

Book Review

*Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity
and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda*

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Wolfgang Vondey

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Reviewed by Tony Richie, D.Min. (Asbury Theological Seminary),
Ph.D. (Middlesex University/London School of Theology)
Senior Pastor, New Harvest Church of God, Knoxville, TN

The ambitious goal of the exciting new Pentecostal Manifestos series is to speak for and to a rising, outward-looking generation of Pentecostal scholarship. Its contributions endeavor to offer creative statements, marked by rigorous theological scholarship, reflecting distinctly Pentecostal engagement with wider themes and concerns in Christian thought today. Wolfgang Vondey's book, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, certainly achieves this high standard in fine fashion. Anyone serious about Pentecostal theology's future development will want to give it a careful reading. Theology professors and students would probably find it especially interesting. Readers should be prepared to have their presuppositions challenged, their intellects stimulated and stretched, and their theological thinking renewed.

Beyond Pentecostalism persistently pursues a series of questions: What is the nature of Pentecostalism? What does it mean to be Pentecostal in the diverse contexts of global Christianity? What is the character of Pentecostal theology? Vondey suggests that two key words broadly and provocatively display Pentecostalism's character: crisis and play. The heart of his study suggests that global Pentecostalism offers indispensable resources to overcome a

number of different manifestations of a contemporary crisis in theology. Well-organized and well-written, *Beyond Pentecostalism* expands on this thesis in six interrelated chapters consisting of three main parts. Each chapter begins by examining one aspect of the crisis from a broad historical-systematic perspective that aims at a critical reconstruction of the global state of affairs. This analysis is followed by a narrative that reveals classical Pentecostalism as a manifestation of that particular crisis. The final part of each chapter conceptualizes a constructive and programmatic proposal for global Christianity that offers resources to overcome the crisis from within the Pentecostal tradition and, thereby, integrates Pentecostalism into the broader theological landscape. Vondey thus addresses sequentially: imagination, revelation, creedal theology, liturgy, Christendom, and play.

Beyond Pentecostalism is provocatively presented. Chapter titles include: "Beyond Reason," "Beyond Scripture," "Beyond Doctrine," "Beyond Ritual," "Beyond Church," and "Beyond Orthodoxy." This cadence can sound scary and, indeed, Vondey challenges one to move beyond

rigid, performance-based theologizing to a place where the imagination is given freer reign, to where theology is done for the sheer joy of it—that is, to a place of play. Vondey moves beyond fixation with the fate of Pentecostalism itself to a place where the energetic ethos of the movement can contribute to and draw from global Christianity in a dynamic and interactive way that is authentically ecumenical without ceasing to be robustly Pentecostal. In this context, his discussion of revival versus renewal is priceless.

The above dialectic is important. It is as if Vondey wishes to have both roots and wings, both to be grounded and to soar. I'm reminded of I. H. Marshall's book, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*,¹ which endeavors to move toward a hermeneutic capable of grappling effectively with contemporary issues without moving away from grounding theology in Scripture. So it is with *Beyond Pentecostalism*. In my reading, Vondey valiantly struggles to strike out into bold, new territory without forgetting where he is from. Whether he is altogether successful or not may be another matter.

In a vigorous panel review at the 2011 Society for Pentecostal Studies annual meeting, *Beyond Pentecostalism* was sharply criticized on several scores. The most stringent charges suspected it of undermining orthodoxy's established structures. Vondey tellingly pointed to a persistent tradition within Pentecostalism critical of institutionalism, however rightly or wrongly, insisting on his own intention to move forward toward renewing the global Christian theological agenda with an intentional ecumenical attitude. He also acknowledged some objectification of Pentecostalism, but challenged Pentecostal self-perceptions regarding classical and

global categorical definitions while admitting his work would be significantly strengthened by more interaction beyond the Western hemisphere.

A theology of play is central to *Beyond Pentecostalism*. Vondey argues that Christian theology is undergoing a crisis due to a prominence of performative paradigms transforming theology into a rigid instrument or tool rather than a joyful, fruitful encounter. Pentecostalism is a manifestation of this crisis and points toward its potential resolution. Enter play. The social sciences, psychology, and philosophy are engaging the category of play. However, theology has, for the most part, avoided developing a theology of play. A notable exception is Jean-Jacques Suurmond's work entitled, *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology*.² For Vondey, play does not imply not taking theology seriously; rather, it is a metaphor for doing theology for the joy of it, for its own sake, and with breath-taking liberation from overly task-oriented systems. Playfulness represents Pentecostal imaginative identity. Pentecostal playfulness can thus contribute to the renewal of the global Christian theological agenda. Yet one is reminded that the games people play are not without rules and, infractions or violations may have serious consequences.

Beyond Pentecostalism occasionally hints that the Pentecostal movement in play mode has rich resources that can readily help global Christianity address issues of women in ministry, cultural and religious diversity, including the importance of interreligious dialogue, and social justice. Regrettably, it does not take up these pressing issues in substantive depth. Nevertheless, this volume bravely opens up a vital discussion for Pentecostal theology—and beyond, for the future of global Christianity. As the author

affirms, it is only a beginning, “the end of a prelude.” Nevertheless, it is a good

beginning and deserves close attention.

¹I. H. Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

²Jean-Jacques Surmond, *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).