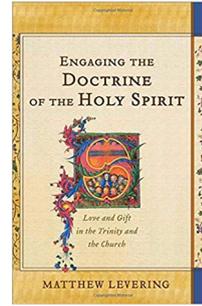


## Book Review

Matthew Levering.  
*Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Love and Gift in the Trinity  
and the Church*

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016. Hardcover, pp. vii-440.  
\$31.57. ISBN 978-0801049927.

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Matthew Levering is an extremely prolific writer who writes on big issues within systematic theology. He holds the James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr. Chair of Theology at University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois. As one can surmise from the location of his academic chair, Levering is a Roman Catholic theologian. But unlike so many Roman Catholic thinkers, Levering adheres to, and is committed to, the Catholic church's historic teachings. What makes Levering special is that his faith is grounded in a commitment that Catholic teaching is true, not because he blindly accepts church teaching, but because he thinks it can (and has) withstand engagement with scholars from other branches of the Christian tradition. Thus, when you read Levering, you are reading the thoughts of a theologian in deep conversation with Scripture, contemporary theologians and biblical scholars, church fathers, and of course, Aquinas.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is just another volume in his Engaging Doctrine series that discusses major categories in systematic theology. Discussion of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a uniquely challenging one because the historic Christian Church never held a council dedicated to clarifying the third person of the trinity the way other councils did for God the Father and Jesus the Son. To make matters worse, understanding of the Holy Spirit's relationship to the Father and the Son (i.e. the filioque) divides Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. Nevertheless, Levering discusses the doctrine of the Holy Spirit with a transparent, irenic, and ecumenical spirit characteristic of a theologian who truly wants to follow the Truth.

Levering opens with a 50-page introduction where footnotes comprise, on average, a third of each page. It is here that Levering, by engaging several theological explanations of the Holy Spirit, sets the tone and states his thesis, namely that the book will defend Aquinas' understanding of the Holy Spirit as Love and Gift.

In the first chapter, Levering uses Scripture and the testimony of Augustine to show that the Holy Spirit may be properly named Love and Gift. At only 20 pages in length, it is decidedly his briefest chapter but Levering cogently makes his case that this dual moniker is helpful in understanding this person of the trinity.

In chapter two, Levering reviews debates between Eastern and Western Christianity concerning the naming of the Holy Spirit. Among the challenges facing the discussion is by saying too much, one oversteps one's knowledge of the eternal and ineffable God. Say too little and the persons of the trinity lose their respective identities. The chapter is a difficult one because the relations between the persons of the trinity hinge on the use of terms like procession and generation. I do not deny the importance of this theological issue, but I wonder if it generates more heat than light.

Chapter three turns to another major dispute between the Eastern and Western churches, namely the filioque issue. After a lengthy discussion Orthodox theologians and Aquinas, Levering concludes by arguing, if I understood him correctly, that the East-West controversy was partly a misunderstanding and that both sides are closer in agreement than it would appear at first glance.

Levering may be correct. But I was puzzled as to why he did not highlight the fact that the Western church usurped its authority by establishing a dogma without giving the Eastern church the opportunity to participate in such an important decision. In other words, could the continued dispute be more about the violation of procedure rather than substance?

In chapter four, Levering argues that Christ's earthly ministry was "uniquely" spirit filled (p. 172). Using the work of James D.G. Dunn, Levering contends that Jesus' ministry was thoroughly pneumatological. Levering then again turns to Aquinas to show how divine missions should be understood. In the end, Levering believes that exegetical views of Dunn and the theological perspective of Aquinas complement each other in rounding out our understanding of Jesus' spirit-filled ministry.

In chapter 5, Levering takes up the Holy Spirit's relationship with the church, specifically whether the Kingdom of God was imminent or two-phased. To explore this discussion, Levering investigates the thought of N.T. Wright, James D.G. Dunn and Dale C. Allison, Jr. A surprising side discussion involved Allison, Jr's view that Jesus' prediction regarding the nearness of the coming kingdom was mistaken. Ultimately, Levering rejects Allison's negative assessment. But I found including Allison, Jr's critical view a distraction and the conversation here led to a somewhat disjointed chapter. I wondered if the only reason why Allison, Jr's higher critical question was engaged was out of some sort of academic requirement.

Chapter six turns to whether the Holy Spirit moves the church toward visible unity. Levering recognizes that the Holy Spirit can (and does) work in diverse ways, but believes its primary purpose is to unify Christians, and unify them visibly. I believe Levering is correct here and would cite John 17 as additional support. Levering continues the theme of unity in Chapter 7 via discussion of the Holy Spirit's relationship to holiness. If the church is to be visibly

one because God is one, then how do we account for the lack of holiness we see in the church? Levering explores the Reformed view of the church as a place of sound teaching and right administration of the sacraments but concludes that it fails to convince. Levering argues that just as the prophets of old did not abandon Israel for her moral failings, so, Levering implies, the Protestants were wrong to leave the Catholic church over her moral failings. In addition, Levering says, the Catholic church is holy because she has the sacraments which are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In the concluding chapter, Levering smartly ties the various thought strands into a coherent tapestry. This concluding chapter along with the conclusions at the end of each chapter are necessary additions. For Levering's arguments are subtle and complex, engaging the ideas of leading contemporary theologians as well as the greatest divines in the history of Christendom. Without these summary sections, readers lacking the depth of theological background will be completely lost. Thus, this text is only suitable for senior level seminar classes at the Master's level or above.

I commend Levering for exemplifying faithful scholarship. As an evangelical protestant, I appreciated Levering's willingness to read (and read respectfully) outside his faith tradition without jettisoning his own faith. Too often Catholic theologians have fallen prey to the errors of theological liberalism and higher critical thinking that has been destructive not only for their own thought but also for those doctrines shared between Catholics and non-catholic Christians alike. Levering's love of God and respect for the Scripture flows from his writing, not in a sentimental way but as someone who wants to follow Christ. Despite my disagreements with elements of his theology (e.g. sacerdotalism), I commend every Christian theologian to write from the attitude of devotion for Christ that is demonstrated in Levering's work. That alone makes the book a worthy read, but I suspect readers will obtain much more.