focus on its function, which in the Book of Acts was to sign crossing of the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. “Glossolalia empowers believers to groan with creation in anticipation of ultimate redemption” (65).

Macchia's soteriology since 2006 is understood with the kingdom of God. Macchia sees justification and sanctification as overlapping metaphors, not two distinct phases. “The righteousness of Christ is truly the life of the Spirit, and we receive the kingdom of God and its righteousness through the Spirit's liberating and renewing presence” (67). Macchia then wishes to integrate Luke-Acts with other canonical witnesses. What Luke knows as baptism in the Holy Spirit is present in Matthew, Paul, and John as God's sanctifying grace united with the inauguration of the kingdom in power. This conception is ultimately trinitarian. “The Spirit is the kingdom that transforms creation, and Christ is its king” (69).

Macchia wants to situate baptism in the Holy Spirit in the larger context of pneumatology, not just as empowerment for mission, but as soteriological and eschatological element. Spirit baptism transcends the church and is best understood in context of the kingdom of God, in eschatological framework, as we can see in Matthew 3. Understanding this is essential for understanding salvific work of Jesus. “[T]he understanding of Jesus as the unique Spirit-baptizer is an indispensable part of the gospel, and those who fail to acknowledge him as such may also overlook the continuity between the kingdom and the church” (73).

Macchia surprisingly affirms historical perspective in the formation of catholicity. History of the family of God cannot be ignored. This does not imply, however, that pentecostals weren't born of the Holy Spirit.

Stephenson notes that Macchia is largely dependent on Johann and Christoph Blumhardt, especially in his emphasis on social liberation. Among other influences he lists Jan Milíč Lochman, Moltman, Tillich, etc. Stephenson's final assessment is ambiguous. He commends his ecumenism and his willingness to engage historical theological material in his work on justification, but then he takes issue with Macchia's denial of realized eschatology by means of the church-kingdom dialectic. It would have been helpful, Stephenson suggests, to explain in what way then is the Spirit “outstanding as the fullness of God's kingdom” (79). Further issue is taken with Macchia's insufficient emphasis on Spirit-christology and with his mediocre engagement of other systematic theologians, e.g Chan and Yong.

Chapter four (82–110) is devoted to Amos Yong, professor of theology and mission and director of the Center for Missiological Research at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA. Yong is a leading advocate for pentecostal's participation in interreligious dialogue. Through the lenses of his foundational pneumatology Yong claims that the Spirit may be at work in other religions in spite the lack of explicitly Christian confession.

Yong is probably the most prolific theologian of pentecostal tradition with a wide range of interests which Stephenson succinctly surveys. Similarly to Macchia, Yong's constructive proposals have pneumatological orientation.

Yong wants to distinguish between foundational pneumatology as a starting point and systematic pneumatology as a mere sub-discipline of systematic theology. Foundational pneumatology “addresses questions of fundamental theology and engages all interlocutors in the public domain pursuing questions concerning divine presence and agency in the world, even persons outside the church” (87). Foundational pneumatology has no a priori warrants and is hence subject to verification. It

includes “construction of metaphysics and ontology that are characterized by relationality” (87). Yong adopts Irenaean model of Father's two hands and Augustinian model of the Spirit as the mutual love between Father and Son. The proposal is characteride by rationality, relationality, and importantly also dynamism, which he underlines by modified version of Whitehead's process ontology.

Yong's metaphysics and ontology are realist, not nominalist. They exist apart from being known. At the same time, Yong emphasizes fallibilism of human knowledge and of his pneumatological imagination. This combination enables interpretation, because a clear distinction is drawn between real world and perspectival fallible knowledge. All interpretation takes place within a community, which prevents naïve realism and epistemological pluralism. Ultimately “it is the Spirit who both enables human minds to understand the one world in which they all live and who drives the discourse, exchange, and dialogue necessary to pursue consensus” (92).

