

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 51 | Number 3

Article 5

---

March 2023

## The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience (Book Review)

Justin Bailey

*Dordt University*, [Justin.Bailey@dordt.edu](mailto:Justin.Bailey@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bailey, Justin (2023) "The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 51: No. 3, 27 - 28.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol51/iss3/5](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol51/iss3/5)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

In Reformed circles, it is common to leverage truth against experience. Because our feelings often err, we properly set our confidence in the stable promises of Scripture. As a person who grew up outside the Reformed tradition, I have found great solace in standing on this more solid ground.

But even this way of putting things—"I have found great solace"—suggests that truth and experience cannot be so easily separated. Truth brings comfort, as the first question of the Heidelberg catechism reminds us. Similarly, the Canons of Dort tell us that assurance "does not derive from some private revelation beyond or outside the Word, but from faith in the promises of God which are very plentifully revealed in the Word *for our comfort*" (V.12, my emphasis). Although our assurance is not derived from private experiences, a chief entailment of good doctrine is experiential.

A more technical way to say this is that good doctrine has "affective salience." This term comes from Simeon Zahl, professor of theology at the University of Cambridge. In his volume *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, Zahl points out that throughout church history it has been common to argue for particular doctrines, not simply based on biblical exegesis, but also because of the "the practical emotional valence and the anticipated experiential impact of doctrines" (37-38). In his book, Zahl seeks to recover the critical role of affective experience in the life of the believer.

Zahl opens with a line from novelist George Eliot: "Ideas are often poor ghosts; our sun-filled eyes cannot discern them; they pass athwart us in thin vapour, and cannot make themselves felt. But sometimes they are made flesh; they breathe upon us with warm breath" (1). Zahl is interested in this precise dynamic: how ideas (especially theological ideas) are made flesh, how they change our embodied, affective experience of the world. Without giving ultimate authority to feelings, Zahl wants to highlight the way that theology is unavoidably freighted with affective and experiential content.

One of Zahl's key moves is his reliance on af-

fect theory, which "attends to the ways that human behavior, politics, economics, culture, and religious life are shaped by forces other than discursive practices, with a particular focus on the realms of feeling, emotion, and desire" (149). In other words, a myriad of influences—our emotional ups and downs, our social relationships, our immersion in the deluge of advertising, all of these things—attune our desires in ways that shape our encounter with doctrinal ideas or discursive practices. To ignore these forces misses how often we "go through the motions," imbibing religious information and going to church without experiencing meaningful change. To quote affect-theorist Donovan Schaefer, "The linguistic fallacy presupposes that language is an apparatus of command that effortlessly articulates with bodies. It has no sense of how discourses attach to bodies and get them to move, and is baffled when bodies sincerely 'believe' one thing and do another" (149-150).

Affect theory draws attention to the modes of emotional resistance in the face of the desire for something different: "the way a bereaved person does not 'choose' the pattern, duration, or intensity of their grief; in the experience of falling powerfully in love; in the way that the fears of the severely anxious are rarely allayed through 'rational' reflection; in the resistance of political convictions to transformation through political argument; in the phenomenon of addiction" (151). Affect theory explains why we resist the truths we say we believe, of why it is so difficult to change.

And yet, Scripture also leads us to anticipate meaningful growth in believers through the power of the Spirit. So how do doctrinal discourses, how does the preaching of the gospel, for example, "attach to bodies and get them to move?" Zahl considers a range of theological accounts of the Spirit (pneumatology) and salvation (soteriology). He shows how often theologians move towards ontological accounts that are abstract and abstruse, in which something mysterious occurs with material effects whose mechanism cannot be further ex-

plained (187). But Zahl argues that theologies of grace must offer more than just a description of what happens in salvation; they must also provide structures for generating patterns of Christian experience, accounting for the enduring experience of sin as well as the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

Here Zahl offers his own constructive account, which he names “affective Augustinianism,” in the line of Augustine, Luther, Melancthon, and Cranmer. In this model, the Spirit effects delight by pouring out the love of God in the heart, through both ordinary and extraordinary felt experiences: “sanctification instantiates in experience[;] it does so as a delight in the things of God, efficaciously generated in bodies by the Spirit through the workings of providence” (208).

In other words, the Spirit works within and among our ordinary emotional experiences of the world, particularly our experience of failure, of condemnation, and of grace. Zahl shows how the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel names an enduring pattern of human experience, in which failure opens us up to the possibility of help from the outside. By these lights, Zahl weaves his way towards a description of the Spirit’s work

that prioritizes delight and desire, but remains open to mystery, with space for our spiritual mediocrity, when we do not change.

In recent years, there has been a move in both academic and popular literature towards the importance of habituated practice in Christian formation. A well-known version, found in James K.A. Smith’s cultural liturgies series and his popular book *You Are What You Love*, concentrates on the way that our desires are shaped by cultural and ecclesial liturgies towards some vision of flourishing. But Zahl’s book offers a more complete picture: why worship often fails to “work,” and how non-ritualized affects make our bodies move, both towards God and away from God. If church leaders are unwilling to meet people where they are—in their emotional, embodied despair and delight—we may miss the reasons why our appeals to trust Scripture over experience seem to fall so flat. But if Zahl is right, Scripture itself offers patterns of affective transformation. Here is a theology that preaches, that gets to the heart of things, naming the desperation we feel at our failure to secure ourselves, as well as the deep comfort of learning that we are not our own, but belong to God.