



**Tomlin, Graham.**

***The Prodigal Spirit: The Trinity, the Church and the Future of the World***

London: Alpha International, 2011. Pp. 192. Paper. £8.99.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

To those even remotely familiar with the New Testament the term “prodigal” will be deeply invested with meaning from Jesus’ parable of the man with two sons in Luke 15:11-32. The “prodigal” son was, of course, the one who asked for an early inheritance, left home and spent it all on riotous living, only to realize the error of his way and return home with a repentant heart. The Father accepted him with open arms, happy and relieved to have his son back, while the other son grew jealous at the festivities in honor of his returned brother. Much has been said about this parable in countless books and sermons. It has been pressed into the service of calling sinners to repentance, of discussing Israel’s eschatological return from exile, or of demonstrating the ceaseless love of God, but the picture conjured up in most of our minds when we hear the term “prodigal” is a recklessly wasteful sinner, and that’s a fair picture since “prodigal” does mean recklessly wasteful or extravagant.

But “prodigal,” like most other words, can carry other meanings in different contexts. For example, according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, it can refer to a “returned wanderer.” Dictionary.reference.com tells us that the adjective can mean “giving or yielding profusely; lavish,” and again, “lavishly abundant; profuse.” It is in this sense that Graham Tomlin (Dean of St. Melitus College and Principal of St. Paul’s Theological Centre) uses the term in reference to the Holy Spirit. Drawing inspiration from Christian artist and sculptor Charlie

Mackesy's sculpture "The Prodigal Son" (pictured below), Tomlin tells the tale of the third Person of the Trinity who is sent into the world from the loving embrace of the Father and Son in order to draw us into the love shared between the Father and the Son. The Spirit gives of himself lavishly, abundantly, profusely, and when he returns, it's with us; it's with a renewed, repaired, and restored creation.



*The Prodigal Spirit* is a book about living a full life in the Spirit. Throughout the seven brief chapters Tomlin insightfully comments on theology, anthropology, ecclesiology, missiology, eschatology, and so much more from a trinitarian perspective. There were many things that stood out to me in this slim volumes but I'll briefly comment on the most noteworthy.

As a Charismatic/Pentecostal Christian I found Tomlin's observations on the Holy Spirit and experience (chapter 3) to be especially poignant. While not seeking to limit the role of experience he highlights the importance of maturity. So often we chase a feeling when we need to seek to be so sensitive to the Spirit that what we do, how we act, what we think, isn't contingent upon physical sensations. This is something that many Charismatics would do well to remember.

When commenting on one of the most foundational questions that humans ask, i.e., "Who am I?" (see chapter 1), Tomlin notes that as Christians we find our identities through the Spirit drawing us into a relationship of sonship. The Spirit finds his identity in relation to the Father and Son. Tomlin affirms the monarchy of the Father while being sympathetic to the *filioque*. Ultimately, the Trinity is a reality to be lived in and experienced before it's a doctrine to be believed or a debate to be won.

The entire book flows nicely but the last three chapters ("The Holy Spirit and Evangelism," "The Holy Spirit and the World," and "The Holy Spirit and the Church") fit together seamlessly. The Church through evangelism and prayer is working to bring the world into the same relationship

that the Church enjoys with the triune God. The Spirit is Creator (see chapter 1) and took part in creating all things good. The “prodigal” Spirit is at work in the world to bring everything back to its original order and he works through the body of Christ. The manner in which the Spirit lavishly loved us and drew us to Christ should be the manner in which we compel others.

But perhaps my favorite chapter was “The Holy Spirit and Character” (chapter 4) in which Tomlin writes about how the Spirit kindles our love for God and the things of God. Tomlin speaks of the importance of making the initial feeling we experience a “settled pattern of life,” and I agree that this is important, but he says it more prescriptively than descriptively. As I began to reflect on what he said I took it in a descriptive manner. When we’re born again it’s *the* most radical change we’ll ever experience. We’ve just passed from death into life and everything is completely new and different. As we settle into this new life it seems that our initial “fire” burns out, but that’s not necessarily the case. It is very possible, and in many cases probable that the initial experience has simply become ingrained in us, has become a “settled pattern of life.” Tomlin speaks of people chasing that initial spiritual high; I’m looking at it as if they’ve built up a tolerance to the same dosage.

*The Prodigal Spirit* is a good book; it’s well written, easy to understand, scholarly yet approachable, and shows evidence of prayerful and reflective thought on the subjects addressed. Tomlin uses footnotes sparingly but in doing so he shows a broad range of reading from the Church Fathers to the Reformers to modern theologians. This is not a book that shies away from Scripture either, in fact, without Scripture I couldn’t see it being much of a book at all. There is a brief bibliography and subject/name index but unfortunately not a Scripture index.

In the end I found very little to fault. There was a brief section in which Tomlin seemed to be setting the Trinity up as a model for human families to follow (see pp. 144-47), a notion that I personally disagree with; I prefer to think that God has communicated to us how we are to interact with other humans, be they family, friends, or enemies, without us having to appeal to the immanent Trinity as a template. There was also a few times where Tomlin used language that seemed somewhat pop-theological (e.g., “Prayer in the Spirit involves being invited by the Spirit into the divine conversation at the heart of the Trinity.” [153-54]). I appreciate the sentiment, but if I’m honest, this is the kind of stuff that drives me crazy in books about the Trinity. These minor criticisms aside I can say that this is a great book to be read devotionally.