Yong's theology of religions is driven by two factors: “(1) his desire to cultivate a pneumatological orientation in theology of religions and (2) foundational pneumatology's assumption about the Spirit's relationship to the created order” (93). Spirit is God's way of being present in the world. Christians must, however, develop a theology of discernment, since the demonic may also be active. Discernment must overlap to moral and ethical categories of outcomes and consequences.

Stephenson takes a look at Yong's constructive discernment on the examples of Buddhism and Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religious tradition. One of the Umbandist practice is encounters with spirit mediums, which possibly results in healings, greater senses of peace and tranquility, and other benefits or virtues. Yong states that the Spirit seems to be working to some degree in the Umbandist practices, but he also adds that the Umbandists “should also have the prerogative to reach their own conclusions about the transcendent realities to which their symbols and rituals ultimately refer” (95). Similarly with Buddhism, Yong compares Eastern Orthodox notions of theosis with Theravada Buddhism's notions of enlightenment. Both traditions practice fasting and self-denial to certain extent with different goals. For Eastern Orthodoxy, the goal is unity with God and resistance to devil's temptations, in Buddhism it is deliverance from the flesh. Both traditions also display dramatic differences in theological categories, which is apparent especially in Theravada Buddhism's rejection of the divine. The question for Yong is not whether world religions are salvific, but whether they are “divinely providential instruments designed for various purposes” (97).

Yong notes that pentecostals have seldom discussed ecclesiology, which in pentecostalism is closely related to soteriology. Identity of the church is connected to the question of who is saved and how.

In his theology of disability, Yong suggests that to see *imago Dei* in rational or stewardship capabilities is to say that disabled people bear the image of God to a lesser extent. Instead of classical notions, Yong suggests that *imago Dei* is “the human's capacity for relationships with God and with fellow humans, something that intellectual disabilities do not necessarily diminish” (103). The question is whether Down Syndrome would be removed by resurrection or not, particularly if Down Syndrome shapes one's personal integrity and defines his continuity.

Yong's particular interest is also in dialogue between religion and science. This dialogue is shaped by fallibilism of Yong's foundational pneumatology, when Yong doesn't attempt to “proceed along the line of a priori necessities that may unduly privilege a particular kind of theological reasoning over scientific methodologies” (105). Yong affirms that mental processes are dependent on brain activity and for example consults neurosciences to ponder the nature of love.

Stephenson commends Yong for recognizing hermeneutics as more than biblical exegesis and for acknowledging priority of some biblical texts (e.g. Lukan narratives) over others. At the same time, Stephenson notes that while Yong declares that “metaphysics predicated on the category of substance is no longer tenable in the late modern world” (108), he still continues to use theological categories such as filioque, perichoresis, intra-trinitarian processions, etc., which are strongly dependent on substance metaphysics. The question which Stephenson wants to ask is how are these categories to be used in Yong's relational metaphysics.

Chapter five (111–130) – “*Regula Spiritualitatis, Regula Doctrinae*” – is Stephenson's own “Contribution to Pentecostal Theological Method”, as its subtitle indicates. Pentecostals often don't realize how methodological pathways influence content of their theologies. And while theologians discussed in this book display increasing methodological awareness, Stephenson feels that there is an element in pentecostal theological method that has not yet been adequately discussed. The question is: What are we going to teach our children? Stephenson takes up the concept of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which

can mean both that the law of prayer norms the law of belief (thus Roman Catholicism), or that the law of belief norms the law of prayer (thus Protestantism) (113). It is the question of relationship between spirituality and doctrine.

Stephenson wants Pentecostals to acknowledge mutual relationship between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* as a dialectics between *regula spiritualitatis* and *regula doctrinae*. He admits that scripted liturgy will not be popular among Pentecostals and that official theological statements in Pentecostalism are difficult to nuance from a theological department. But:

If pentecostal theologians allow spirituality and doctrine to stand in a proper relationship with each other, the results can be the articulation of doctrines that are not antagonistic to the aspects of spirituality that are intentionally embraced by a pentecostal community, as well as doctrine that can in turn inform and if necessary correct aspects of a pentecostal community's spirituality that need to be adjusted. (116)

An example of this reciprocal relationship can be seen in Galatians 3,1–5, where Paul asks Galatians “to adopt consciously the theological viewpoint that they unconsciously presuppose in their spirituality” (117). Stephenson lists similar example in Basil of Caesarea. Now some core aspects of Pentecostal spirituality are as follows:

1. The Holy Spirit is present among the people of God to transform them, especially on rebirth and renewal in the Spirit and the sanctifying work of the Spirit.
2. The kingdom of God has broken into history and the gospel must be preached with urgency.
3. The transforming activity of the Holy Spirit is available to everyone without difference.

Stephenson then turns his attention to the Last Supper in light of pentecostal spirituality. In this light, Lord's supper is more than remembrance. “Of all of the passages in the New Testament that refer to the supper (Matt 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22,14–20; I Cor 10:14–22; 11:23–34), only two of them mention ἄνάμνησις (Luke 22:19 and I Cor 11:24)” (120). Now doctrine of the supper which realizes that Spirit transforms people of God will have to address the question of God's presence in the Supper. The question, however, is how is Christ present in the supper, if “neither the Synoptic Gospels nor I Corinthians point to Christ's *presence*, but rather to his *absence*” (123). This brings Stephenson to eschatological considerations: There is a tension of Lord's supper, if once again it has been celebrated without the Lord. Jesus is absent, so we groan. Presence of an ordained minister is not necessary, it is not even implied in I Corinthians 11:17–34. Not a minister, but “[o]nly discipleship and theological instruction can ensure the necessary reverence for the supper” (125). This might be important, because the number of small groups that meet at homes for worship on other days than Sunday. Lord's supper may be crucial in maintaining the emphasis on eschatology.

Conclusion. Pentecostals must shake off the Saul's armor. “Like David facing Goliath, the metaphor continues, pentecostals need to discard the armor and weaponry that encumber them and take up the stones and sling needed to slay Goliath” (131). This is not to say that pentecostals should insulate themselves, but the question remains whether they will use tools of other theological traditions as “Saul's armor” to slay thousands or as “David's sling” to slay tens of thousands.

To assess this book is to ponder paradise, it is a walkaway. Now seriously, this is a very well written and knowledgeably structured handbook, in which Stephenson presents best of the current Pentecostal theology in both readable and punctual manner. Its problems are probably connected to its genre. It is that kind of intellectual anthology which attempts to exhaust the field which is way more immense than it would seem at the first glance. One wonders where are Stanley Horton, Anthony Palma and others. One could also ask why has the author limited himself to “full blood” Pentecostals and excluded J. Rodman Williams or Clark Pinnock, who have exercised major influence on Pentecostal theology, both popular and academic.

Of course, the author disclaims right at the beginning that this simply is a limitation of his study. But one could then ask whether “pentecostalness” of a theologian really can be bound to his ministerial credentials and not to some distinct spiritual-theological orientation distilled from the tradition's first years and attested by particular doctrinal beliefs and goals. I was missing this discussion particularly in the case of Amos Yong, whom I admire and acknowledge as a genius of Pentecostalism, but in whom I still can't fully discern the Pentecostal genius.

Another particular feature I was hoping to see here is some sort of descriptive account of the clash between the old school second generation Pentecostal theology (Pearlman, Arrington, et al.) and the current theologies of new generations of

Pentecostal theologians. (Yes, the first one mentioned is still alive and well, even though second generation Pentecostals are already with the Lord.) It is obvious for anyone within the tradition that these two groups provide different sets of answers to many contemporary questions. Hence it would have been beneficial to compare and unite or divorce the two. **To summarize my comments, there still is a question of Pentecostal identity, which somehow escapes its clear answer not only in this book, but in the general environment of the current Pentecostal theological discussion.**

In the end, this is a beautiful and extremely valuable book for anyone who wants to read an accurate account of most of the current trends in Pentecostal theology. Make no mistake; it is intelligible, but very dense reading. Nonetheless, you will not be disappointed!

<https://selah.cz/books/types-of-pentecostal-theology-method-system-spirit-book-review/>